

Social Service Ministry in China¹

By Swells in the Middle Kingdom

"Swells in the Middle Kingdom" began his life in China as a student back in 1990 and still, to this day, is fascinated by the challenges and blessings of living and working in China.

While social service has long been part of missionary work in Mainland China, today a host of different factors are driving Chinese Christians to explore for themselves the place of humanitarian concerns within gospel ministry. For a growing number of local Christians, loving one's neighbor through acts of service is rapidly becoming an indispensable aspect of Christian witness. This essay will first explore the role of social service in the history of mission in China before analyzing its place in the ministry of the contemporary Chinese church. Given current conditions in China, some details must be left out of the discussion of the contemporary situation.

In the winter of 2016 I participated in a conference in Hong Kong hosted by several different China ministry agencies designed to help Mainland Chinese church leaders get a better understanding of what was happening on a macro level within the Chinese church across the country. Presentations on topics such as Christian home schools, Chinese seminaries, Chinese cross-cultural mission, and the future role of expatriates in China ministry were given by various thought-leaders—most of them Chinese Christians from the mainland. Over the course of the multi-day symposium, attendees were divided into various working groups designed to focus attention and ideally coalesce opinions on a select number of hot issues.

One of the working groups was tasked with summarizing the state of social concern (*shehui guanhuai* 社会关怀) ministries within the Mainland Chinese Christian community. A large number of mainland attendees had elected to join this group, and when it came time to present their work at the end of the conference, their representative stood up and delivered an impassioned defense of the need for the church in China to engage more deeply in activities that demonstrated social concern for their local communities. Many voices rose in assent, and heads nodded around the room in eager agreement. During the question and answer time, however, it quickly emerged that the members of this group—while all agreeing that churches across the country needed to demonstrate social concern—were nevertheless deeply divided on the relative importance of these kinds of activities. For a small number of attendees social concern was a vital aspect of spreading the gospel (*chuan fuyin* 传福音) while for many of those present it was a sideline task—strategic, perhaps, but quite different from actual gospel ministry. The group's presentation to the conference thus ended in confusion, with different attendees speaking at and across one another in debate over the relationship between social service (*shehui fuwu* 社会服务) and evangelism (*chuan fuyin* 传福音).

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Social Service and Evangelism

Social services are generally understood to include any activities designed to promote social well being or, more narrowly, any programs that offer organized philanthropic assistance. From a ministry perspective, these are the sorts of activities that intentionally (though not exclusively) address various this-worldly needs. Educational initiatives, disaster relief, economic assistance, medical aid, legal or political advocacy, psychological counseling, and a host of other activities have been undertaken by Christians throughout history and around the world—all with the intent of advancing the cause of the gospel. Theologically, these kinds of ministries are grounded in a belief that all aspects of life are part a Christian’s witness, in as much as the living gospel, as communicated through Word, deed, and sign, must necessarily be expressed through or embodied in actual lives. In many cases, the conviction that the Kingdom of God has implications for human life on this earth provides a key justification for Christians engaging in the provision of social services. More recently, the acknowledgment that evangelism and conversion are only steps—albeit critical steps—along the lifelong path of discipleship, has become an integral part of this emerging understanding of what is now commonly referred to as holistic mission.²

The question of how social service relates to evangelism has been raised periodically throughout Christian history, despite the persistent instances of integration. Building on the example of Jesus’s own ministry, early Christians carried on his understanding of the Kingdom of God by caring for the poor, the widows, and the orphans—not only in their own fellowships but in society as well.³ The remarkable practical care provided by Christians during some of the early epidemics that ravaged the Mediterranean was a key factor—alongside Christian recognition of women as important social actors imbued with the image of God—in the rapid growth and spread of Christianity in the first few centuries of the church.⁴ When the global Protestant mission movement took its earliest steps twelve hundred years later, pietistic Moravian Christians were at the forefront, leading the way from Bohemia to North and South America, Latin America, Africa, and eventually Asia. Their conviction that “service of souls” and “service of the body” were interdependent aspects of gospel ministry ensured that education and social concern were integral components of their early mission program.⁵

The Jesuit mission to China is today commonly remembered for its presence at the imperial court beginning in the final years of the Ming Dynasty and its successful outreach to the scholarly elite of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries. Recent studies, however, have drawn attention to the comparatively greater amount of energy expended by most Jesuit missionaries in caring for common people amongst the many rural communities where their churches were established. The earliest baptized converts of the Jesuit mission were common “women, children, the sick and the old,” many of whom had experienced miracles while having their physical needs addressed by the foreign priests.⁶

² For a helpful summary of holistic mission, see Mark Russell, “Christian Mission Is Holistic,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 25, no. 2 (2008): 93–98. The ideas in this paragraph are taken from Bryant L. Myers’s classic modern text on Christian social engagement, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), especially chapter 8.

³ Even amongst proponents of social service ministry, Gal 6:10 is often used to support prioritizing service within the church over service in the larger community.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 254–55.

