

## Chinese Megachurch Persecution:

### *Application of an Indigenous Resource Framework*

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#### Abstract

Despite increased religious tolerance in China over the past few decades, persecution of Christians persists. Small churches or Christians who clandestinely meet in small groups may avoid a certain degree of conflict; few studies consider how their larger, less conspicuous counterparts fare. An indigenous resource framework and content analysis of interview, secondary, and participant observation data inform this study of megachurch conflict in mainland China and whether responses follow patterns similar to those used by Black Christian-based activists in the United States during periods of persecution. In addition to the single megachurch identified in existing Chinese news media, this study uncovered twelve additional large congregations to suggest greater presence of such churches than acknowledged in China. Moreover, findings evidence use of a strategic combination of indigenous resources common before and during the Civil Rights Movement such as non-violent activism, charisma by church clergy, and prayer, but adapted to the specific politico-religious environment in China to combat persecution, engender social justice, as well as rally local and international support.

**Keywords:** Chinese, megachurches, religion, Civil Rights Movement

#### 1. Introduction

##### *1.1 Research Problem and Relevance*

Despite increased tolerance of Christianity in China since the 1980s, religious persecution persists. This subject continues to receive attention from both academic and mainstream writers (Saiget, 2009; Vu, 2009; Yang, 2010; Yiwu, 2011), yet studies have not specifically examined the experiences of some of the most highly visible Christian collectives in China – megachurches. In fact, despite the noticeable increase in megachurches internationally, sources consistently report the existence of *a single megachurch* in mainland China (Bodeen, 2009; Buchan, 2000; *China Aid*, 2010; Vu, 2009). In light of these somewhat suspect tallies, this writer was intrigued about whether the growth-seeking nature of the megachurch phenomenon has reached China's shores and how a Communist milieu has responded. As well as determining whether additional Chinese megachurches exist, this query is informed by the social activism of Blacks in the United States (U.S.) during periods such as the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) as the backdrop to consider how the former group experiences and responds to religious persecution. An analysis of this nature has important academic as well as applied dimensions and may provide valuable insight into how contemporary religious responses to mistreatment compare and contrast for disparate, yet historically disenfranchised populations.

Although the ecological experiences of U.S. Black Christians, before as well as during the CRM, and mainland Chinese Christians<sup>1</sup> who participate in megachurches may appear too dramatically different to comparatively assess *en face*, several points belie this assumption. First, and most evidently, both groups have had a history of negative experiences and social injustices based on their minority status in their respective social spaces – racial oppression for U.S. Blacks and politico-religious discrimination for their Chinese peers. Furthermore, their *numeric* minority statuses; fear of their growth and potential influence; and, exposure to stereotypes and ethnocentrism are other commonalities. Whether their distinctiveness is phenotypic, political, social, or cultural, I contend that common religious resources are directly or indirectly embedded in their collective responses to oppression and injustice. Despite distance and differences, I hope to illumine experiential similarities informed

by their connections to Christianity, ill treatment, and social action. I consider several research questions. First, can we inform existing literature about the number and general nature of megachurches in mainland China beyond current reports? Given the conspicuousness of megachurches, what are some of their experiences and responses to persecution? Finally, do large Chinese churches employ beliefs, resources, and strategies associated with and utilized by U.S. Blacks during historic periods of persecution? Informed by an indigenous resource theoretical framework (Morris, 1984), this meta-analysis references academic and mainstream sources to identify thirteen mainland Chinese megachurches as well as examine some of their conflicts. I am specifically interested in the possible influence of charisma, a self-help tradition, non-violent activism, and prayer in response to persecution. To my knowledge, a study on the Chinese megachurch experience and its corresponding challenges has not been performed. This analysis is one response to this paucity in research. This study does not profess to examine every aspect of the Chinese megachurch phenomenon, but rather seeks to initiate documentation of its existence and illustrate common approaches used to harness indigenous resources to combat contestation and fight for religious freedom in contentious environments.

### *1.2 Christianity and the Megachurch Phenomenon in Mainland China*

Christianity has officially been part of Chinese culture since the 1800s, but sources date its existence in Persia as early as 636 AD (Lee, 2009; World Council of Churches, 2006; Xi, 2008). Reports vary, but suggest between 40 and 130 million Christians in China (Akiman, 2003; Bays, 2003; Moll, 2008; Zwartz, 2009). However, a 2007 national study evidences only about 33 million adult Chinese Christians and much more diversity than previously thought (Yang & Tang, forthcoming).<sup>ii</sup> Despite what many consider increased religious tolerance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sources show a long history of religious persecution (Yang, 2005). According to this same scholar, “the atheist ideology drives the Communist regimes to restrict religious supply, suppress religious demand, and eradicate religion when it is perceived possible” (Yang, 2010: 4).

Although Chinese churches can be broadly categorized as Protestant or Catholic, a more salient distinction appears to be whether they are registered or unregistered (the latter illegal congregations are also referred to as “house churches”).<sup>iii</sup> Churches are required to be registered at the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau. Furthermore, Protestant churches must be affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches (TSPM or TSM) and the China Christian Council (CCC) (Bodeen, 2009; Lee, 2009; Vu, 2009; Yiwu, 2011). However, research suggests that the majority of Chinese Christians reject governmental control<sup>iv</sup> to worship in house churches; thus their numbers are underestimated (Bays, 2003; Lambert, 1999). According to Bodeen (2009), “house churches have been around for decades, but their growth has accelerated in recent decades, producing larger and larger congregations that are far more conspicuous than the smaller groups of friends and neighbors that used to worship in private homes (p. 2). Inconspicuous unregistered churches may avoid the brunt of religious persecution; their more conspicuous megachurch peers may not fare as well.

