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THE CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH: THE REFORMATION, HOUSE CHURCHES IN CHINA AND ECUMENICITY

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Abstract

The churches in every generation have the crisis of being in captivity in various ways. It is important for the churches to be attentive to the Gospel and to be humble to receive criticism in order to be God's faithful witness. The concerns of this paper are what the captivity of the churches in the Reformation and in China are, how these two experiences are correlated and what theological and spiritual significance of their witnesses contribute to ecumenicity. On the one hand, house churches in China are enriched by the discovery of the Gospel of Luther's reformation and its commitment to the ecumenicity of the churches. On the other hand, the experience of house churches in China raises the concern of ecumenical solidarity with the oppressed people.

Keywords: China, Chinese Church, Ecumenicity, Reformation

Introduction

During the 1990s, "justification by love" proposed by late Bishop K.H. Ting had sparked off a very controversial discussion among the churches in China, not only because theologically, Ting's proposal was very different from the Reformation's emphasis on the justification by faith,¹ but also because politically he was the

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¹K.H. Ting, *God is Love*, Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries International, 2004.

Chairperson emeritus of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China (the Three-Self are self-governance, self-support and self-propagation; hereafter: the TSPM) and the President emeritus of the China Christian Council. The discussion does not end with a conclusion, but it has been gradually dim after the death of Ting. Apart from Ting's issue, is there any common theme running through the Reformation and the churches in China? Speaking from the perspective of house churches,² I consider two correlated themes, what the Church of Jesus Christ is and how those who claim themselves the true Church of Jesus Christ relate to the churches whom they consider failure to be true Church of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther is concerned about the hierarchical Roman Catholicism and its distortion of the Gospel, while house churches in China are concerned about churches registered with the TSPM and the loss of Christian freedom. The significance of the struggle for being the Church of Jesus Christ is that the true-ness and the relationship of the churches are about a symbol of ecumenicity. The unity of the church in ecumenicity is not an end in itself, but is to manifest the future fellowship of the kingdom of God, which is to include all creation, a renewed creation that has passed through the judgment of God. Wolfhart Pannenberg writes, "The Christian ecumenical movement cannot accomplish this mission without at the same time creating a model for the compatibility of unity and multiplicity in relation to other religions and in the political world as well."³

Like the life of Jesus, the Church is for others. This paper focuses on how both the heritage of Reformation and the experience of house churches in China enrich our commitment to and imagination of ecumenicity. Due to the fact that the Chinese government has different policy on Catholicism and Protestantism, this paper only focuses on the Protestant churches. And the Reformation here refers to Martin Luther's reformation.

²House churches or family churches in China are Protestant assemblies since late 1950s, and they are reluctant to be a member of the TSPM, a government backed organization. They are called house churches, for their gathering is at believers' homes. Since 1990s, many house churches are no longer home-based due to an increase of believers and relatively open civil society. Some scholars prefer to use the term, unregistered church, to speak about this Protestant phenomenon. But I keep the term 'house church' in this paper, for house churches themselves prefer to use this term to describe them.

³Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Church*, trans. Keith Grim, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983, 165.

Reformation, not Revolution

It is an undeniable fact that de-centring the status of the Roman Church and the emergence of new churches are consequences of the Reformation, but these phenomena are not necessarily equivalent to schism, for it depends upon how the unity of the Church is perceived. If the unity of the Church is about communion featured by sharing, participation, and community instead of institution and structure,⁴ the Roman Church around the period of the Reformation does not reflect too much the spirit of communion, for the hierarchical Roman Church does not have the capacity to take of the plurality of the Christian community into it. Ironically, the emergence of new churches pushes us to reflect seriously on the meaning of the unity of the Church. Some more radical reformers intended to denounce the Roman Church entirely, but this view was not the position of Martin Luther. Luther had no intention to give birth to a new church, for he held that the visible church was never the invisible Church which was a spiritual community by nature, but the invisible Church was experienced in the visible church.⁵ He unreservedly criticized the Roman Church, but he still considered the Roman Church to be holy. After nearly 20 years of battle with the Roman Church, Luther in his *Commentary on Galatians* (1535) wrote,

