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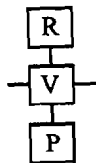
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CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA: A PRELIMINARY REFLECTION

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This paper begins with a review of theoretical perspectives of civil society in China. I argue that the confrontational models seem to block our vision for a constructive future. I suggest an alternative model that distinguishes three sectors of society: the state, the for-profit sector, and the not-for-profit sector. The third sector is composed of moral and intellectual associations that have irreplaceable functions in the process of social and economic reforms. Religious communities are important components of the third sector. After this theoretical discussion, I will describe three religious policies of the central government, three relationships between local governments and churches, and three concurrent forces of Christianity in today's China. This analysis is to argue that there are spaces of religious freedom and, more importantly, there is the need for Christianity to contribute to the spiritual and moral construction of the Chinese society in its grand transition to market economy and democratic politics. This is a preliminary reflection along with anecdotal accounts for illustration.

EXISTING MODELS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA

Existing theories of civil society in China generally assume an antagonistic relationship between the state and civil society. This has particular historical reasons. "Civil Society" is a new concept applied to the study of China, albeit one that has received increasing attention among China observers (e.g., Mufson 1996), international scholars (see Wakeman 1993) and Chinese intellectuals (see Ma 1994; Wang, Yu and Dy 1997). A primary stimulus to the sudden increase in the discussion of civil society was the Tiananmen Square incident following the pro-democracy movement in 1989. The collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe further augmented it. These historical stimuli, however, have also imposed constraints on the discourse and scope of the discussion. Dominating

the discussion is a narrow focus on the balancing or challenging power of civil society to the authoritarian government. This perspective presumes a conflicting relationship between the state and civil society. As Heath Chamberlain (1993) pointed out, most writings of Chinese civil society have shared a "flawed conception of civil society, insofar as they define it exclusively in terms of 'counter-structure' — as 'existing outside the orbit of the state,' 'beyond the control of government,' 'autonomous vis-a-vis state officials,' [and] so forth" (1993:204).

Instead, Chamberlain proposed a model that distinguished "civil society" from "society" and placed civil society intermediate between the state and society. Philip C.C. Huang (1993) suggested a similar three part model, only replacing the term of "civil society" with the that of "third realm." Both Chamberlain and Huang emphasized that "civil society" or the "third realm" was "as much a creature of the state as it is of society" (Chamberlain 1993:204). However, their models still presume an essentially confrontational relationship between the state and civil society. Both binary and three part models are stack models (Huang 1993:228), with the state over civil society, or adding another bloc of "society" at the bottom (see figure 1 below). Another problem is that neither Chamberlain nor Huang clearly defined "society." Vaguely, "society" in their models seems to mean the mass of ordinary individuals who do not hold public office or act in the public sphere.

These existing models of civil society share a crucial deficiency. They pay almost exclusive attention to economic organizations, such as chambers of commerce of the late Qing and early Republic periods and the collective economy of contemporary China. Following this perspective, Chinese political dissidents put their bet for China's democratic system on the emerging middle class entrepreneurs of private or semi-private businesses. As Richard Madsen (1993) points out, these models make no distinction between moral communities and interest groups within "civil society." In light of the moral crisis in today's Chinese society, we must pay more attention to the development of moral associations. Moral and intellectual associations, as Tocqueville observed, are the keys to (understanding) American democracy.

A DYNAMIC MODEL OF THREE SOCIAL SECTORS

The problems with stack models of civil society make it

necessary to seek a new perspective. Here I suggest a dynamic model of three social sectors: the state (government authorities), the for-profit social sector (the capital), and the not-for-profit sector (voluntary associations). The best way to visualize relationships of the three sectors is a circle (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Models of Civil Society