Megachurch growth has become an international phenomenon.<sup>v</sup> Megachurches are generally defined as congregations that have: an average of 2,000 attendees during weekend worship services (Hartford Institute of Religious Research, 2005; Thumma & Travis, 2007). Other researchers move beyond this dichotomy and use a more nuanced definition that considers attendance, program sponsorship, and organizational structure to define megachurches and large churches in general (Schaller, 2000). In light of the religious constraints in China, this study is informed by both definitions in order to identify existing megachurches based on the former criterion as well as large congregations (for example, those with attendance or memberships of 1,000 or more ) that are well on their way to meeting the traditional definition despite their tense politico-religious environment. Some might expect Chinese megachurches to be an obvious extension of population density, space constraints, and the ever-expanding global religious market (Yiyao & Xiaohuo, 2010). Yet little is known about the large church experience in China. For example, according to media reports, the Lighthouse Church (a pseudonym) was the only megachurch in China (Fan, 2006; Vu, 2009). Demolished in late 2010 and its senior pastors arrested, this 50,000 member unregistered church had been in existence for over 30 years (Cole, 2009). It featured: leadership via a pastoral team; missionary work among the poor; extreme evangelism; and, a rural setting (Vu, 2009). This summary does not do justice to the complexities of the Christian experience in China; nor does it suggest that registered and unregistered churches are indistinguishable. However, it provides a context to consider large Chinese church existence, challenges, and responses to persecution and injustices as well as to assess whether parallels can be drawn to Black Christian-led historic responses to mistreatment.

### *1.3 Indigenous Resource Theoretical Framework*

An indigenous resource perspective moves beyond traditional social movement theories and resource mobilization models to consider the influence of unexpected and less often considered tools used by dominated

groups to effect change and respond to injustices and inequities. This theoretical framework helps understand both the context from which often taken-for-granted resources emerge as well as mechanisms disenfranchised groups harness to combat oppression. Its' tenets are most vividly illustrated in *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* by Morris (1984).<sup>vi</sup> He posits that “the task of the indigenous perspective is to examine how dominated groups take advantage of and create the social conditions that allow them to engage in overt power struggles with dominant groups” (p. 282). He also contends that the former group is able to sustain social action against the latter if they possess three elements: “(1) certain basic resources, (2) social activists with strong ties to mass-based indigenous institutions, and (3) tactics and strategies that can be effectively employed against a system of domination” (p. 282). Basic resources include; strong community-based social ties, experienced leadership, organized groups, as well as labor and money that can be easily marshaled. *Charisma* is also a central, yet intangible resource with the potential to rally labor, motivate monetary contributors, and foster commitment. These resources help stabilize group efforts and provide a continued influx of capital that encourages outside support – but may result in increased attempts by the dominant group to maintain the status quo. Yet they are wasted when not strategically and intentionally used. Just as Black Church clergy: reframe financial giving, music, and biblical symbols to fuel protest during the CRM (King, 1967; Morris, 1984; Wilmore, 1994); use religious rituals to foster secular activism (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998); and, re-appropriate biblical symbols to impact social action (Cavendish, 2001; McRoberts, 2003), it will be important to gauge whether and how indigenous resources are used by Chinese megachurches to both combat persecution and stand up for their beliefs.

Scott (1985) presents a parallel lens to describe indigenous resource use during everyday resistance by rural peasants. He describes similar tactics during chattel slavery, including “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson sabotage” (p. 29) that he argues had enormous effects over less frequent, quickly squashed revolts. Seemingly minimal efforts were successful because “these acts and behaviors are imbued with meaning via symbols, norms, ideological forms” to combat domination and social control (Scott, 1985: 37). Akin to CRM tactics, the author describes boycotts and quiet strikes that reflect both anonymous *and* ideological resistance. Paralleling a central tenet of Morris' (1984) thesis, Scott (1985) argues that resistance “begins close to the ground, rooted in the homely but meaningful realities of daily experience” (p. 348). I contend that parallels can be made between how religious symbolism was used by Blacks during and after slavery, particularly throughout the CRM, and its contemporary usage by Chinese megachurches. Use of this thesis is not predicated upon the belief that the Chinese megachurch phenomenon constitutes a social movement, but rather that its tactics, strategies, resource allocations, and group dynamics reflect the spirit of such a movement and thus warrant an appraisal from this perspective.

### 1.3.1 Indigenous Resources and Usage from the Black Activist Tradition

The above framework postulates that seemingly bereft groups possess valuable assets that need only be identified, harnessed, and used for activism. Resources such as prayer, charisma, non-violent activism, and self-help were strategically used by Black activists before and during the CRM (Billingsley, 1999; Frazier, 1964; King, 1967; Lewis & D'Orso, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). I consider *how* these tools help organize, shape, and influence Chinese megachurch responses to persecution to become part of indigenously-organized social action. For example, Cone (1969[1999]) discusses the bible's deliberate use to combat negative racial images and link other-worldly beliefs to this-worldly events. Religious symbolism was particularly important to prepare followers to withstand mistreatment and rally resources (Billingsley, 1999; Costen, 1993). Wilmore (1994) notes that during slavery; “in the biblical stories, psalms, and accounts of miracles they [slaves] found the convictions and hope that a better life was possible for them in this world” (p. 7). Moreover, individual and collective prayers were evident: during religious and secular events (Copeland, 1995; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998); to communicate with God and intercede on behalf of others; and, to receive godly approval before pursuing potentially dangerous activities (Carter, 1976; Mattis, 2002). Charismatic clergy have also been central to this activist legacy as they, “crafted sermons, prayers, narratives, hymns, poems, essays, and songs to educate, uplift, and stir the African American spirit toward social action” (Hill, 1997:26). The above noted cultural components were most salient in response to mistreatment. Their embeddedness in Black religiosity meant they could be tactically drawn upon during non-violent activism to foster self-help and group empowerment (Cone, 1969[1999]; Morris, 1984; Patillo-McCoy, 1998). Although these resources were not exclusively employed by Blacks, strong evidence supports their indelible, historic presence in the Black religious tradition.<sup>vii</sup> Here I consider their potential appropriation among large Chinese churches. This endeavor will document the existence and nature of megachurches in China beyond current mainstream sources and how they respond to persecution.