⁶ Mary Laven, *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 55, 195–97, 212–21.

From its earliest beginnings with the 1807 arrival of Robert Morrison in Guangzhou, Protestant missions in China have been involved in a host of activities besides the oral proclamation of the gospel. From Robert Morrison's dictionary work to S. Wells Williams's printing press; from Peter Parker's ophthalmic hospital to the opium refuge work of the Oberlin Band in rural Shanxi; missionaries on the field time and again were compelled by their circumstances and the needs of the people around them to do more than merely speak the gospel in words.⁷ The classic dichotomy between Hudson Taylor's gospel work amongst common people and Timothy Richard's educational work amongst China's elite is itself a gross caricature of nineteenth-century evangelical mission in China: Taylor employed medical and educational work in his mission even as Richard presented the gospel message through spoken and written words to large swaths of famine-oppressed Chinese farmers.⁸ The nineteenth-century anti-opium crusading of many of the China missionaries was a natural outgrowth of their evangelistic encounters with opium users on the China field, and many of their supporters embraced the cause back in Britain, successfully lobbying Parliament to outlaw the trade.⁹ This kind of activism, in the form of political reform, orphanages, Sunday School educational programs, health crusades, temperance movements—all the services the Salvation Army undertook and more—has long been an identifying feature of evangelical Christianity.¹⁰ The institution building that became such a prominent feature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Christian missions in China enshrined this activism in the many hospitals, orphanages, and schools established to extend those social service ministries to more and more people.¹¹

The North American Fundamentalist-Modernist debates of the early twentieth century left their mark on the China mission world as well, as a growing number of western missionaries began to eschew the more supernatural aspects of the Kingdom of God for a very this-worldly sense of mission.¹² Taking over the language of "Social Gospel" that had previously captured the quite opposite conviction of Victorian evangelicals that their faith should find expression in active concern for the poor conditions of others in society, these missionaries to China reduced the missionary task to humanitarian projects alone.¹³ At the same time, eminent Chinese Christians such as T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen) and Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong) were likewise arguing that the Chinese church must concern itself with China's social development.¹⁴ And yet for those missionaries in China—whether local or expatriate—who insisted on the abiding spiritual significance of faith in Jesus, integration of evangelism

⁷ Nat Brandt, *Massacre in Shansi* (New York: toExcel, 1999); Christopher Daily, *Robert Morrison and the Protestant Plan for China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); Andrew T. Kaiser, "S. Wells Williams: Early Protestant Missions in China" (MA Thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1995).

⁸ Andrew T. Kaiser, *Encountering China: The Evolution of Timothy Richard's Missionary Thought (1870–1891)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019).

⁹ Charles Weber, "'Abolish This Great Evil': Chinese Christians' Opposition to Opium Trafficking," in *Shaping Christianity in Greater China: Indigenous Christians in Focus*, ed. Paul Woods (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2017), 216–30.

¹⁰ Activism is one of the four defining features of David Bebbington's well-known evangelical quadrilateral, alongside biblicism, conversionism, and crucicentrism. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989; reprint, New York: Routledge, 2002), 2–3.

¹¹ Irwin T. Hyatt, "Protestant Missions in China, 1877–1890: The Institutionalization of Good Works," in *American Missionaries in China: Papers from Harvard Seminars*, ed. Kwang-Ching Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Research Center, 1966), 93–126.

¹² Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907–1932* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1997).

¹³ On Victorian British understandings of the Social Gospel, see Brian Stanley, "Evangelical Social and Political Ethics: An Historical Perspective," *Evangelical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (1990): 19–36.

¹⁴ Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 40–41.

and social service continued to be a practical, and often theological, necessity for their ministry. Anna Ziese, an Assemblies of God missionary who served for forty-nine years in twentieth-century China, is considered a legend for her faithful presence in China up until her death in 1969. Her most noted ministry involved evangelism *and* visitation in the Taiyuan, Shanxi prison.¹⁵

Drawing on ideas developed within Latin American theology, the 1974 First International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Switzerland gave expression to a newly revived evangelicalism that rejected the either-or dichotomy of the earlier Fundamentalist-Modernist debates to espouse a robust Kingdom theology that integrated oral proclamation and social service within the evangelistic task.¹⁶ As more and more mission agencies around the world joined the Lausanne community, its evolving advocacy for “the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world” became representative of large portions of the evangelical mission world.¹⁷ The missions community continues to debate constructively the relative priority and importance of evangelism versus humanitarian aid, but for younger generations of (short- and long-term) missionaries ideals similar to the original Moravian impulse to serve souls *and* bodies are increasingly important motivations for service.¹⁸ Whether or not these new generations of missionaries will be able to hold these two impulses in healthy tension, or fall into either of the dualistic extremes of the early twentieth century, remains to be seen.