Stack Models

Trichotomous Equilibrium Model
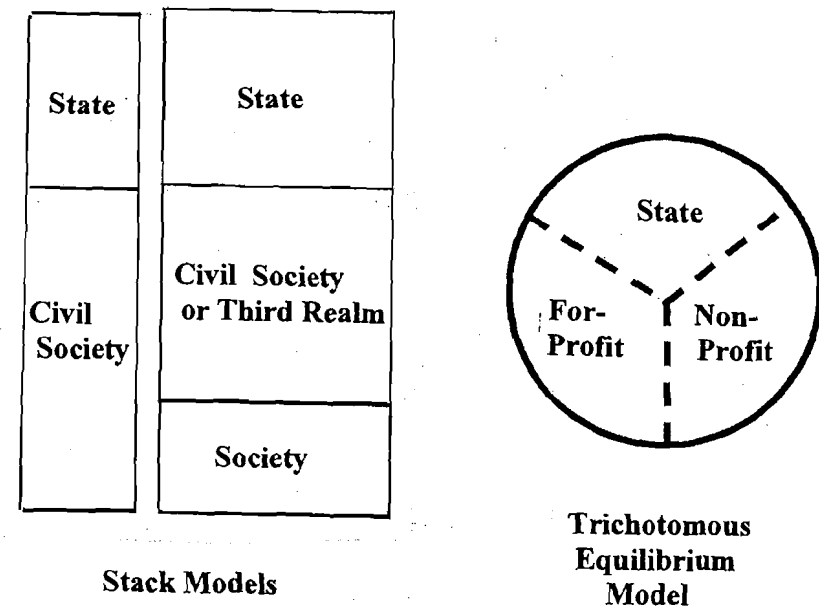
In contrast to the binary and three part stack models, the trichotomous equilibrium model has several advantages. First, this model recognizes the interactive relationship between the state and civil society (indicated by the broken lines between the state and the other two sectors). The state can be constructively involved in the creation and growth of civil society. Meanwhile, the state also restrains civil society. Second, this model distinguishes the not-for-profit sector from the for-profit sector of civil society. Although both sectors are outside the state, they have very different functions in society. I will elaborate this below. Third, this model also expresses an ideal status of dynamic equilibrium of the three sectors. These sectors are mutually interactive, cooperative as well as contentious.

The Third Sector

The key difference between this alternative model and the stack models is the distinction of the "third sector" from the state and the capital. Although this alternative model is new to the study of Chinese society, the discussion of the "third sector" has made significant progress in the study of American society.

According to Michael O'Neill (1989), American scholars started to fully realize the importance of the third sector in American society only after the 1960s. However, the importance of moral associations was appreciated by Alexis de Tocqueville more than a hundred years ago. Tocqueville argued that although American political and industrial associations easily catch people's eyes, "nothing, in my view, more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America" because they are crucial for the American democracy (1969:517). Since the 1960s, a variety of terms have been used to describe this sector in American society, including "voluntary sector," "private sector," "nonprofit sector," or "independent sector." What scholars generally agree on is that *the third sector is nongovernmental, nonprofit, and voluntary.* Lester M. Salamon defines it as

> a massive array of self-governing private organizations, not dedicated to distributing profits to shareholders or directors, [but dedicated to] pursuing pubic purposes outside the formal apparatus of the state. (1994:109)

These associations and organizations are voluntarily organized and voluntarily participated in by individuals through voluntary donations and volunteers.

The third sector includes churches, private schools and colleges, arts' organizations, social service agencies, mutual aid associations, and various philanthropic and voluntary nonprofit organizations. The largest and most important component of the third sector in the United States is the religious organization. O'Neill emphasizes that religion is "the Godmother of the nonprofit sector." It gave birth to nongovernmental and nonprofit institutions of education (church sponsored schools and universities), health care, civil rights, and political campaigns such as abolition and civil rights movement. "Directly and indirectly, religion has been the major

formative influence on America's independent sector" (O'Neill, 1989:20).

Salamon believes that the perception of the relationship of the third sector with government will be a decisive determinant of third sector growth in any society. Although the third sector sometimes is cited by politicians to oppose or reduce the role of the state,

> In fact, however, the relationship between government and the nonprofit sector [in the United States] has been characterized more by cooperation than conflict, as government has turned extensively to the nonprofit sector to assist it in meeting human needs . . . . Government has thus emerged as a major source of financial support for America's nonprofit sector, outdistancing private philanthropy by almost two to one. In other advanced countries, government support is even more pronounced. (Salamon, 1994:120)

Because of its flexibility and grassroots energies, the third sector can accomplish what the state fails to do, or it can cooperate with the state to provide human services and meet human needs, including moral education, "assisted self-reliance" or "participatory development." The relationship between the state and the third sector can vary widely, from strict restrictions imposed on the third sector by the government to great support and cooperation.