It also compares and contrasts approaches employed historically by Blacks during periods of contestation with more contemporary responses by Chinese Christians. Beyond its academic import, it will also illumine some of the common, applied approaches oppressed groups use to proactively respond to persecution and forge positive identities.

## **2. Methodology and Context: Studying Large Chinese Congregations**

The strained political and religious climate in China required particular cautiousness to protect the confidentiality of the research partners during this 2008 - 2010 meta-analysis. At the start of the study, by all accounts, only one megachurch existed in China. So the initial research phase entailed a search to either confirm or disaffirm the report on the number of Chinese megachurches. The process included: scouring and cross-checking secondary academic sources and mainstream newsprint to locate other possible Chinese megachurches, interviewing a purposive group of five clergy and laypersons in mainland China, and participant observation. Moreover, several internationally known scholars on the Chinese Christian experience currently in the U.S. professoriate served as informants. These same sources provided information about persecution and responses. In addition to the one megachurch previously identified in news reports, my efforts uncovered and corroborated twelve *additional* churches. In the summer of 2010, I also engaged in approximately thirty hours of field work over a two week period that included in-depth interviews (between 45 minutes to 2 hours in length) and participant observation during worship services at two large unregistered churches and one registered megachurch in mainland China. Neighborhood and church tours, conducted in English, provided additional information about church experiences and community engagement.<sup>viii</sup> Participant observation field notes represent primary data here. Interviews occurred with: a clergy representative from a large unregistered church; a member of a registered megachurch; two key informants familiar with Chinese local and religious history; and, a pastor of a large unregistered church.<sup>ix</sup> Pseudonyms are used for places, church names, and people.

### *2.1 Analytic Technique*

Content analysis was used to analyze the secondary data, interviews, and participant observation notes. This approach reflected a close reading of the data to identify: common experiences, responses, and strategies that emerged as a result of persecution that may be endemic to this cultural milieu; parallels between church resources and capacities evoked historically by U.S. Black Christians during persecution; or possible indigenous resources that reflect a conflation of life as Christians in China. Moreover, I was interested in similarities in meanings as well as common themes often overlooked by other methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Krippendorf, 1980). There are several limitations of this study, including possible language constraints for respondents for whom English is a second language and the short field work period in China. Moreover, the intense need for vigilance to protect research partners limited certain site-visits. However, these cautions did not diminish the veracity of my findings and reflect the nature of both studying hidden populations and contested spaces. Rather than the definitive study on the large Chinese church experience, I consider this endeavor the impetus for future, more detailed investigations of the megachurch presence in China and their fight for religious freedom.<sup>x</sup>

## **3. Chinese Megachurch Results**

### *3.1 Congregational Profiles*

Thumbnail descriptions, presented in Table 1, summarize the thirteen large churches identified in this study. Most of the churches have over 2,000 weekly attendees or members. A review of the table shows eight traditional megachurches and five that met Schaller's (2000) broader large church definition. Six are unregistered "house" churches (thus seven are registered churches); four churches are led by pastoral teams and six have confirmed multiple worship services. Just as it provided a spiritual haven for slaves and many CRM participants, writers posit a Christian boon in China that includes megachurch involvement fueled by existential queries, waning Communism, and global capitalism;

This rise, driven by evangelical Protestants, reflects a wider spiritual awakening in China. As communism fades into today's free-market reality, many Chinese describe a 'crisis of faith' and seek solace everywhere from mystical Taoist sects to Bahai temples and Christian megachurches. (Osno, 2006: 9)

The growing megachurch presence among house churches suggests that, like Blacks during chattel slavery (Wilmore, 1994), persons are willing to face legal and physical persecution to be in religious spaces they consider liberating and more germane to their experiences and beliefs. When worship format is considered, registered megachurches tend to hold multiple services in one large edifice. However, groups of satellite locations (also known as cell churches or daughter churches) are much more common among unregistered

Chinese churches, particularly large ones, and, according to Cheng (2003), “exhibit characteristics of a social movement” (p. 17). The cleric of a large unregistered church describes his church’s growth;

As disciplines of Christ...we made our church open to society...this caused our church to become a big church and more public – ‘cause when our doors are open, everyone can find the joys of our church...that made the church grow rapidly.

Despite being forbidden (McGeown, 2004), his formula for church growth includes aggressive evangelism - for which megachurches are known (Barnes, 2010; Tucker, 2011). Field work findings and key informants suggest that smaller Chinese satellite churches are usually led by laypersons; when local pastors are present, they subsequently report to a team of pastors at the larger site who typically have separate responsibilities in terms of preaching, teaching, and administration. This latter leadership format is common among large unregistered churches. Of the five sample Chinese megachurches for which clergy information was available, each has multiple pastoral *teams* that include three to ten ministers; only one church has husband-wife senior co-pastors. Teams and lay leader usage provide consistent leadership in the face of both persecution and population density. Such teams are increasingly common among White evangelical megachurches (Thumma & Travis, 2007), who are frequent proselytizers in China. Pastors of registered churches must complete required TSPM training, attend bureau-sponsored meetings, pay fees, and abide by TSPM worship guidelines (Fan, 2009). In contrast, one minister of a large unregistered church in Beijing describes the difficulty many house church clergy have in obtaining formal training or re-committing to ministry; “more and more people means the growth of congregations will outpace growth of church staff, our theological training is slow because of the political situation...some train in western seminaries and they don’t want to come back, or if they come back, it takes times to re-adjust”. And, like Martin Luther King Jr., those who do return face vilification as dissidents (Buckley, 2012; Yiwu, 2011).