When expatriate missionaries began returning to China in numbers in the early 1980s, restrictions on foreign religious activity forced many Christian organizations and individuals to establish businesses and social service organizations as some of the few means available to secure extended residence in China. China’s stage of development made many of the offered services, such as English training, agricultural and medical services, disaster and poverty relief projects, and community development, quite attractive to Chinese officials eager for their nation to “catch up” with the rest of the world.¹⁹ For those expatriate Christians who served in China during the first decade of opening and reform, memories of successful official banquets facilitated by all parties’ shared commitment to “Serve the People (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务)” are still strong, though perhaps not as strong as their recollections of the many Chinese people who came to Jesus through the services that were provided. As the ministry roles of expatriates shifted over the next forty years from *leading* their own ministry initiatives to *partnering* with local Christians and, in recent years, *servicing* under the direction of Chinese Christian leaders, these expatriates have had a profound influence on the way many younger Chinese Christians view social service ministry. Chinese believers are increasingly aware of the vast array of social services provided by local and foreign Christians in China during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; but the example of

¹⁵ David Bundy, “Anna Ziese: For God and China,” *Assemblies of God Heritage* 20, no. 3 (2000): 13–21. See also Andrew T. Kaiser, “Anna Ziese” in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/anna-ziese>.

¹⁶ On integrative mission in Latin American evangelicalism, see David C. Kirkpatrick, “C. René Padilla and the Origins of Integral Mission in Post-War Latin America,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67, no. 2 (2016).

¹⁷ From section six of “The Lausanne Covenant” in James Dixon Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, Official Reference Volume, Papers and Responses* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 3–9.

¹⁸ On the central role of the service project in narratives of North American short-term missions trips, see Brian M. Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 184–88.

¹⁹ For a recent analysis of some of the factors that shape official attitudes towards faith-based charity work in China, see Susan K. McCarthy, “In between the Divine and the Leviathan: Faith-Based Charity, Religious Overspill and the Governance of Religion in China,” *The China Review* 17, no. 2 (2017): 65–93.

the foreign Christians they have personally known is encouraging many of today's Chinese Christians to care for their communities in the name of Jesus.

Social Service and Today's Chinese Church

On a recent trip to Chengdu I was able to visit five different social service ministries. In each case, these were projects run by local believers. They each had their own form of local legal registration, and they were primarily relying on monies collected in China to fund their project expenses. Some were more like companies, others more like charities; some were urban in their focus, others more rural; most were in some sort of partnership with a government entity. But in each case I was left with the overwhelming impression that these Chinese projects were doing the very same kinds of things that foreign social service workers had been doing across China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Certainly, for reasons outlined below, Chengdu is at the forefront of Christian social service ministry; but even so this marks an inflection point for the church in China. In officially registered churches and house church networks across the nation, believers are expressing interest in incorporating social service into their ministry activities.

Many older Chinese Christians today can recall back in the 1990s when it was not unusual to see a small clinic attached to a registered church, often staffed by retired medical workers from the congregation. A few unofficial orphanages also existed, with members from a local house church or registered church caring for ten or so abandoned children outside of the official social welfare system. As Christians became more confident regarding their place in society, and as more and more Christians gained financial security, the scope for Christian social service began to expand. At first, most of these new initiatives were driven and managed by individuals within local congregations. By the early 2000s, various educational, medical, and economic relief projects were initiated—many operating informally, some involving legally registered entities. HIV-work, assistance for people with disabilities, financial aid for church construction in remote or impoverished locations, and various educational projects were soon being operated by Christians in many different locations across the country.

The series of earthquakes that struck western China from 2008 to 2014 ushered in a new era in Chinese Christian social service. Unable to ignore the desperate needs right on their doorsteps, churches throughout Sichuan were able to overcome their natural inclination to look inwards, and finally establish new habits of community engagement, even as these same disaster conditions rendered the state relatively open to grassroots participation in social action.²⁰ For the first time in modern memory, massive numbers of Chinese from all across the country volunteered to assist with the disaster relief efforts, flooding Wenchuan County and the surrounding area with eager if often naïve would-be “helpers.”²¹ While non-Christian young people were also moved to participate, Christians made up the majority of these volunteers, many choosing to remain and continue assisting long after others had left.²² In

²⁰ For more on the “consensus crisis” that allowed for the flourishing of Christian social services in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, see Easten Law, “Faith-Based Engagement in China's Harmonious Society: A Study of an Indigenous, Faith-Based Ngo's Organizational Culture and Response to the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake,” in *Shaping Christianity in Greater China: Indigenous Christians in Focus*, ed. Paul Woods (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2017), 274–80.

²¹ One China Development Brief study suggests 263 foreign and domestic NGOs participated in the 2008 disaster relief efforts in Sichuan. Quoted in Law, “Faith-Based Engagement in China's Harmonious Society,” 275.