> The task for third-sector organizations is to find a *modus vivendi* with government that provides sufficient legal and financial support while preserving a meaningful degree of independence and autonomy. (*Ibid.*: 122)

The relationship between the nonprofit sector and the for-profit sector is also mutually interactive. While money donations from various businesses are needed and should be encouraged, the third sector associations and organizations must try to maintain a meaningful degree of independence and autonomy. As moral agencies, the nonprofit organizations and associations often have to fight against immoral practices of certain businesses. It is also a

constant task of moral associations to provide moral education to all individuals, including those in the professions of making profits.

MORAL CRISES AND MORAL AGENTS IN CHINA

Many scholars and China-watchers have observed the rampant and perilous moral problems in today's China. Facing epidemic corruptions among government officials, the Chinese Communist Party has taken measures of "anti-corruption campaigns." To fight against increasing crimes in the society, government has tried "serious crackdowns on crimes." However, these measures cannot make long-lasting effects, can be misused for persecuting personal opponents and dissidents, and their sporadic nature goes against the general progress toward the rule of law. Evidently, the state has only limited power and resources to deal with these rampant problems. It can pass new laws, but laws can only punish *some* illegal actions of *some* people. Moreover, punishment alone cannot make responsible citizens or moral persons. The social control and moral functions of the state, the Party, and the work unit (*danwei*) have been reduced along with the deepening reforms toward a market economy.

The for-profit sector cannot be the basic source for moral order either. The capital in a market economy can be an important force of civil society, but the nature of capital is to make profits. Making optimum profit is the overriding rule for entrepreneurs in the marketplace. They have to abide by laws when the laws can be enforced. The drive for profits are often more powerful than noble desires. For instance, after some publishing houses changed to "self-responsible for making profits and losses" (*zifu yingkui*), some tried to publish whatever books could make profits. Some editors expressed their helplessness by calling this "forcing fair ladies to prostitution" (*bi liang wei chang*). Of course, entrepreneurs are human persons and, off the market, they may have moral concerns not different from others in the society. Some of them may have the willingness and resources to contribute to moral construction.

Tocqueville said, "If men are to remain civilized or become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of condition is increased." However, Chinese intellectuals seem to have not yet mastered the art of associating together, nor have they understood the importance of moral associations to combat the moral disorder. Facing the social

chaos and moral confusions, some intellectuals charged themselves with saving the "humanist spirit" by willingly "going to the margins" (Zhao 1994). [There was a series of articles in 1994 in the widely-circulated journal Du Shu discussing the so-called "*ren wen jing sheng de she luo*" (the loss of human and civil spirit.]

This means that these intellectuals choose to stay out of the market streams and try to criticize immoral and uncivil developments. Meanwhile, many Chinese scholars have joined the discussion on "civil society." However, the dominant approach is philosophical and individualistic, emphasizing "civilized" individuals or "civic" citizens (see Ma, 1994:183-186). The lack of strong intellectual associations is partly due to political limitations. But there are also profound cultural reasons. In the Chinese tradition, the dominant pattern of learned societies is the small circle of master-disciples. Scholarly exchanges on an equal ground are exceptions. This master-disciples structure is an obstacle to the formation of effective scholarly associations. Another problem is the tendency of "political scholarship" among Chinese intellectuals. Scholars tend to pay more attention to opportunities to please or anger politicians in order to gain access to political power, and have less interest and energy to exchange and associate with other scholars for the purpose of scholarship and educating the public. The existing scholarly associations are often used by a few "political scholars" as a spring board leading to government offices.

In contrast, non-academic people seem to have better mastered "the art of associating together." According to a pioneering empirical study by Ye Zhang, despite stringent government restrictions to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), "NGOs are thriving rather than declining" (Zhang 1995:100). Within the limited space allowed by the government, people are creative and flexible to associate with others. A journalist report (Mufson 1996) illustrates this well. In 1992, some people wanted to start an environmental group. Required by government policies, they had to find an organizational sponsor. But the national environmental protection agency turned them down by declaring that there was already an environmental nongovernmental organization. Then the applicants changed the group's name to the China Environmental Cultural Society, and successfully became "attached" to the Academy of Chinese Culture under the Culture Ministry.