As is the case in the U.S. (Thumma & Travis, 2007), the burgeoning megachurch presence is not completely welcome among Chinese Christians. For example, the following believer cautions State – controlled megachurch growth;

The TSPM has to build churches. They have 14 million members and only 13,000 churches, giving them an average congregation of over 1,000...there is a particular dynamic of growth that occurs in cell churches that is lost when one moves into a mega-church...the individual is changed from being a priest into a number...it’s in small groups that one learns to contribute and grow in the faith, and large congregations tend to concentrate power in the hands of professional clergy. [but] Many are quick to point out that the larger meeting does not preclude a cell church structure. Often the largest mega-churches run vibrant cell churches, as in South Korea and America. But this is not yet an option in the Three Self, who are reluctant to push small groups and dissolve power. (Buchan, 2000: 5)

The above quote partially explains the common membership pattern of about 1,000 persons among the large registered churches located during this analysis. Moreover, it alludes to the intimacy and fellowship of cell groups that seem particularly salient in the densely-populated country and suggests that if unfettered, many large congregations would exceed the traditional megachurch definition. The following cleric of a large unregistered church describes their network structure; “we try to develop more family groups or house groups...each group has a separate service, but each group belongs to the same church... ..we use donations and tithes together according to the church plan”. Similarly, niche groups have been one response to similar critiques about isolation and anonymity in U.S. megachurches (Barnes, 2010; Thumma & Travis, 2007; Tucker, 2011). The network “cell church” structure of unregistered Chinese megachurches seems to reflect a more elaborate combination of the satellite and niche group formats used by their U.S. peers. Discovery of the twelve additional megachurches, particularly the six large unregistered congregations and their profiles, albeit limited, calls into question existing reports of scant large church presence in China and suggests the strong likelihood of other unreported megachurches.

Table 1. Thumbnail descriptions of the thirteen sample Chinese megachurches

*The Lighthouse Church:* A 1.5 million dollar, six story unregistered church with 50,000 members, 30 satellite locations, and a shoe factory in rural China. It was part of a church network, built through donations. The church was known for evangelism and large tent revivals. Ten of the church’s leaders were jailed or sent to labor camps and the church was demolished in Sept. 2010.

*Shan Juan Church:* A registered church built in 1900 in Shenzhen, China, it has over 20,000 members. The

5-story building was erected in 1995 with overflow room that seats 3,000. The church has multiple pastors (actual number unconfirmed).

*Bamni Street Church:* A registered church in Shenzhen, China, with 2,000 members, seats 1,000 persons, and has multiple Sunday services (20 satellite churches that meet without a pastor).

*Laid Hian Church:* A registered church in Beijing, China, that has several thousand members, a 300 person overflow area, and five Sunday worship services.

*Shong Gi Church:* A registered church located in Hangzhou, China, seats over 5,400 people and has sponsored international evangelical gatherings in excess of 20,000 attendees.

*Saint Peter's Church:* A registered church in Nanjing with about 5,000 regular attendees, four satellite chapels, and an overflow worship area assessable via jumbo monitors. Its pastor espouses a conservative theology that excludes conversations about politics and evangelizing.

*Langhai Gospel Church:* A registered church in Shanghai, instituted in 2004, it has over 2,200 attendees, sponsors two Chinese services and a Korean worship service, lead by 3 full-time pastors.

*Choujian Church:* An unregistered church in mainland China [locale omitted] with over 10,000 members.

*Chouxang Church:* An unregistered church in mainland China [locale omitted] with over 1,000 members and 3 services.

*Siang Cai Church:* An unregistered church in mainland China [locale omitted] with about 1,000 members that meet as smaller fellowships.

*Chanwhai Church:* Built in 1925, closed by the Chinese government in 1949, re-opened in 1980, it has 4 pastors, multiple Sunday worship services, over 800 members, and 500 volunteers.

*Chouwang Church:* An unregistered church in Beijing with over 1,000 members. At this writing, the church has been closed by Chinese officials.

*Langbang Church:* An unregistered church in Shanghai with over 1,000 members. At this writing, the church has been closed by Chinese officials.

These church summaries are based on data collected from 2008-2010 via secondary sources, participant observation, survey data, and in-depth interviews. The above list is not exhaustive. Pseudonyms are used for all church names and certain locations are omitted, particularly for unregistered churches that might reveal their identities. Although readers may be able to determine the identity of Lighthouse church, anonymity is unneeded given its demise. Several churches have fewer than 2,000 worship attendees weekly; they are retained because their programs, community service, and organizational structure reflect Schaller's (2000) broader megachurch definition.

### 3.2 Indigenous Resource Usage

#### 3.2.1 Spiritual and Temporal Examples of Resistance among Large Churches

According to an indigenous resource thesis, during group conflict, many of the resources and capacities needed by disenfranchised groups emerge from within the collective. Because they are endemic to the group, knowledge about them, access, and effective usage resonate with group members. These often commonsense elements are cultural tools that emerge based on the experiences and legacy of that group (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Morris, 1984; Scott, 1985). Scholars posit a multifaceted politico-religious impetus for the persecution of Christians in China including governmental fears that Christianity will: usurp its authority; engender support of capitalism; and, foster foreign control (Yang, 2010, 2005; Zwatz, 2009). Yet Lee (2009) provides a broader correlate between the otherworldly nature of the salvific experience and dramatic this-worldly outcomes for some Chinese Christians; "the act of conversion was a protest against the state" (p. 36). An argument can be made that fears by Chinese governmental officials who associate religious freedom with political freedom parallel fears by U.S. slave holders that slaves who became Christians would also make the same association.<sup>xi</sup> Moreover, just as slaves defied authority and held clandestine worship services in bulrushes and *invisible institutions* followed latter by worship in house churches and storefronts (Costen, 1993; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), Chinese Christians often come together surreptitiously in house churches or gather outside (Fan, 2006; Lambert, 1999; Saiget, 2009; Yiwu, 2011). The following quote illustrates zeal and non-violent action evident during megachurch worship reminiscent of the CRM's fervor;

In Henan, many movements that have over 100,000 members call leaders and members together regularly to meet on hillsides and in caves for gatherings of 3,000 or more. Because

such meetings are dangerous, it reveals there must be something vital about meeting together in large groups. (Buchan, 2000: 2)