²² Brent Fulton, *China's Urban Christians: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 67–69.

one Sichuan hospital Christian volunteers organized themselves into a band of assistants with matching “Jesus Loves You” pins on their shirts, providing water, clothing, and basic assistance to the flood of patients seeking emergency medical services. Within a few days hospital staff had come to rely on these trustworthy, caring individuals, telling inquirers with simpler questions or problems to go ask a “little Jesus (*xiao Yesu* 小耶穌)” for help.²³

The visible participation of Christians in the earthquake relief effort had a generally positive effect on public opinion and on the Christian population, which experienced a marked growth in conversions in the years following the disaster. However, the outpouring of Christian volunteers and charitable relief during the Sichuan earthquake also revealed the church’s inexperience with social service ministry. Determined not to squander this opportunity to share their faith with their fellow citizens, some groups of Christian volunteers took advantage of peoples’ traumatized state to coerce them to convert, employing techniques such as requiring people to recite a prayer accepting Jesus before they were given food or other kinds of aid. These instances of compassionless social service left some of the disaster-struck areas with a very unfavorable impression of Christianity.²⁴

While saddening, this phenomenon is not entirely surprising. When the Chinese church recommenced public worship in the early 1980s, many aspects of Christian faith and practice still showed the hallmarks of an inherited fundamentalist theology. For many older Chinese Christians, their life-long experience of Christian discipleship had been profoundly shaped by the influence of conservative foreign missionaries and Chinese evangelists from the 1930s and 1940s whose own theology was colored by the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. This is at least part of the reason behind the more otherworldly understandings of Christian witness that are popularly held by older Chinese believers. For this generation of Christians, social service is distinct from the oral proclamation of the gospel; it smacks of the “Social Gospel” and represents a distraction of energies and resources from the primary task of evangelism.²⁵ The parallels with North American debates from the previous century are striking.

The testimonies of younger Christians, however, often feature contemporary expatriate Christians—many of whom are or were engaged at least publicly in the delivery of various public or professional services.²⁶ For these newer believers who came to faith during the period of opening and reform, social service is seen as a more natural part of Christian identity in as much as so many expatriate examples of Christian living involved the provision of services such as English teaching, economic development, medical care, or disaster relief to people inside and outside the church. This generally positive impression, however, is in some cases muddled by expatriate Christians who—particularly during the earlier phases of post-opening and reform China ministry—justified shirking or downplaying their professional responsibilities in light of the urgency or importance of their “spiritual” ministry. Viewing their public identity as teachers, doctors, or aid workers as a “cover” or “platform,” these expatriates often unintentionally gave the impression that their service to the

²³ This phenomenon was reported by the author’s coworkers upon their return from providing medical assistance on site in the aftermath of the disaster.

²⁴ Ma Li and Li Jin, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China*, Studies in Chinese Christianity (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 107.

²⁵ For a typical example, see one pastor’s critique of charitable work in Li and Jin, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church*: 112.

²⁶ See, for example, the role of foreign English teachers in the conversion of a Chinese doctor as recorded in chapter 8 of Liao Yiwu, *God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

community was of little gospel significance.²⁷ This kind of contradiction between what expatriate Christians said and what they actually did provides support in China for the lingering fundamentalist instinct to erect a theological dichotomy between social service and evangelism.

The massive outpouring of grass roots assistance from across the country during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake ultimately posed a challenge to the authority and legitimacy of local officials, and by 2011 the government had clamped down on the activities of foreign and grassroots organizations in the province.²⁸ Chinese social service providers responded by using existing laws to register their local projects—some charitable, some for profit, many of them Christian—as legal entities. This provided Sichuan, in particular, with a mature, effective, and local social service industry prior to January 1, 2017, when the new law for the administration of foreign NGOs came into force and effectively closed the door to social service ministry in China through foreign NGOs.²⁹ While initially regarded as an attempt to halt the development of social services in China, these regulatory measures are now viewed by many as an attempt to reshape emerging civil society in the image of the Party.³⁰ Under the new regulations, expatriate social service organizations wishing to continue operating legally in China must complete a complicated registration process that requires the approval of one of a discrete number of officially sanctioned Professional Supervisory Units (*yewu zhuguan danwei* 业务主管单位); once registered, each individual event carried out by the foreign organization must also be separately approved by local Public Security officials. As of May 1, 2018, a little over 300 foreign NGOs (out of a 2016 total of between 1,000 and 7,000) have managed to successfully register representative offices in China.³¹ This has left an unknown number of agencies to either leave China or continue struggling to secure the relevant permissions, all of which has contributed to a shift in the kinds of issues that foreign NGOs in China are addressing.³² Local social service organizations are stepping in to fill the void.

Since the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the number of expatriate Christian China workers has been decreasing. Attempts to “manage” society in the run-up to the games resulted in the removal of many foreign Christian individuals and organizations. Instability out west and the lack of consequences to the state for these expulsions spurred on further regulatory and ideological developments that continue to constrain the population of foreign Christians legally residing in China—as seen in the forced removal of expatriates from several international sending agencies in the fall of 2018.³³ In light of this demographic shift,

²⁷ For a recent instance of a missionary grappling with this issue, see Elliot Clark, “The Non-Negotiable of Missionary Integrity,” *The Gospel Coalition*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/non-negotiable-missionary-integrity/>.