Although the city Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorra, nevertheless there remain Baptism, Sacraments, the Word of the Gospel, the Holy Scriptures, the Ministry of the Church, the name of Christ, and the name of God... Therefore, the Roman Church is holy because she has the holy name of God, the Gospel, the Baptism, etc. If these things exist among a people, the people are called holy.⁶

Luther merely protested against the abuses in the one church of which he was a member. What Luther aimed at was to reform the Roman Church into an evangelical church, for the Gospel got lost somehow between Pentecost event described in Acts of Apostles 2 and the Reformation. He endeavoured to reach an agreement with the Roman Church on the issue of justification and others in colloquies (Speyer/Hagenau [1540], Worms [1540-1541], Regensburg [1541-1546]). Unfortunately, all these attempts failed. Despite this, both Lutherans and the Roman Church have not given up the call to

⁴Heindrich Holze, *The Church as Communion*, Geneva: LWF Publication, 1997.

⁵ <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-362> (accessed on 4 June 2017)

⁶Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26, St Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 24-25.

unity.⁷ Finally, both the Lutherans and the Roman Church came to a joint declaration on the doctrine of justification by faith in 1999. Pope Francis on the 500th anniversary of Reformation affirms that, “the intention of Martin Luther was to renew the Church, not divide Her.”⁸

The Gospel Creates and Purifies the Church

Luther’s inquiry of “How may I find a gracious God?” should not be confined to a personal existential problem of his over-scrupulous work. In fact, his concern sparked off a more fundamental concern, that is, “whether the church is to be the Sacrament.” A focus on an ecclesiological concern instead of Luther’s personal existential concern is a belief of that “there is no salvation outside the Church,” that was commonly held at the time of Luther. This belief expressed that to place oneself outside the institution of the church was therefore to forfeit any hope of salvation. Thus, the Reformation was basically about a critique of the Church’s practice, teaching, and belief. Its aim was to reform, improve, and renew the Roman Church so that the Gospel, which was the Church’s greatest treasure, could appear in full clarity. Luther’s strong passion for the supremacy of the Gospel made him take an unreserved criticism against the Roman Church. In *Address To The Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), Luther wrote,

The Romanists have, with great adroitness, drawn three walls round themselves, with which they have hitherto protected themselves, so that no one could reform them, whereby all Christendom has fallen terribly. Firstly, if pressed by the temporal power, they have affirmed and maintained that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the contrary, that the spiritual power is above the temporal. Secondly, if it were proposed to admonish them with the Scriptures, they objected that no one may interpret the Scriptures but the Pope. Thirdly, if they are threatened with a council, they pretend that no one may call a council but the Pope...⁹

But Luther carried no intention to wipe out the Roman Church from God’s plan. In 1540, when he was challenged by more radical reformers, Luther commented that,

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html (accessed on 4 June 2017).

⁸ <http://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/01/19/pope-francis-martin-luther-wanted-to-renew-the-church-not-divide-her/> (accessed on 4 June 2017).

⁹Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 44, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 126.

We on our parts confess that much is Christian and good under the papacy; indeed, everything that is Christian and good is to be found there and has come from that source. For instance, ... the true Holy Scriptures, true baptism, the true sacrament of the altar, the true keys to the forgiveness of sins, the true office of the ministry...¹⁰

Obviously, Luther followed Augustine in adopting a mixed body ecclesiology, that was, a mixed body of sinners and saints. Luther explained the parable of the weeds (Mt 13:24-30) that “the church cannot be without evil people. Those fanatics who don’t want to tolerate any weeds end up with no wheat either.”¹¹

What makes the Church the Church? The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed states the Church is “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.” Luther did not object to this confession, but he added two points. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession (1530) states: “The Church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.”