Similarly, by referencing a collective identity (i.e., “the Negro”) and religious symbolism, Martin Luther King provides commentary about the benefits and possible dangers of collective efforts for existential and literal transformation;

A myriad of factors came together to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Individually *and as a group* [emphasis is mine]...he came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all his children...the tension we are witnessing in race relations today can be explained in part by this revolutionary change in the Negro’s evaluation of himself and his determination to struggle and sacrifice until the walls of segregation have been fully crushed by the battering rams of justice. (Washington, 1991: 6)

Applying the above two observations illustrates the beneficence of unity under a single collective and that, like during the CRM, mass mobilization among Chinese megachurch participants can assuage fears by codifying common beliefs and goals and providing edifying support to “produce, organize, coordinate, finance, and sustain social protest” (Morris, 1984: 284). Another form of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985), clandestine outdoor meetings provide a strategic way to avoid unwarranted evictions typically used by local Chinese government leaders to harass worshippers and disrupt house church meetings (Buchan, 2000; Yiwu, 2011). For such Chinese Christians, protest, whether direct or more tacit, is tantamount to challenging bedrock societal beliefs. Yet their response also parallels those of Blacks who historically relied on Christian cultural tools to challenge the status quo, engage in self-help, and fight back against Whites who sought to oppress them (Cone, 1969[1999]; King, 1967; Lewis & D’Orso, 1999; Morris, 1984).

### 3.2.2 Clergy Charisma as an Indigenous Resource

For many, the CRM is inextricably associated with one of its charismatic leaders, Martin Luther King Jr. His self-presentation showed that an intangible resource, charisma, is just as valuable to collective movements as funding, committed volunteers, and alliances (Lewis & D’Orso, 1999; Morris, 1984). Furthermore, charismatic leaders are often the means by which these other aforementioned resources are acquired. Sojourner Truth, Malcolm X, and Frederick Douglas had similar influences on historic Black activism (Cone, 1969[1999]; Costen, 1993; West, 1993; Wilmore, 1994). Black clergy during the CRM were known for strategic confrontations and non-violent protests via the media as well as marches (King, 1967; Lewis & D’Orso, 1999; Morris, 1984). In contrast, Cheng (2003) suggests that some Chinese churches practice *religious quietism* by espousing conservative theology as well as refraining from political commentary and public criticism of the State. Pastors of registered churches appear to espouse a more conservative stance due to governmental sanctions (Bays, 2003; Lambert, 1999). For example, one pastor of a registered megachurch in Nanjing whose significant growth has been attributed, in part, to his charismatic leadership notes; “anyone is welcome to come in and have a chat with me about religion. But if people want to come in and talk politics, that we don’t do. We only want to concentrate on religion here” (Elegant, 2006: 5). Despite its leadership by a cadre of Black clergy, this pastor’s stance is reminiscent of the reticence among many Black pastors to become involved in the CRM (Morris, 1984). Morgan (1998) posits that pastors of *unregistered* churches can experience substantial church growth by avoiding political topics. Yet if the following comment by a pastor of a large *unregistered* church in Beijing is correct, the definition of theological conservatism varies greatly;

For most Chinese house churches...we regard our theology as generally evangelical, conservative evangelical...our main bridge [historic leader] is Watchman Nee. He played a very strong influence for native theology and house churches.

Modeling their church’s stance after the charismatic, 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Christian leader and writer who was persecuted and imprisoned for espousing Christianity and organizing churches, suggests activist tendencies. A minister of a *registered* megachurch in Hangzhou provides additional insight; “the authorities pay no attention to what you preach, so long as you don’t talk about political issues... [yet] the law in China is very fluid. They can regulate but people sometimes do what they want” (Fan, 2006: 3).

The above comments point to a possibly more nuanced understanding of religious quietism as an indigenous resource when the practice is further juxtaposed against Martin Luther King’s understanding of militant non-violence;

I think moderation on the one hand can be a vice; I think on the other hand it can be a virtue. If by moderation we mean moving on through this tense period with wide restraint, calm

reasonableness, yet militant action, then moderation is a great virtue which all leaders should seek to achieve. But if moderation means slowing up in the move for justice and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of the deadening status quo, the moderation is a tragic vice which all men of good will must condemn...now, so often the word "militant" is misunderstood because most people think of militancy in military terms. But to be militant merely means to be demanding and to be persistent...it is possible to be militantly non-violent. (Washington, 1991: 661)

King rejects a dogmatic, traditional view of militancy and appropriates the concept in light of his biblically-based belief in a non-violent imperative. By doing so, determinism, calculated protest, and discerning responses to discrimination should take place. Moreover, his perspective, considered too conservative by some Black leaders of his day, enabled King to rally Blacks and White allies in a racially-charged country. Broad parallels can be made between King's understanding of how Christianity and social context should inform social action and Chinese clergy's appropriation of charisma that manifests as an indigenous resource called religious quietism.

An argument can also be made that certain Chinese megachurch pastors' conservative stance and strategic negotiation of conflicted spaces may initially appear to be capitulation (Elegant, 2006; Fan, 2006; Yiwu, 2011), but is akin to historic Black Church pastors, particularly in the South, who buttressed tensions and served as liaisons between the Black community and intolerant Whites (Franklin, 1968; King, 1967; Lewis & D'Orso, 1999). It would seem that Chinese clergy of large churches nuance a traditional understanding of charisma to navigate a religious "tight rope" by tactically controlling and channeling charisma to meet congregant needs, cautiously evangelize, challenge listeners about godly living, *while* minimizing potential political ire. Yet relying on biblical tenets, even cautious leaders express plans indicative of the proactive proselytizing for which megachurches are known (Thumma & Travis, 2007);

We will try to have our own website with our own message. We expect not too long that we may have our own radio and TV show to make the Lord's Gospel known to more people and so the church can do more good work for society. We want to be a city on a mountain – a lampstand [paraphrasing Psalms 119: 105-6]. (pastor of a large unregistered church in Beijing)

Whether large church clergy protest in more traditional ways (King, 1967), guardedly preach and proselytize (Cheng, 2003), or practice ideological resistance (Scott, 1985) to evade persecution, their continued use of charisma is noteworthy in light of the history of persecution of charismatic clergy such as Zhang Yingrong and Yu Jie and the execution of Wang Zhiming (Buckley, 2012; Yiwu, 2011).