²⁸ Details in this paragraph are from personal interviews with a registered Chinese Christian social organization (*shehui zuzhi* 社会组织) operating in Sichuan.

²⁹ “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in the Mainland of China,” April 28, 2016, as posted at *The China NGO Project*, <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/laws-regulations/law-of-peoples-republic-of-china-administration-of-activities-of-overseas>.

³⁰ Shawn Shieh, “Remaking China’s Civil Society in the Xi Jinping Era,” August 1, 2018, *ChinaFile*, <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/remaking-chinas-civil-society-xi-jinping-era>.

³¹ “Will 2018 Be the Year of a Silent Foreign NGO Exodus?” May 23, 2018, *The China NGO Project*, <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/latest/will-2018-be-year-of-silent-foreign-ngo-exodus>

³² In practice, management of the registration process allows the state to encourage some forms of social service and to effectively stifle the provision of services that are antithetical to the Party’s priorities. Jessica Batke and Chen Qi Hang, “Has the Foreign NGO Law Changed the Work of Foreign NGOs in China?” *The China NGO Project* (January 10, 2018), <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/analysis/has-foreign-ngo-law-changed-work-of-foreign-ngos-china>.

³³ Due to ongoing security concerns, data for this multi-province action is not yet available.

Chinese believers are becoming the primary workers and initiators in the Christian social service sector. The expatriate-run relief and development ministries of the 1990s and early 2000s are now bearing fruit, with Chinese believers trained in those projects now leading local initiatives. As younger Chinese Christians take on greater responsibility in local churches, their previous exposure to the social service ministries of expatriate workers gives them a level of comfort with these new forms of ministry, making social service projects real options for more and more local congregations—particularly house church fellowships. In addition to the individuals within congregations who rely on the financial gifts and volunteers of their fellowships to run their personal ministries, individual churches are now undertaking their own forms of social service work, with “social concern (*shehui guanhuai* 社会关怀)” or “public benefit (*gongyi* 公益)” committees becoming increasingly common within registered and unregistered churches alike.

In addition to the various socially engaged ministries that have emerged since the beginning of the period of opening and reform, Chinese churches today are developing new ways to reach out to the disadvantaged in their communities. Ministries related to family counseling are extremely popular in Christian circles today, with marriage enrichment seminars and weekend “getaway” retreats, lay trainings in psychological counseling and family dynamics, private for-profit counseling centers, and “life education” trainings for youths spreading rapidly across the country. Some churches are electing to “adopt” private unregistered Christian orphanages, offering legal and regulatory assistance from members of their congregation as well as the financial support and volunteer staffing that the projects need in order to function. Projects designed to care for children (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) left behind by migrant worker parents have become common features of rural and urban churches alike, especially within the last two years. Christian schools are proliferating rapidly, although they are mostly small in scale (around a dozen children), expensive (due to translated curriculum and low student-teacher ratios), and primarily aimed at serving the church.³⁴ Elder care is expanding as well: I recently visited a large registered church (over a thousand members) in a rural county seat that now operates two nursing homes in their town. Registered as a private business owned by one of the church elders, the elder care facilities are located on church property alongside the church’s own small clinic, providing a total of three hundred residential beds at a reasonable price. One significant and telling indication of the growing interest among Chinese Christians in social service ministry: China’s largest registered Christian charity, the Amity Foundation, has recently begun participating in charitable projects outside of China’s borders.³⁵

Contemporary Challenges

While interest is growing in social service ministry, particularly among young urban believers, significant hurdles still remain. For churches that have for many decades been focused on the survival and maintenance of their congregation in an environment hostile to faith, turning outward can be very challenging. The long-nurtured in-group mentality of so many congregations can make it difficult for them to embrace the kinds of external engagement that social service ministry entails. For those churches who do not already have local members who are practitioners or at least informed advocates for this kind of ministry,

³⁴ Though there are reports from different locations noting increased official challenges to Christian education projects in the second half of 2018.

³⁵ This is clearly also a reflection of the Chinese church’s growing interest in cross-cultural missions. See Part IV in this book.

all the will in the world is often not enough to develop these new forms of outreach. In a dozen provinces across the country, local Christian social service workers are forming networks—associations of like-minded servants gathered to share resources, consult together on legal issues, hold each other accountable, and provide mutual encouragement and assistance. These fellowships are already being utilized by local and foreign organizations for the delivery of technical and theological training related to social service ministry. Local Christian social service incubators can offer valuable guidance and training in how to enter into social service ministry, functioning as a bridge to help churches cross over into the larger world of social service work; currently there are three such training centers operating with a national reputation.³⁶