The relation between the traditional four marks of the Church and Luther’s addition is that the former is about the ontological attributes and the latter is the marks. For Luther, preaching and sacraments are the expressions of the Gospel, and these are the essence of Christian worship. Paul Avis rightly notes that, “Luther was primarily and passionately concerned for the purity of the Gospel, Calvin for the purity of the Church.”¹² For Luther, it is the purity of the Gospel defining the Church, not vice versa. In *The Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (1517), Luther stated that the pure Gospel was that no one could meritoriously prepare for justifying grace by exercising one’s natural powers without grace. No one could fulfil the law without God’s grace. No one could become righteous by doing righteous deeds. The Church is found by the Gospel, and also is called to proclaim the Gospel. Obviously, the introduction and practice of indulgence are against the Gospel.

In November 1518, Pope Leo X’s bull stated his power of defining church teaching without accountability to the Bible and the Fathers. This assertion pushed Luther to hold determinately that,

People must be taught that if they really want to find peace for their conscience they should learn to place their confidence, not in the power of

¹⁰Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 41, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 231.

¹¹Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 38, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 560.

¹²Paul Avis, “The True Church in Reformation Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977) 322.

the pope, but in the word of Christ who gives the promise to the pope. For it is not because the pope grants it that you have anything, but you have it because you believe that you receive it. You have only as much as you believe according to the promise of God.¹³

In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther critically observed that the Gospel had become a captive of the institutional church through the complex system of priests and sacraments. Sacraments became marketable, and people were mistaken that they were capable of earning merit. Luther argued that the Gospel was about God's grace, which was freely given to humans and nourished the faith of the people of God. This rationale explains that the doctrine of justification by faith is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (the article by which the Church stands or falls). Only the proclamation of the Word is necessary to create the Church. The Word is the mark par excellence of the Church; and by the Word, Luther means the Gospel. In *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), Luther's statement that "since the Church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word. If it is without the Word it ceases to be a church."¹⁴

It was the Gospel sustaining the Church in which one would experience freedom and love in God's graciousness. On the contrary, the hierarchical structure and tradition of the Roman Church made it inclined to self-absolutization and self-righteousness. As a result, the Roman Church became an obstacle to God's graciousness more than a channel. It is the Gospel freeing us from traditions and even dead dogma.

Faith and Worship

For Luther, the reformation of the church cannot be separated from the reformation of the liturgical life, for worship is an expression of the relationship between God and his people. There is no church without worship, for it is the Word and sacrament that create the Church and make worship meaningful. In fact, the Ninety-Five Theses are a critique of practice, the sacramental practice of contrition and confession in Christian worship. Worship is not the work of Christian effort, but Christians are called to worship. This call goes out before the service even begins. It is the Gospel uniting us and

¹³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 31, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 104.

¹⁴Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 40, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 37.

bringing us to worship together. In worship, all human achievements, human differences, and human-made barriers are put aside, for worshippers experience that they live by grace. Luther explained: "Faith is commanded in the first commandment; praise and confession of the name [of God] in the second; and the works of God in us are commanded in the third. In these three commandments the true and legitimate worship of God is fulfilled."¹⁵ David Yeago rightly comments that Luther's ecclesiology is "a primary identification of the Church as *the concrete worshipping community*, whose inward unity in faith and the Spirit is constituted precisely *in and through* its public sacramental practice."¹⁶

Christian worship was usually called *leiturgia* (liturgy, the work of the people) in the patristic period, but *leiturgia* was gradually replaced by *missa* (the Mass), meaning the order of worship in Word and sacrament. The change from *leiturgia* to *missa* is not just a matter of the choice of words, but it reflects the dominant concern of order and structure, and gives less attention to an experience of *communitas*. The laity still found ways to participate in the *missa* through processions, the singing of carols (especially in Germany), ocular communion (observing the elevation of the Host at the consecration of the Eucharistic elements), going to confession and receiving absolution from a priest, and celebrating festivals and feast days of saints with fairs, carnivals, liturgical dramas, and mystery plays, but their involvement could not be considered as participants, for they did not participate equally and consciously. Furthermore, since most people were illiterate and did not understand Latin used in the *missa*, their participation was very limited and less conscious.