Within the third sector of Chinese society, religious institutions deserve special attention. They are closest to the so-called "moral

associations" in Tocqueville's terms. Religions are social institutions with long traditions in China. Under the rule of the Chinese Communists, for several decades, all religions were treated as premodern superstitions and suffered cruel suppression. However, we have seen the great revivals of all religions in China since the beginning of economic reforms. In the past two decades, Christianity, both Protestantism and Catholicism, has grown the fastest among the formal religions.

Government Policies toward Christianity and Other Religions

The official Chinese Communist ideology is hostile to religion, regarding religion as pre-modern or feudalistic, conservative, or even reactionary. However, this ideology has been relaxed since the beginning of reforms and open-door policies in the late 1970s. There are now some legal spaces for formal religions. China's Constitution has a carefully versed clause for the freedom of religion. Article 36 of the Constitution states that: "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination." Besides the Constitution, some laws have articles on protecting religious freedom. For example, Article 251 of the Criminal Law states that "serious cases in which any government employee illegally deprives citizens of their rights to religious belief and infringes upon ethnic customs and practices, may result in custody or a sentence of two years in prison."

Chinese government recognizes five religions in China: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. These formal religions are allowed operation within restricted sites under the supervision of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council and religious departments at various government levels. "The responsibilities of these departments," according to the Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council, "includes implementing the policy of freedom of religious belief in accordance with the Constitution and law and coordinating the relationship

between religious groups and other parts of society. It is also their duty to protect the religious belief of citizens, and the rights and interests of religious groups, churches, and monasteries, and handling religious affairs in accordance with the law" (a speech by Ye Xiaowen on June 9, 1997 at a press conference in Beijing: see the official internet webpage of Chinese embassy at http://www.china-embassy.org).

However, in reality, the central government of China does not have one uniform policy of religion. Pragmatism in economic and political spheres since the late 1970s has spilt over to the religious sphere. Different religions are treated differently, depending upon how government officials perceive a religion's relevance to certain social and political agendas. There are three distinguishable policies of religion on the level of the central government of China: favoring or partial to Buddhism, cooling or frigid to Islam, and suppressing or restrictive to Christianity (Protestantism and Catholicism). Buddhism among Han Chinese has a history of about 2000 years. [Tibetan Buddhism as a distinctive branch of Buddhism is complicated with ethnic elements. It requires special discussion beyond the scope of this paper.] In many ways it has become an integral part of Chinese culture. Many Buddhist monasteries and temples are declared national treasures of cultural heritage. Since the late 1970s, Chinese government has spent big amounts of money to restore and renovate Buddhist temples, in part for the tourist economy. Some government officials showed enthusiasm to restoring old temples or building new Buddhist sites. Many people regard Buddhism as a benign religion that would not pose threats to social stability. The influence of Buddhism in Taiwan and among overseas Chinese makes it necessary for the Chinese government to respect it for the purpose of the "united front." Therefore, in Chinese bookstores are many Buddhist sutras, biographies and writings of famous monks and nuns, and even direct proselytizing materials.

Islam in China has a history of at least 1000 years. Islam is largely ethnicized in China. Muslims are confined to ten ethnic minority groups without proselytization to other people. Except Hui people, who are very much Hanized (becoming like Han people) and spread in many areas of China, most Muslim minorities are concentrated in Northwestern China. Politically, Uigur and some other ethnic groups have centrifugal tendencies. The Chinese government tries to appease Muslims while suppressing divisive elements among them. Consequently, Islam becomes an untouchable

religion. Publication of books on Islam is restricted, but a Chinese version of the Koran and some books of Chinese Islam history can be found in bookstores. Muslim pilgrims are allowed to go to Mecca each year.