Chinese Christians already engaged in providing ministry through social services are quick to admit that the church still has much to learn about development principles and social service best practices. One Chinese relief worker recalled that on his first foray into disaster assistance in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, he personally was responsible for organizing 512 Christian volunteers from all across China who arrived in the disaster area with the same idea: “show me where I can evangelize (*chuan fuyin* 传福音!)” Such thinking persists in many Chinese churches, with pastors and congregants unclear of how social service relates to evangelism or the gospel. One Chinese Christian social organization (*shehui zuzhi* 社会组织) was asked in 2014 to provide three to six months of training to a group of Chinese cross-cultural missionaries who had had their visas confiscated and been sent back to China owing to their “fundamentalist” approach to evangelism. Similarly, Christians in China typically have had little or no exposure to the basic principles behind transformational development or public benefit (*gongyi* 公益) projects, while even those already employed in social service ministries have yet to master industry best practices. As one experienced Chinese relief worker described things, most Chinese humanitarian workers still run around telling everyone “baby formula is great.”³⁷ These stories, of course, all highlight just how new this kind of ministry remains for most Chinese churches.

Legal registration also remains a challenge, owing to the frequent changes in government policies and implementation. There are currently four registration options for Chinese believers seeking to establish a legal basis for carrying out social services. Social associations (*shetuan* 社团) work well for organizing large groups of volunteers, but their financial operations and capabilities, including fund-raising, are extremely limited. Foundations (*jijinhui* 基金会) are for the most part restricted to giving away money, with an extremely high initial capital holdings requirement. Social service organizations (*shehui fuwu jigou* 社会服务机构) have replaced the previous civil non-enterprise units (*minban fei qiye* 民办非企业) as the primary channel for civil (non-government) non-profit operations in China, and they are further divided into four categories of activities: scientific (*keji* 科技), community services (*shequ fuwu* 社区服务), public benefit charities (*gongyi cishan* 公益慈善), and industrial and commercial associations (*hangye shangye xiehui* 行业商业协会).³⁸ These first three forms of legal registration are collectively known as “social organizations” (*shehui zuzhi* 社会组织 or *minjian zuzhi* 民间组织). The fourth registration option, public institutions (*shiye danwei* 事业单位), is restricted to government initiatives—the so-called

³⁶ Each possessing different strengths and foci, the three centers are located in Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Shanghai.

³⁷ The details in this paragraph are from interviews with Christian social service workers in Sichuan. Many Chinese people believe baby formula—particularly imported baby formula—is superior to breast milk.

³⁸ These four officially recognized categories for social service organization registration are from a 2018 interview with a Chinese consultant specializing in social service registration issues.

GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations).³⁹ Unfortunately, the requirements and processes for registration can vary greatly from region to region, with many civil affairs and public security officers making determinations on political factors that are far from transparent—and sometimes simply refusing to register any organizations at all.⁴⁰ Christian ministries often struggle to find an acceptable local entity to supervise their work (a requirement for most types of registration), in many cases tempting them to adopt deceptive practices to hide their religious connections in order to secure registration. Not surprisingly, some projects choose to simply register as a small business. While business registration is easy and the reporting process is comparatively standardized, this prevents ministries from raising local donations and receiving grants from most local foundations. Until the state further normalizes the role and especially the management of social service organizations in Chinese society, the legal status of all these efforts will remain precarious, limiting their development.

Finally, funding remains one of the biggest hurdles to widespread Christian participation in social service ministry. China's recent unprecedented levels of urbanization and economic growth have created many wealthy individuals within the Christian community. Unfortunately, the newfound nature of much of this prosperity has left little time for the development of biblical notions of stewardship and generosity within the church.⁴¹ While it is not unusual to see churches financially supporting their own small-scale social service efforts, larger or more professional projects (city-wide education services, disaster relief and prevention initiatives, rural poverty alleviation, etc.) only rarely receive substantial, regular funding from churches.⁴² The more developed and professional social service ministries tend to secure most of their funding by selling their services to the government or seeking grants from Chinese foundations. Having the government as a client definitely affects project selection and implementation, as some needed services or especially effective ways of serving are incompatible with government priorities. Likewise, while it is easier and much quicker to acquire funding from local foundations, they tend to give short-term grants and only support a portion of total expenses. An attempt was made in early 2018 to establish a legally registered national-level foundation with the cooperation of eight or nine Christian social service groups, but they were unable to secure approval in the face of what appeared to be a national-level unofficial halt to all foundation approvals.⁴³ For social service ministries to develop the Chinese church needs to discover more and better ways of financial support. Churches themselves need to catch a vision and develop practices for using their resources to support ministries beyond their own congregation.⁴⁴ It is too early to say whether or not the state will increase its willingness to purchase social services from local non-government providers, though experiments in Chengdu are encouraging. And without a national foundation that at least tacitly recognizes Christian priorities in the delivery of social services, many kinds of ministry will struggle to tap into bigger funding pools. The result is that for the time being many Christian social service operations that are not the product of a

³⁹ On current nomenclature, see "China," *Council on Foundations* (October 2017), <https://www.cof.org/content/china#Types>.