In order to reclaim true worship, Luther attacked the sacramental system in his works *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Abuse of the Mass* that was published in the following year, in 1521. For instance, Luther criticized the practice of Eucharist in three ways: first, the cup was withheld from the people; second, the mystery of the Eucharist was rationalized with the dogma of transubstantiation; and third, the *missa* was offered as a good work and a sacrifice instead of being received as the gift of Christ to his Church. Despite his strong critique of the sacramental system, Luther wrote,

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor has it ever been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the

¹⁵Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 44, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 318.

¹⁶See David S. Yeago, "A Christian, Holy People: Martin Luther on Salvation and the Church," *Modern Theology* 13, 1 (1997) 106-108.

one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. We cannot deny that the mass, i.e., the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ and then by the apostles, quite simply and evangelically without any additions. But in the course of time, so many human inventions were added to it that nothing except the names of the mass and communion have come down to us.¹⁷

For Luther, the liturgical reform is not confined to right administration of the sacrament, but the people could participate in worship communally and consciously. This shifts the locus of activity from the hierarchy of the ecclesial institution (papal authority transferred through bishops and priests) to the action of the worshipping assembly listening and participating in an encounter with God's Word.

First, Luther conducted the *missa* in German liturgies in order that the people could understand the worship and participate in it consciously. Though he provided a *German Mass and Order of Service* (1526) due to the request by the people, Luther had no intention to absolutize the German order of service. Rather, he encouraged each region to draw up its own worship order according to its local needs. Moreover, Luther used the traditional form and local form of the *missa* alongside each other so that the different needs of the people could be met.

Second, Luther considered congregational singing as useful and desirable. He wrote,

I also wish for us to have as many vernacular songs as possible that the people could sing during the mass either along with the Gradual or along with the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*. For who doubts that in times past all the people sang those things that now only the choir sings or answers in response to the blessing of the bishop? Indeed, these songs could be appointed by the bishop to be sung either immediately after the Latin songs or on alternating days, being sung first in Latin, then in the vernacular, until the entire mass is done in the vernacular. But poets are lacking among us, or are not yet known, who could compose for us devout, spiritual songs (as Paul calls them) that are worthy of being used frequently in the church of God...¹⁸

Here Luther clearly indicated his desire to have the people sing during the mass because the choir had taken over those parts of the *missa* that had originally belonged to the people. He encouraged

¹⁷Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 53, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 20.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 12, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 218.

singing by the congregation in his own church, but not at the expense of the choral liturgy. This view was reflected in the *Letter to Georg Spalatin* (1523). It is important to note that Luther was very conscious to introduce any desired changes in the liturgy only when the people were ready for them. Theological and pastoral concerns are two sides of a coin in Luther's liturgical reform.

Third, in order to improve the poor knowledge of the Christian faith among ministers and laity, Luther wrote his *Small Catechism* (1529) for a general audience and the *Large Catechism* (1529) for pastors and well-educated laity. They were written in German. One significant feature of these catechisms was their ecumenical spirit. They were built on the long tradition of the Church instead of Luther's theology only.¹⁹

Christians are unified through worship, not only because we are called to worship, but also because worshippers equally, consciously, and communally participate in worship. This is the concrete practice of the meaning of the priesthood of all believers in Luther's teaching. It is important to stress that for Luther, the Church as the communion of saints exists because of the gospel and not because of the visible structure.

Churches in China in Captivity

If the distortion of the Gospel by the practice of indulgences is what Luther challenges the Roman Church, what are the challenges to churches in China? Due to the intervention of the Chinese government in religious affairs, churches in China are divided into two camps, that is, churches registered with the government-backed TSPM and churches' refusal to join the TSPM which are commonly called house churches. Churches registered with TSPM are in compliance with the law and policy, while house churches are illegal. I am aware that there are different approaches to study Christianity in China, but I still consider the paradigm of TSPM versus house churches a valid approach to articulate the relationship among churches and church-state relation.