### 3.2.3 The Case of Lighthouse Church: Indigenous Resources in Action

Quite possibly the most dramatic recent example of persecution and use of indigenous resources in China is the closing and demolition of the 5,000 seat unregistered Lighthouse Church. The largest reported megachurch, it was open for over 30 years and was actually a *network* of churches of over 50,000 members (Cole, 2009). In addition to providing assessable, inconspicuous meeting places (Bodeen, 2009), these satellite locations are also reminiscent of resource nodes used during the CRM where activists could receive leadership guidance, finances, food, and other instrumental and expressive resources to continue their efforts (Morris, 1984).

Like Black clergy leaders during the CRM (King, 1967; Lewis & D'Orso, 1999), the evangelical fervor of the charismatic husband-wife senior co-pastors, indicated by their ability to rally networks of smaller house churches and spearhead tent revivals (Bodeen, 2009), fostered fear among Chinese officials (Morgan, 2004; Vu, 2009). In response to protests against its closing, ten church leaders were imprisoned or sent to labor camps (Bodeen, 2009; *China Aid*, 2009a, 2010; Cole, 2009). The male senior co-pastor received a three year sentence for "illegal land occupation" while the female co-pastor received the stiffer sentence of seven years for "illegal land occupation and assembling a crowd to dispute public order...some of the toughest for house church leaders in recent years" (Vu, 2009: 1). Mainstream sources suggest recent arrests focus on large churches in China "before they grow out of control" (Bodeen, 2009: 2). Lighthouse posed a tangible threat to Communism because "the church was leading a nationwide Christian revival through its evangelical work and social services which had brought it to the brink of official legitimacy" (Saiget, 2009: 1). It can be argued that Lighthouse's considerable size and conspicuousness (six-story tall, \$1.5 million dollar edifice built via donations) was evidence of a religious social movement, self-help, the growing Christian presence in China, and the dwindling governmental control over citizens (Anna, 2009; Bodeen, 2009). March et al (2010) contrasts this unregistered megachurch's conspicuousness with its peers' tendency to either circumvent authority or gain tacit support from it;

While Chinese authorities seem to be growing more tolerant of house churches and quietly



renting facilities for their services in the name of ambiguous or even fraudulent entities, apparently constructing a monstrous sanctuary – even in [name] province – could not go unanswered. (P. 722)

Saiget (2009) contends; “more senior religious authorities began getting nervous at the size of the unregistered church [Lighthouse], and feared its ability to organize ordinary people into what could become mass-anti-government movements...authorities are clearly sending a message to the Christians” (pp. 1-2). From its erection to demolition, Lighthouse members and allies relied on: belief in their right as Christians to worship freely together; prayer; donations of time and money; determinism; and, ingenuity - mobilized as indigenous resources - to thwart an onslaught of persecution. Furthermore, efforts to undermine Lighthouse were akin to CRM opponents who feared *uppity Blacks* who were moving “too fast” in their strides for racial equality (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; King, 1967; Lewis & D’Orso, 1999). Like the CRM, Lighthouse illustrates the advances that are possible for everyday citizens when they use their seemingly meager resources. Individually they do not pose a threat, but collectively, they represent a significant adversary with which existing power structures must contend (Billingsley, 1992; Scott, 1985). However, an argument can be made that its thirty year, less noticeable, existence as a group of smaller, connected entities was undermined once leaders decided to unite more structurally in the form of a megachurch.

Another parallel is apparent between this conflict and the CRM when one considers the church’s response. Sources suggest as many as 400 police and hired security guards raided the church on Sept. 13, 2009 (Zwartz, 2009). Yet members responded in a non-violent manner; “none of the followers fought back, they just silently protested the action by the authorities and took the beating” (Saiget, 2009: 2). The senior pastors’ subsequent non-violent rally to protest the church closing was also in the spirit of the CRM – and similarly, participants were accosted and jailed (King, 1967; Morris, 1984). Inconsistent policy implementation, lease coercion, forced relocation, and detaining church lawyers are common strategies to stymie Chinese Christian resistance. Yet, evidenced by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., one of the primary techniques to squelch group fervor is to remove charismatic leaders (Cheng, 2003; *China Aid*, 2009a; Lewis & D’Orso, 1999; Morris, 1984; Osnos, 2006). Inciting fear among megachurch followers may unnerve believers from smaller churches - or actually inspire younger Christians to maintain their resolve (Lambert, 1999).

#### 3.2.4 The Ameliorative Effects of Prayer in Response to Persecution

Prayer in response to persecution and as a weapon of social activism is apparent among Chinese Christians in general and megachurch supporters in particular. For example, adherents speak and write of praying before, during, and after ill treatment – and its ameliorative effects;

I have gone through all sorts of sufferings. Each time I was plunged into despair, I prayed and sought guidance from the Lord. I have lived through fifty years of suffering. (a Yi minister quoted in Yiwu, 2011: 135)

The above more recent experience and response are strangely similar to that described decades earlier by the Christian, slave, and activist Sojourner Truth. In addition to having total confidence in this communicative process, in retrospect, Truth believed that proactive prayer had the ability to actually circumvent persecution;

Though it seems curious, I do not remember ever asking for anything but what I got it. And I always received it as an answer to my prayers. When I got beaten, I never knew it long enough beforehand to pray; and I always thought if I only had had time to pray God to help, I should have escaped the beating. (Andrews & Gates, 2000: 586)

Although distinguishable by time and space, the above two comments on the beneficence of prayer are particularly acute based on the longevity of mistreatment for the former Christian under Communism and the latter under chattel slavery. Yet for each, prayer represents an intangible resource embedded in their repertoire of religious resources that emerged in response to mistreatment (Morris, 1984; Swidler, 1986). Moreover, the following experience provides a stronger correlate to the Black religious tradition as prayer waylaid the author’s fears of conflict;

Zhang [a Yi minister] stood, gazed into the distance, and lowered his head to lead a prayer. I felt overcome by an entirely different set of emotions. The damp solitary darkness in my dream evaporated around me. His voice, deep and thick, and the melodic words made me think of the beautiful uplifting gospel music of the American blacks. (Yiwu, 2011: 143)

In these instances, the use of prayer as a liberating tool and non-violent act in response to violence can be considered prophetic *and* political. In addition to expressive properties, instrumentally, prayer fortifies adherents

to continue to challenge the State and the status quo it represents - as commanded by the very God to which they pray (Carter, 1976; Copeland, 1995; Mattis, 2002).