⁴⁰ There are multiple reports of local officials refusing to process new applications for domestic social service organizations since January of 2019.

⁴¹ Brent Fulton, "Will China Become Generous?" *ChinaSource* (Dec 7, 2016), <https://www.chinasource.org/blog/posts/will-china-become-generous>

⁴² Based on interviews with several more mature Chinese social service ministries.

⁴³ From personal interviews with some of the participants.

⁴⁴ The challenges here are similar to those faced by Chinese missionaries seeking financial support. Si Shi and GJ, "Financial Considerations in Chinese Missionary Sending: Sources of Support and Difficulties in Raising Finances," *ChinaSource* (April 20, 2017), <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/financial-considerations-in-chinese-missionary-sending>.

particular local congregation still rely on some degree of funding from outside China's borders. However, murky channels for outside funding and salaries paid for by foreigners are not long-term solutions for a church under increasing political and regulatory pressure to Sinicize (*zhongguohua* 中国化) and be truly independent.

Conclusion: Hope for the Coming Winter

It is currently common to hear the phrase “winter is coming” repeated by church leaders from across China.⁴⁵ These words are being used by local Christians to describe their shared sense that the Chinese church is entering a period of increasing state persecution. As the Chinese Communist Party reinserts itself back into more and more sectors of Chinese society, traditional avenues for social service ministry are constricting. In 2019 orphans have been removed from private care and returned to the state-run social welfare institutes. The aggressive emphasis on political indoctrination through the state schooling system that rolled out in late 2018 has dramatically reduced the number of educational alternatives still in operation.⁴⁶ Combined with increasingly enforced restrictions on attendance at church for citizens under eighteen years of age, current trends suggest that opportunities to minister to children, in particular, will be very difficult to sustain in the near future. More darkly, some believe that the shocking “security measures” being employed by the Chinese state in Xinjiang are the future for “social management (*shehui guanli* 社会管理)” throughout the rest of China.⁴⁷ Over the past two or three years, international news services have recorded many signs of the state's growing determination to constrain Christian expression throughout Chinese society; but this important and significant trend cannot be adequately understood apart from an acknowledgment of the changes happening within the church as well. While the current push within the Mainland Chinese church to serve society in the name of Jesus has deep historic roots, several aspects of the church's contemporary condition suggest that China is on the cusp of a new era of Christian witness through the indigenous provision of social services.

First of all, as mentioned above, the number of expatriate Christians serving long-term in China has dropped dramatically since the Beijing Olympics. A systematic tightening of the regulations related to foreign residence, employment, and business activity in China has resulted in the departure of many expatriates—especially those involved in the provision of social services. Many project closures were long overdue, as foreign money and personnel had perpetuated ministries that were out of touch with the current Chinese context. In other cases, treasured ministries have come to an end, though it is hoped that in time local believers will preserve what is valuable from the legacy of those foreign efforts. Regardless, the signs are clear: the future of social service ministry in China lies in the hands of Chinese believers.

⁴⁵ Andrew T. Kaiser, “Chinese Christians Preparing for ‘New Normal’,” *The Gospel Coalition* (March 2, 2017), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/chinese-christians-preparing-for-new-normal/>, Date Accessed: June 7, 2018.

⁴⁶ June Cheng, “Hard tests for China's Christian schools,” *World Magazine* (September 13, 2018), https://world.wng.org/2018/09/hard_tests_for_china_s_christian_schools?platform=hootsuite. For an overview of the theoretical and historical underpinnings of China's current patriotic education drive, see “Homo Xinensis: Drop Your Pants! The Party Wants to Patriotise You All Over Again (Part III),” *China Heritage* (August 31, 2018), <http://chinaheritage.net/journal/homo-xinensis/>.

⁴⁷ On security measures in Xinjiang, see Steven Jiang, “Chinese Uyghurs Forced To Welcome Communist Party into Their Homes,” *CNN Online* (May 14, 2018), <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/14/asia/china-xinjiang-home-stays-intl/index.html>; Adrian Zenz and James Liebold, “Xinjiang's Rapidly Evolving Security State,” *China Brief* 17, no. 4 (2017).

Raising up a new generation of Chinese Christians to engage their communities for Christ should be top priority for existing expatriate and local social service providers.

Second, recent changes to China's regulatory environment have made it increasingly difficult for foreign social service ministries to secure the registrations and permits they need to operate legally within China. Increased surveillance of business activities, heightened financial controls, and the new foreign NGO law discussed above have made it difficult for many social service projects to maintain legal standing in China. While some of this reflects an actual increase in Chinese adherence to the rule of law, a recent government propaganda campaign highlights the decidedly political and even hostile motivation behind many of these actions. The Ministry of State Security and several other government institutions related to science and defense used the occasion of the third annual National Security Day on April 15, 2018 to promulgate a series of cartoons warning citizens to be wary of foreign spies masquerading as NGO workers.⁴⁸ While such ham-fisted security pushes are not new, this reveals the true nature of the state's apparent determination to control or eliminate foreigners working in China's social service sector. In this environment, every foreign social service initiative must be actively pursuing full localization of their ministry, supporting local believers in their efforts to establish, manage, and legally register their own indigenous social service ministries.⁴⁹