Since the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, every Protestant denomination had to become a member of the TSPM in order to be allowed to carry out their church activity.²⁰ In 1954,

¹⁹Eero Huovinen, "Doctor Communis? The Ecumenical Significance of Martin Luther's Theology," *Lutherjahrbuch* 80 (2013) 13-30.

²⁰Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 158-168; Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Good*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988, 113-153.

Christian leaders held a meeting in Beijing and formally established the TSPM. From then on, all churches in China completely cut off links with foreign missions. In 1958, all Protestant denominations were united under one church named "United Worship" by the TSPM, and the distinction of denominations did not exist within the organization. It claimed that the "United Worship" was to advocate mutual respect in matters of faith and worship, seek common ground while shelving differences. Although the churches might still keep some traditions such as the different forms of baptism, rituals, and so forth, they gave up denominational titles and structures, and did not emphasize denominational church order or doctrine. The leaders of the TSPM claimed that the Chinese Christian churches had entered the post-denominational era. But in the same year, the Chinese government took a radical change of religious policy and forbid all religious activities, including religious activities of TSPM. This change of policy pushed Christians to meet privately at home, and stimulated the growth of house churches. In short, house churches are variously described as autonomous, independent, unofficial and underground.

The Open Door Policy in 1978 has brought the relaxation of religious policy, and this is reflected in the Document 19 (The Basic viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period) published in 1982. House churches are still illegal, and pastors and Christians from house churches are still under arrest, but they are relatively more tolerable than in the past. In late 2008, the Development Research Centre of the State Council and the Pushi Institute of Social Science, Beijing jointly organized a workshop on "Christianity and Harmonious Society: Chinese House Church Symposia." This is regarded as the first officially organized conference on house churches and it discussed questions of what a house church is, why house churches have emerged, and how to deal with them. Since then, the government has gradually opened a path for house churches to be legitimate, that is, registering with the TSPM. Some house churches welcome this invitation, but house churches associated with the informal leadership of Shouwang Church in Beijing and Early Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu do not accept it.²¹ To a large extent these churches are inherited from the

²¹Both Shouwang Church and Early Rain Reformed Church are seen as the leaders of house churches in China. Liu Peng, "House Church: A Review of the Beijing Shouwang," in Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz, ed., *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 231-242. Chole Starr, "Wang Yi and the 95 Theses of the Chinese Reformed Church," *Religions* 7 (2016) 142-157.

house church tradition of Wang Mingdao (1900-1991).²² He is a pastor imprisoned for his faith by the Chinese government from 1955 until 1980. He is influential among Christians, and has been called the “Dean of the House Churches.” He takes a negative view to the TSPM.

Shouwang Church is a house church founded in 1993, and in 2011, it had a membership of more than 1000. It is willing to register with the Beijing Religious Affairs Bureau, but it is advised to register with the TSPM. This is unacceptable to the Shouwang Church, for it considers the basic difference between the TSPM and the house churches is the difference of “different faiths.” It employs Wang Mingdao’s words to describe that the TSPM are non-believers. The Shouwang Church argues that,

First, the Three-Self was born out of the Cold War and was [the result of] the government using a political movement to achieve political goals. Second, its current goals and functions show that the Three-Self is still there for the ruling party’s purpose of forming a United Front and regards patriotism as its highest goal. Third, its systems and operations show it is still a quasi-government institution, neither self-governing nor self-supporting, and its very existence seriously conflicts with the Three-Self principles.²³

Shouwang Church concludes that,

If a church joins an organization whose goal is to accomplish the tasks stipulated by the ruling party or secular state agencies, then the very foundation for the meaningful existence of the church will be shaken. The church’s very foundations might very well become dislocated; that is to say, its position as a universal [Christian] church founded upon Jesus Christ would be turned into that of a nation-state. For example, when the Three-Self movement regarded as its primary task the eradication of ties between Chinese Christianity and imperialism, its position obviously was that of a nation-state, not that of the universal [Christian] church. From the perspective of a universal [Christian] church, even though there was definitely a need for Chinese churches to become self-reliant local churches, they obviously should not exist separated from churches in other countries. Their relationship with all orthodox churches in other countries, whether they are churches in so-called ‘imperialist’ or ‘socialist’ countries, is a relationship of brothers in Christ. Faith in Christ takes primacy over the state, and the universality of the church takes primacy over its nationality.²⁴

²²Richard Cook, *Fundamentalism and Modern Culture in Republican China: The Popular Language of Wang Mingdao*, University of Iowa, 2003, Unpublished PhD thesis.