Christianity, in comparison, has a much shorter history in China. In the late sixteenth century, Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuit missionaries made the first successful foothold of Christianity in China. However, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century, with the assistance of Western imperialist powers, that Catholic and Protestant missions made significant penetration into the Chinese populace. This historical connection between Christianity and Western imperialism contributed to the stigma of Christianity as a "foreign religion" to the Chinese, or even worse, as a means of Western imperialism, or spiritual opium. Besides this historical problem, Christianity as a congregational religion is seen as a real threat to the grassroots branches of the Chinese Communist Party in the countryside. Internationally, "Christian nations" and some Christian organizations in the West have constantly pressed China on human rights issues. The domestic threat and international pressures from Christianity made many Communist officials believe that Christianity is a hostile force. In addition, Chinese Communist officials have little knowledge of Christian religion. Ignorance leads to prejudice and fear. Out of fear they try hard to suppress the rapid growth of Christianity. However, heavy suppression has not stopped or slowed the growth of Christianity, but instigated heretical and cultic practices that are more threatening to social stability. This has become a vicious circle.

THREE KINDS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

Along with deepening reforms in social and economic spheres, policies of the central government are not always uniformly carried out in the whole country. To a certain extent, it has become legitimate for local governments to implement central government policies with modified measures. Therefore, in reality, there are three kinds of relationships between local governments and churches: the government may suppress churches, may restrict yet protect churches based on laws, or may even encourage churches to grow. *Restriction and Suppression.* In the United States we have heard many news reports and personal accounts of government suppres

sion of Christian leaders and believers in China. The most recent round began in the spring of 1996 in the name of "seriously cracking down on crimes" and continues today. Some Christian leaders of the underground church have been arrested, taken into custody, or sent to reeducation camps. Many people in open churches have also received warnings and intimidations. Recently I visited an open Protestant church in a Northeastern city. Church attendance has grown fast and there is not enough space to accommodate the large attendance. Although the church holds five worship services each week, many people have to stand outside the sanctuary and chapels during the service. The church wants to build a larger sanctuary, but the local government has refused to grant permission. Officials of the Religious Affairs Department of the city often ask for baptismal lists, interrogate young pastors, and insist on sitting in on routine pastoral meetings. This kind of relationship between local government and the church is common in areas where Christianity has a long history with a substantial number of believers. Both sides have confrontational experiences and negative attitudes of each other. Therefore, this relationship will continue for a long time to come. Of course, even in those areas, the relationship is not always that simple. For example, in that Northeastern city, some government officials have become Christians and have been baptized, openly or secretly. There was also a telling anecdote. The city customs once captured some Christian books and bibles shipped from overseas. The customs passed them to the Public Security Bureau (PSB). Instead of destroying them, the PSB quietly informed the church and asked the church to buy them. With the dearth of Christian literature in China, the church happily bought all these books, while the local PSB happily gained some extra income.

Supervision and Protection. Because of the reform efforts to move China to a society ruled by law, the consciousness of laws has increased among many people, including government officials. Some officials become serious about the rule of law. They may not know much about Christianity and may not like to see the growth of Christian religion. However, facing legal and reasonable requests from Christian believers, they sometimes do things according to laws. I visited a small city in Northern China. In the early 1990s some Christians applied to the local Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) to form a Christian church. In 1993 the church was established. Then the church requested to have an estate returned to the church. There was a missionary church in that city. The missionary left after the

Communist liberation, and the sanctuary was torn down during the Cultural Revolution. On that estate three rows of resident townhouses were built. The RAD helped the church to persuade the residents to move out. A couple of households adamantly refused to do so. The RAB people could not help. With their approval, the church went to court and won the case. The court ordered those people to move out. Overall, this small city church has maintained a healthy relationship with the local authorities. One of the reasons that made this relationship possible was probably the lack of confrontational history between the local government and the church. Christianity has not been a trouble to the local government. This church grows steadily.