Lastly, there is strong indication that a fusion of the indigenous resources examined here is evident in the work of Bob Fu and China Aid Association (CAA), a Texas-based church monitoring group.<sup>xii</sup> For example, just as CRM leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Ella Baker, and Fred Shuttlesworth strategically employed the media to inform and challenge the U.S. about the persecution and perseverance of civil rights activists (Franklin, 1968; King, 1967; Morris, 1984), CAA tactically relies on the Internet and news media to inform and evangelize. For example, the group challenged international political and religious groups to engage in a 120-Day Prayer and Fasting Vigil starting April 13, 2010 to pray for a favorable outcome in response to Lighthouse megachurch's closing;

[Lighthouse] church members are now mobilizing for fervent prayer. They call on the churches around the globe to pray and...express their gratitude to the international community for the care, support, and intercessory prayer given in the past few months. (*China Aid*, 2010: 5)

Media-covered rallies and protests in response to the Lighthouse incident are reminiscent of CRM sit-ins and public protests where followers faced possible imprisonment and/or death (King, 1967; Morris, 1984). Furthermore, akin to King, Fu represents a charismatic liaison and speaker for this form of non-violent activism.

#### 4. Discussion

The precarious position of Christianity in general and unregistered churches in particular means that almost half of the Chinese megachurches identified here are in violation of the law. Moreover, despite reports of only one megachurch in China, the twelve additional large churches located during this study suggest their presence has been under-reported. These findings also provide strong evidence for use of indigenous resources akin to those utilized by Blacks during historic periods of conflict and injustice such as prayer, charisma, non-violent social action, and self-help (Costen, 1993; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Patillo-McCoy, 1998). These resources represent beliefs and behavior that surface among dominated groups that result in strides toward their liberation (Morris, 1984; Scott, 1985). Their organic nature is further supported by their emergence during turmoil across time and place – yet appropriated and nuanced based on the specific context (Lee, 2009; Swidler, 1986).

Literature and mainstream reports both suggest that the Chinese have freedom of religious beliefs, but not freedom of religious expression or practice (Cheng, 2003; Lambert, 1999; Morgan, 1998). Clergy are often accused of mitigating this pattern (Morgan, 1998). However, I contend that religious quietism represents an indigenous resource given its emergence in response to State-wide conflict that reflects a desire to preach, teach, and tactically proselytize in a manner that minimizes persecution and honors what clergy consider central tenets of their vocation. As such, it may be considered an example of everyday resistance akin to cave worship as well as bulrush services, dual song symbolism, and use of libratory biblical passages common among slavery and post-slavery Blacks (Cone, 1969[1999]; Costen, 1993; Wilmore, 1994). However, because of this tension, scholars such as Bays (1996) argue that China has experienced growth in the *spirit* of independent Protestantism, but not in reality. And because most of the Chinese megachurches studied here appear heavily influenced by pastoral leadership, succession, or incarceration or death of activist clergy, effectively undermine both church existence and social action.

It is unclear whether what is happening in China is a social movement or an attempt to synthesize what people believe are beneficial elements of their political, social, and religious lives. To Chinese Christians, the situation might be considered religiously oppressive, but not politically so. Segments of the Black community fought to change the U.S. political, economic, *and* social terrains. Are Chinese Christians challenging these same structures, but with a different agenda based on their history and cultural traditions? The follow quote by a 24 year-old, male new convert illustrates these complexities;

It doesn't matter where you worship...The holy figure on the cross above the pulpit is my Lord, whether it was above the pulpit at a government church or inside a living room. It's not President Hu Jintao or Chairman Mao...Why don't we let God do God's work and Caesar do Caesar's? Why do we always mix the two? The government wants to politicize religion, and some Christians are doing the same. These things kill my spiritual appetite. (Yiwu, 2011: 217, 222)

U.S. megachurches do not seem to want to be inconspicuous. Leaders and members are socialized to proactively evangelize and live lives reflective of the "big" God they serve (Barnes, 2010; Harrison, 2005; Thumma &

Travis, 2007). Chinese megachurches cannot be inconspicuous. Unless they are registered, they can expect persecution (Fan, 2006; Vu, 2009). The outreach and congregational voice of registered churches can also be stymied (Bays, 2003). Yet the ability of the *unregistered* churches identified here to reach megachurch status illustrates the influence of indigenous resources to mobilize and prepare believers to negotiate challenges despite great peril (Carter, 1976; Morris, 1984; Swidler, 1986; Wilmore, 1994). Furthermore, it illustrates global variation on the growing megachurch phenomenon - and the Chinese contingent as a largely *hidden population* in this process.

## 5. Conclusion

Just as the CRM was thrust forward by a critical mass of historically disenfranchised Blacks using religious-based resources (Morris, 1984; Scott, 1985), Christianity resonates with Chinese residents who are responding to systemic forces and spurs similar reactions to contestation (Morgan, 1998; Saiget, 2009; Vu, 2009; Yiwu, 2011). As illustrated here, part of the combative process entails reliance on resources such as prayer, non-violent social action, self-help, and charisma as *ordinary* Christians strive to effect change. Their emergence, specific contextual appropriation, and usage as a result of oppression give credence to Morris' (1984) indigenous resource thesis and illustrate commonalities between contemporary Chinese and historic Black religion-led responses to persecution and injustice. Moreover, I contend that religious quietism reflects a unique appropriation of charisma and ideological resistance (Scott, 1985) where clergy have the magnetism to convincingly convey a salvific message, rally support for protests, and build solidarity - tempered by the reality of political context.