²³ <http://www.chinaaid.org/2011/06/why-we-wont-join-three-self-patriotic.html> (accessed on 4 June 2017)

²⁴<http://www.chinaaid.org/2011/06/why-we-wont-join-three-self-patriotic.html>

Refusal to register with the TSPM has brought Shouwang Church under different degrees of persecution since October 2009, when authorities ran the group out of a church-owned building. The church later attempted to purchase or rent new locations, and each time, authorities pressured the landlords or previous property owners to break their contracts with the church. As a result, Shouwang Church resorts to worshipping outdoors, most frequently in Zhongguancun's Haidian Park, for it considers that freedom to believe in religion is protected in the Constitution. However, police continues to interfere, and detained several church members on an almost weekly basis. Pastor Jin Tinming has been restricted in his house for 6 years and is still on-going.

The uncompromising attitude of the Shouwang Church to the TSPM reflects that, first, the three-self principles of TSPM has nothing to do with the protection and promotion of the autonomy of the church. On the contrary, it intends to make churches under the management of the government. This is against the belief of the Church that Jesus Christ is the head of the church, not the state. It is clear that house churches are inclined to the free-church tradition, and reject any form of Constantinian relation. It takes a sharp separation between the state and the church. Second, Shouwang Church adopts the idea of ecumenism as a theological argument against the patriotism of the TSPM. This is a very important insight, for ecumenism is relatively weak among churches in China. However, it is not clear how ecumenism articulated by the Shouwang Church can go beyond the theological conservatism of house churches, and is related to the unity of creation, the TSPM churches, Catholicism and even other faiths.

An echo to Shouwang Church is the Early Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu. It is a house church and refuses to register with the TSPM. On 15 August, 2015, two pastors and five elders from this church signed a document entitled "Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 theses."²⁵ Theses 1-17 is about God's sovereignty and biblical authority; Theses 18-31 is about God's law and Christ's Redemption; Theses 32-39 is against the "Sinicization of Christianity"; Theses 40-44 is about Church as the body of Christ and His kingdom; Theses 45-72 is about the relationship between two kingdoms and the separation of church and state; Theses 73-95 is against the TSPM and an affirmation of the great commission. At the

²⁵ <http://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2015/08/95-theses-the-reaffirmation-of-our-stance-on-the-house-church?rq=95%20theses> (accessed on 4 June 2017).

end of the 95 theses, it states that the Early Rain Reformed Church is in the house church's heritage of Wang Mingdao. This is not my intention to discuss the 95 theses, but I would like to highlight three themes related to this study. First, the Early Rain Reformed Church is willing to register with a department of civil affairs, but not with the TSPM (Thesis 91). It is because it considers the TSPM is "a movement of the Antichrist," and "it denies that there is a kingdom of Christ that is higher than the nations of the earth, and attempts to create a "Nationalistic Church" that depends on the political powers" (Thesis 76). Besides, the TSPM "takes away local churches' autonomy and independence" (Thesis 80). I will return to this point in due course.

Second, it criticizes a demand for a "Sinicization of Christianity." It accepts that God reveals himself in the Chinese culture, but the Chinese culture does not carry God's revelation. On the contrary, it states that,

the Chinese for a very long time, rather than living a life of worshipping the true God, have been living in an evil culture of idolatry, which worships autocracy and prostrates before the Emperor. The philosophical teachings of "no ultimate truths, only virtues" have resulted in a moral self-righteousness. These three cultural norms have been binding the hearts of the Chinese and our institutions up until now (Thesis 34).