Encouragement. Although it is still rare, there have been some cases where the local government encourages church growth. According to some reports, Fugong County of Southwestern Yunnan Province has become a "Christian county" with 90% of the county population as Christians in 1995. In that county, the crime rate is extremely low. Government officials there encourage people to become Christian as the following story indicates: a government clerk was dismissed for constant drunkenness. His supervisor asked him to become a Christian and change his life before coming back. This clerk got baptized, stopped drinking, and was re-employed. Although some officials do not openly support church growth, they do publicly praise the moral character of Christians and their social services. Constant contacts with Christian believers, increasing knowledge of Christianity, open-mindedness, and pragmatism have changed the biased views of some government officials. If the church can contribute to social stability, to social service, and to moral construction, this kind of positive relationship between government and the church will be strengthened.

Among these three relationships between the local government and the church, the first kind has political and historical roots, whereas the latter two relationships are in accordance with the development of market economy and democratic politics. I expect that churches and church-sponsored services will be increasingly encouraged.

THREE FORCES OF CHRISTIANITY

Have Chinese Christians mastered "the art of associating together?" After the 1950s, many missionaries and Western

Christians worried about the complete wipe-out of Christianity in China under the atheist Communists. In the 1960s and 1970s, Christian churches, along with other religious institutions, were all closed. However, not all Chinese Christians stopped congregating together. Instead, they went underground. Secret family gatherings or house churches tenaciously continued. When government policy toward religion began to relax in 1979, many Christians came above ground, while many others remained underground. Both the open church and the underground church have been growing fast.

The open church is the government-approved church. For Protestantism, there is the "Three Selfs Patriotic Movement Committee"; for Catholicism, there is the "Catholic Patriotic Society." These are religious organizations set up under the control and supervision of the Communist government, although their leaders publicly deny it. Since 1979, these organizations, while accepting supervision and control of the government, have also tried hard to enlarge spaces for religious freedom. Theologically, the leaders may be liberal, but most believers of the open church are evangelical. Since 1994, some Protestant churches have registered with the government, but refused to join the TSPM. In general, the open church is a legitimate place that attracts nonbelievers.

The house church or the underground church, although having roots in the long history of Christianity, was mostly a product of particular circumstances in Communist China. During the Cultural Revolution, it was the only way Christians could associate with each other. After the open-door and reform policies, many chose to remain underground because of complicated reasons, including theological disagreement with leaders of the open church, deep mistrust on the part of ruling Communists, and for the purpose of free evangelism (government regulation restricts evangelism within the church site, but evangelical Christians are compelled by their faith to evangelize in all possible situations). However, due to the nature of underground activity, these underground churches are vulnerable to heretical and cultic developments.

The third force of Christian evangelism in today's China is the so called "cultural Christians." These are scholars who study and write about Christianity. Most of them learn Christianity through reading Christian philosophy, theology, and literature. They become sympathetic, accepting, and enthusiastic in regard to certain Christian beliefs. Some may have accepted the faith, although most of them do not regularly attend church activities. As scholars, it is legitimate

for them to translate Christian books, write about Christianity, and have public lectures and conferences on university campuses. For many students and educated young people, "cultural Christians" provide the first introduction to Christianity. The number of institutes and the number of researchers studying Christians are growing.

In China today, these three forces of Christianity coexist without much mutual communication, interaction, or cooperation. Due to theological, political, and historical reasons, integration of these three forces will be very difficult, if possible. However, all three forces will make their distinctive contributions to the moral and spiritual reconstruction of Chinese society along with continuous rapid growth of Christianity in China.

CONCLUSION

China is undergoing rapid transitions today. While the political space is still very much restricted by the Communist Party and the government, economic energies have been unleashed. However, along with deepening economic and political reforms, social stability and the moral order have become a concern by many people. China's healthy transition to a modern society cannot depend solely on the state or the for-profit sector of Chinese society. Confrontational models of civil society is deficient because of their narrow focus on the balancing power of civil society to the state. We must see the need for moral and intellectual associations to play greater roles in this grand process of social transition, which is made possible with the new model of three social sectors presented here. In fact, Chinese people are creative to form grassroots organizations and associations within the limited spaces allowed by the government. We can see that the pragmatic central government has multiple policies of religion; pragmatic local governments have various relationships with the Christian church; and there are multiple forces of Christianity in today's China. These are indications that the third sector of Chinese society is enlarging. This is the hope for a moral order in the rapidly changing China, and the hope for the healthy transition of China to a modern society.

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