Third, the growing tide of missionary sending from the Mainland Chinese church is also contributing to increased interest in social service ministry. Most obviously, the current Chinese church mania for short-term mission trips has created a demand for the kinds of "service projects" that many Christian social service initiatives represent. At the same time, the small but growing number of Chinese long-term cross-cultural missionaries are also receiving positive exposure to social service ministry as they encounter bi-vocational international ministry teams in hard-to-reach countries where social services are often important vehicles for engaging the local community and securing legal residence. As the ties between these Chinese missionaries and their sending churches strengthen, their experiences will likely filter down into the congregations, shaping and in some cases expanding believers' expectations of gospel ministry to include the provision of social services. Ideally, this will spur Chinese churches to develop new habits and mechanisms for supporting Chinese social service ministries through prayer, finances, and participation.

Fourth, many Christian leaders are deeply concerned about the shrinking role of the church in Chinese society. Between government propaganda and information control, and the pervasive presence of social media, Chinese people—particularly the young—seem to have little room for faith in their lives. Many local pastors see social service ministry and the community engagement it represents as a key pathway for demonstrating Christianity's continuing relevance for today's China. A new generation of Chinese people need to see and experience—as well as hear—the gospel for themselves. To remain focused on the survival of those already within the church walls, insulating the community of faith from the changing society, is to court marginalization. For many Chinese pastors, robust ministry through the provision of locally valued social services is necessary if the church hopes to reach present and future generations and avert fading into obscurity.⁵⁰

Fifth, as religious affairs once again fall under the remit of the United Front Work Department, some Christians are looking for ways to justify their existence to the Party. With

⁴⁸ "Government Cartoon Portrays 'Foreign NGOs' as National Security Threat," *The China NGO Project*, <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/latest/government-cartoon-portrays-foreign-ngos-national-security-concern>.

⁴⁹ Swells in the Middle Kingdom, "The Challenges of Localization: Why Localize Now?", *ChinaSource* (Dec 9 2016), <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/the-challenges-of-localization>.

⁵⁰ This and the following paragraph are based on conversations with Chinese pastors in registered and unregistered churches in many different locations in China between 2016 and 2018.

so little room within the China Dream for religious expression, there seems little reason for the Party to allow Christianity a place in society. While acknowledging that there will always be dissonance between the church and any worldly power, many church leaders see social service ministry as an opportunity to demonstrate the value of Christianity to Chinese society in a language that the Party can understand and accept.⁵¹ Consciously avoiding the naïve accommodationism of the early TSPM, today's Christians are looking for ways to faithfully preserve their public identity in this new Chinese epoch (*xin shidai* 新时代). This is a strategic attempt to preserve a sphere of civic space for the public demonstration of Christian faith—for gospel witness—in the face of growing restrictions.

As has happened so often in history, divine irony is employing the very conditions of state repression that are constricting the church's religious activities to lead the Chinese church into a new phase of gospel witness. While reports in the foreign media mourn the restrictions the Chinese church is facing and may increasingly face in the coming years, Chinese believers themselves are much more sanguine. During a conference I attended in 2016 one prominent mainland Christian intellectual directly addressed the threat of a coming winter. With a telling combination of confidence and sorrow in his expression, he reminded the attendees that the Chinese church has been through periods of repression in the past—and emerged in the end stronger than before. The same God who was faithful then is still in control, and he will preserve his church through whatever periods of suffering, purification, or growth he chooses to bring.

What is clear is that all these different factors—demographics, regulatory changes, theological developments, strategic considerations, political shifts, and more—have placed the church in a position where local believers increasingly will be called to step out of their comfort zones, independent of foreign assistance, and be the hands of Jesus in their communities. In many ways, the time has already arrived: as one Chinese author acknowledges, “Christianity has probably become China's largest nongovernmental organization.”⁵² This is a *kairos* moment, an opportunity for the church to offer an alternative to contemporary society. Care for society (*shehui guanhuai* 社会关怀) done faithfully can bring healing *shalom* through the building of trust and the demonstration of *agape* love to a cynical China where integrity seems impossible and all relationships feel broken. Even as the political winds blow strong in the face of the church, the witness of Chinese Christians through the provision of various social services holds the potential for gospel transformation—for a renewed China Dream that embodies the core values of the Kingdom of God.

⁵¹ One scholar notes that officials who value faith-based charity work as a “tradable resource” are often unaware of the degree to which Christian social service projects are able to transmit gospel messages through their service. McCarthy, “In between the Divine and the Leviathan,” 72–73.

⁵² Li Fan, as quoted in Evan Osnos, “Five Things You Need to Know about Faith in China,” *On Faith*, <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2014/05/13/five-things-you-need-to-know-about-faith-in-china/32061>.