It concretely criticizes the attempt of "proclaiming that traditional Chinese culture and religions include some unique revelations about redemption outside of God and the Bible," "teaching a type of Universal Doctrine of Christ that denies the historical Jesus and affirms that Chinese traditions have implicit teachings about the redemptive saving ways of Christ," and "teaching Justification by Love" or all such teachings that seeks assimilation with traditional Chinese moralistic teachings, and weakens or even denies the necessity of Christ's atonement on the cross (Thesis 37).

Is the "Sinicization of Christianity" more related to a matter of contextualization than a sign of the political penetration of the Chinese authorities into church affairs? Is the Early Rain Reformed Church aware of its theological tradition as a type of "European Christianity" more than the Christian faith? Does orthodoxy allow a certain extent of plurality? However, we have to understand that the 95 theses is written in the light of the government's initiative of the "Sinicization of Christianity" proposed by Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, in May 2015.²⁶ In other words, the so-called "Sinicization of Christianity" has a strong political motivation than a matter of theological articulation.

²⁶<http://www.sara.gov.cn/llyj/332789.htm> (accessed on 4 June 2017).

Thirdly, due to the political reality in China, it is quite understandable that the 95 theses hold a sharp separation between church and state. But it is not clear how the church is related to society, and what the role of the church in the protection and promotion of human right is.

Though some people suggest that a paradigm between TSPM and house church is no longer appropriate to understand Christian living in China, the examples of Shouwang Church and Early Rain Reformed Church and their supporting churches would not agree with it, for house churches endeavour to resist the penetration of TSPM. If so, house churches have to reflect whether there is any faithful Christian and churches in TSPM, whether there is any possibility for churches to have collaboration with the government, whether the uncompromising attitude of house churches is a witness to God or makes them suffer unnecessarily. Carrying these concerns in mind, we move to the final section of the paper.

Dialogue between East and West

Both the Reformation and house churches in China remind us that it is the Word creating the Church, giving the Church authority and commanding the Church to mission. The Church has to repent continuously in the light of the Word. Luther and house churches in China have different responses to the church in captivity. Luther criticizes the Roman Church unreservedly, but he would not denounce the work of the Holy Spirit in the Roman Church through the sacraments. In order to overcome the question of legitimacy of the Roman Church, Luther emphasizes the church as an invisible spiritual community. This is not to ignore the visible church, but the visible church is not the whole of the Church. The idea of invisible church is not found in the position of the house churches in China. What they do is to adopt a dualistic view, and condemn the TSPM as anti-Christ and the false church. If how to determine the church as the true church is solely based on the criteria of its relationship to the TSPM, this is a political judgment more than a theological judgment. In fact, different churches have different concerns in their decision to register with the TSPM, and the collaboration with the government should not be considered as equivalent to the betrayal of faith. Likewise, the emergence of house churches does not automatically justify that they are practising Christians. Here I am not defending the authenticity of TSPM, but the idea of invisible church articulated in the Reformation is helpful for Christians in China to deal with the ambiguity of the church in history.

A correlated theme is the church-state relation. Luther's reformation would not be able to proceed without the involvement of German princes and nobles. Luther's teaching of two kingdoms allows him taking a non-separatist view of church-state relation. Contrarily, house churches in China experience that the government's involvement in church affairs is a violation of religious liberty, and a separatist view of church-state relation is common among house churches. It cannot be denied that the emergence of the TSPM is a political product, but if the TSPM would not be dissolved in the near future, churches in China may have to reflect how to engage with the government wisely, and seek for the possibility of the internal transformation of TSPM. It is understandable that house churches take a clear stand against the TSPM, but Christian witness within the TSPM should not be ignored.