My findings represent one step in what hopes to become future queries about this important collective. Will more Chinese megachurches, registered and unregistered, be uncovered? How will they compare and contrast to other large churches both in China and internationally? Should Chinese churches take on more traits like their Black counterparts? What can large U.S. churches learn from their Chinese peers? Can Communist spaces ever cultivate the critical mass of disenfranchised residents needed for social action akin to the CRM? What can Bob Fu and the CAA learn from the life and legacy of Martin Luther King and the CRM? This analysis has only broached the subject of the complex relationship between faith and politics in China (Bays, 2003; Cheng, 2003; Lambert, 1999). Although informative, sources on Chinese megachurches must move beyond small articles in religious outlets and news media reports. Additional studies are needed based on survey data and participant observation. The challenges associated with such projects are apparent. Yet this work is essential for increased knowledge about contemporary Chinese religiosity as well as awareness of global religious persecution. Additionally, the current study does not do justice to the complexities of Church-State relations in China or how indigenous resources manifest given the plethora of languages and dialects there. The intention here is not to critique a specific political system, conflate dynamics for registered and unregistered churches, or over-simplify the Chinese megachurch experience, but rather to broadly examine a contemporary form of religiosity as well as some of its implications on the fabric of Chinese culture in this new global religious environment.

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<sup>i</sup> Note 1. This analysis only focuses on large churches in mainland China.

<sup>ii</sup> Note 2. The most extreme report shows that there are 130 million Christians in China – with representation greater than the membership of the Communist Party (Zwartz, 2009). Bays (2003) suggests that rates are shaped by distinct organizational motives where TSPM figures are the lowest, state generated figures are mid-range estimates, and evangelical Christians claim the highest figures.

<sup>iii</sup> Note 3. Lambert (1999) contends that the government is more amenable to registered churches because they are less likely to challenge governmental policy and members are often government supporters.

<sup>iv</sup> Note 4. Unregistered churches: believe Christ is head of the church and thus reject political control; consider church registration a violation of scripture; and, oppose state law that prohibits preaching and proselytizing to people less than 18 years of age, intercessory prayer, and faith healing.

<sup>v</sup> Note 5. Common features of US megachurches include: evangelicalism; multiple, energetic, televised worship; volunteerism; cafeteria-style programs; and, political conservatism (Thumma & Travis, 2007).

<sup>vi</sup> Note 6. Morris describes the benefits and limitations of collective behavior (Blumer, 1946; Park & Burgess, 1921; Smelser, 1962) and resource mobilization models (Gamson, 1975; Tilly, 1978) to explain the CRM. The current approach considers non-traditional responses to structural changes and crises as espoused in the former theory. Yet it does not consider such social movements to be crude attempts at change or romanticize outcomes. Morris (1984) challenges the centrality given outside elites in mobilizing resources and the tendency to downplay charisma, culture, and beliefs in mobilization theories. He contends that neither approach adequately explains the CRM like the indigenous resource approach because it considers other processes specific to mass-based movements by dominated groups.

<sup>vii</sup> Note 7. Other motivators are possible. Another perspective involves the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic religion. For the former persons, religion is an active force that directs their lives and not merely a mechanism to achieve self-serving ends – unlike their extrinsically religious peers. For the former persons, religion is an end in itself and would guide social action. Yet extrinsically-motivated persons could take part in social action, but for non-religious reasons (Morris, 1984). Although the outcomes might parallel those invoked by Black religious culture, motives differ dramatically.

<sup>viii</sup> Note 8. At the focal megachurch site in Beijing, I attended the English service and one Mandarin service (of the three offered in Mandarin). I also attended a worship service and a leadership meeting at the two large churches, respectively. Although I could easily identify and describe certain worship features (i.e., scriptural use, biblical passages, worship leadership format, worship progression, call-and-response, hymn names, and use of dance), a translator provided details during our de-briefing on sermon details. Based on timing logistics and concerns about confidentiality, a key informant recommended focus on several large churches in Beijing. I acknowledge the limits of this approach, but contend that these experiences provide important insight on this hidden population in light of research constraints.

<sup>ix</sup> Note 9. Interviews were in English. Bi-lingual translators were present at each site or interview. Because audio taping was discouraged, I compiled the interviews by hand. One translator was a volunteer and two were paid local translators. Two local key informants helped coordinate church visitations. Visits to several other megachurches, including Lighthouse, were cancelled due to the inability to do so inconspicuously and safely. Key informants discouraged monetary stipends for interviewees. Any misinterpretations during data collection or analysis are the responsibility of this researcher.

<sup>x</sup> Note 10. I concede that the Chinese churches included in the site visits were selected based on suggestions by key informants (who could have purposely chosen outliers or churches for subjective reasons). Confirmations by two Chinese academic experts in the U.S. who study Chinese religiosity support inclusion of the two focal sites as representative. The nature of this portion of this study requires a certain degree of reliance on the discretion of key informants. I concede its limitations, but consider it necessary given the context.

<sup>xi</sup> Note 11. In addition to using violence, slave owners emphasized priestly biblical texts such as “slaves obey your masters” from Colossians 3:22 to control slaves, but downplayed scriptures such as Colossians 3:11 that reminded slaves that God valued them as much as their masters.

<sup>xii</sup> Note 12. Fu is a former Communist Party researcher in exile. Initially a leader of a student democracy movement that was squelched during the Tiananmen Square assault in 1989, he became a Christian that same year. Fu fled to the U.S. in 1997 where he established the CAA to monitor Christian events and discriminatory incidents in China and rally international support.



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