Second, both the Reformation and house churches in China are concerned about Christian worship. In contemporary term, it is about religious liberty. Christian worship is the Christian practice of theology. Christian faith is expressed in worship rather than in thought. Luther focuses on the Word and sacrament, the mass and liturgy, laity and office in Christian worship, while house churches in China struggle for having their own worship other than "United Worship" arranged by the government. Despite their different concerns, their Christian worship has reflected something like what Victor Turner, an anthropologist, talks about *communitas* found in liminality. According to Turner, people in liminality are "betwixt and between," and they do not belong to the society that they previously are a part of, and they are not yet reincorporated into that society. People experience an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness in liminality.²⁷ In Turner's phrase, this bond is *communitas*. Contrarily, structure is defined as "society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of more or less."²⁸ Theologically, worshippers in worship have experienced a life different from ordinary life, for they are directed to an eschatological hope in worship.²⁹ This theological dimension of worship has a political implication. The evangelical worship challenges the status quo represented by the mass of the Roman Church, while the Christian worship of house churches in China challenges the Chinese

²⁷Victor Turner, *Ritual Process*, New York: Transaction, 1995, 95-96.

²⁸Victor Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96.

²⁹James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009, 155-214.

government to convert Christian worship into social control. Christian worship is a political act, not only because the worshippers confess Jesus Christ as the Lord, but also because the worship itself challenges the structured system favouring the dominant.

Finally, Luther's emphasis on the Gospel easily gives way to the development of an idea that Christians do not need to do good work, for good work has no role in Christian salvation. It is true that Luther's theology would support that the treasure of the Church is not service to the world but the Gospel. The Church stands or falls, not on its ethics (service, good works), but on the article of justification. To be fair, what Luther wants to argue is that moral acts cannot replace the Gospel, and the Gospel cannot be reduced to doing good work, but it does not imply that good work has no role in Christian living. Luther writes, "A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself."³⁰ This is the ecumenical solidarity that the churches should take seriously.

Regarding house churches in China, the situation is very complicated. On the one hand, other religious groups and non-faith groups are hesitant to show solidarity with house churches, because they do not want to be targeted by the government as anti-government. On the other hand, some people from the *Weiquan* movement (defending rights movement)³¹ may not want house churches to get involved in it, for religious issue in China is always sensitive, and the government is inclined to associate it with imperialism. Ironically, this also applies to the church. For instance, Shouwang Church is reluctant to associate its struggle with *Weiquan* movement, for *Weiquan* movement is a political issue in China, and Shouwang Church wants its case in low profile. The major challenge to ecumenicity in China is the success of the government's strategy of categorization which makes people hesitant to be in solidarity with one another. This explains that social movement in china is fundamentally fragmented. Courage to be in solidarity with the victims, not for the sake of social mobilization, is the great challenge to churches in China. This is about ecumenicity, and this may be the Gospel whom the people in China are longing to hear and see.

³⁰Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 31, St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986, 364.

³¹Jonathan Benney, *Defending Rights in Contemporary China*, London: Routledge, 2013.

Conclusion

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is a very ambiguous issue in China. The TSPM would not have any celebration of it, for this might encourage or give an excuse to the churches of the TSPM to initiate reformation, and this is something that the Chinese authorities do not want to see. Contrarily, house churches in China have different degrees of celebration. Since house churches in China are more affiliated to Calvinist theology and have the Chinese moralistic inclination,³² their ecclesiology gives more attention to Law than Gospel. Luther's theology is intentionally introduced here, for it confronts both TSPM and house churches in different ways. Both Luther's emphasis on the Gospel and the paradox of the Christian faith, that is, between faith and works, sin and faith, spiritual realm and worldly realm, allow the churches in China to have a theological capacity to struggle with the complexity of Chinese politics. This has been illustrated in the section of dialogue between East and West. At the same time the struggle of churches in China reminds us that ecumenicity and freedom, discipleship and the Gospel are the messages of the Reformation.

³² See Alexander Chow, "Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today," *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, 2 (2014) 158-175; Fredrik Fällman, "Calvin, Culture and Christ? Developments of Faith among Chinese Intellectuals", in Francis Khek Gee Lim, ed., *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-Cultural Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2013, 152-68.