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**Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today**  
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Christianity in mainland China has often been characterised as a religion for the marginalised of society. However, since the 1990s, there has been a growing phenomenon within the country's burgeoning urban metropolises with an increasing number of urban intellectuals converting to Protestantism. This paper explores the theology of several representatives of these urban intellectual Christians who makes use of the teachings of John Calvin and his followers. It will show that there is a strong theological interest in engaging in the public sphere around subjects like the rule of law, constitutionalism, and a civil society. Though these individuals have been described as 'Chinese New Calvinists' or 'Christian public intellectuals', this paper proposes that a more appropriate understanding of this growing and significant group is as Chinese public theologians.

*Keywords:* Calvinism, Chinese Protestantism, house church, public intellectuals, public theology, urban Christianity

In March 2010, the English-language newspaper the *China Daily* ran a curious article entitled 'House churches thrive in Beijing'.<sup>1</sup> The casual reader may overlook two simple facts that the *China Daily* is an official mouthpiece of the Chinese government and that 'house churches' (*jiating jiaohui*) are generally considered illegal in China since all Protestant Christian activities are intended to register under the government-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM).<sup>2</sup> It is quite significant that this media outlet, which rarely

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<sup>1</sup> Wu Yiyao and Cui Xiaohuo, 'House churches thrive in Beijing', *China Daily*, 17 March 2010, <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-03/17/content\\_9600333.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-03/17/content_9600333.htm)> [accessed 25 September 2013].

<sup>2</sup> The TSPM was initiated as a parachurch organisation in 1951 by a group of Protestants with the support of Premier Zhou Enlai. It was initially conceived as an entity to promote a patriotic church with autonomy from foreign influences. Though it would be inactive during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), in the 1980s, all Protestant churches were now required to register with the TSPM for legal operation.

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are recognised as separate religions by the Chinese government. While Catholics have a similar organisation to the TSPM known as the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, there is no official entity for Eastern Orthodox Christians in China today. Moreover, the Chinese term for Christianity (*jidujiao*) is almost always used as a synonym to Protestantism (*xinjiao*), and rarely used to refer to

reports on sensitive domestic issues, published an article explaining and justifying the existence of illegal activities in China.

But what is additionally peculiar is the lead into this article: ‘Churchgoers drawn by smaller congregations and more relaxed approach of authorities’.<sup>3</sup> The main church discussed in this article is the Beijing Shouwang Church (*Shouwang jiaohui*). While it is described as having a ‘small congregation’, the Shouwang Church at the time had nearly 1,000 members. Moreover, the *China Daily* article speaks about the ‘more relaxed approach of government authorities’, yet about one year after this article came out, this same church made headlines again – but this time, not in the *China Daily*. In April 2011, through international media outlets like *CNN*,<sup>4</sup> the *New York Times*,<sup>5</sup> the *BBC*,<sup>6</sup> the *Guardian*,<sup>7</sup> and the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*,<sup>8</sup> reports were stating that Chinese authorities have clamped down on this church, blocking them from accessing their property, placing its pastor and elders under house arrest, and detaining any would-be church attenders.

Amongst the various news reports on this church, what became increasingly apparent is that the members and leaders of Shouwang include very well-educated individuals – graduates and professors from Beijing’s top universities. This is significant since Christianity in China has often been characterised as growing primarily amongst the poor, uneducated, and underprivileged of society. Shouwang is perhaps the most internationally well-known of

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Catholicism (*tianzhujiao*) or Eastern Orthodoxy (*dongzhengjiao*). All uses of the terms ‘Christian’ or ‘church’ in this paper will refer to Protestant Christianity unless otherwise specified or obvious from context.

<sup>3</sup> Wu and Cui, ‘House churches thrive in Beijing’.

<sup>4</sup> Jo Ling Kent, ‘Church Officials: Chinese Authorities Block Easter Service in Beijing’, *CNN*, 25 April 2011, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/04/24/china.easter.crackdown/index.html>> [accessed 25 September 2013].

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Jacobs, ‘Illicit Church, Evicted, Tries to Buck Beijing’, *New York Times*, 18 April 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/18/world/asia/18beijing.html>> [accessed 25 September 2013].

<sup>6</sup> ‘China Detains Protestants Shouwang Devotees’, *BBC*, 24 April 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13180842>> [accessed 25 September 2013].

<sup>7</sup> Reuters in Beijing, ‘Chinese Christians arrested for trying to hold open-air service’, *Guardian*, 10 April 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/10/shouwang-church-arrests-beijing-china>> [accessed 25 September 2013].

<sup>8</sup> Verna Yu, ‘Fears of More Pressure on Underground Churches’, *South China Morning Post*, 1 April 2011, <<http://www.scmp.com/article/963840/fears-more-pressure-underground-churches>> [accessed 25 September 2013].

a number of newer so-called ‘urban intellectual churches’ in China, a great number of which have gravitated towards the theological tradition coming from the teachings of John Calvin. While some scholars have regarded this new type of Christianity as insignificant in the Chinese landscape both numerically and in overall influence, I will show that urban intellectual churches are in fact a very significant voice – one that necessitated China’s state-run mouthpiece to publish a news article downplaying their importance. Moreover, many of the leaders of these churches can best be understood as public theologians seeking to address the public concerns of Chinese society today. However, before exploring these subjects further, it would perhaps be useful to briefly review the last three decades of Christianity in China.

### **Three Decades of Chinese Christianity**

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated what he called the ‘reform and opening up’ policy. In contrast with the Maoist dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution a decade earlier, this new policy sought to provide greater freedom to differing thoughts and approaches to China’s future. Along with these changes came a form of religious freedom where religious believers were now allowed to worship publicly. This was particularly demonstrated in the famous 1982 directive entitled ‘The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period’, more commonly known as ‘Document 19’, that provided a basic protection for religious freedom, but also gave a preferential treatment to atheism.<sup>9</sup>

However, in the mid-1980s, internal government documents began to speak about a ‘Christianity fever’ (*jidujiao re*) occurring throughout China due to a surge in the number of converts to Protestant Christianity, and, for that matter, to all religions (*zongjiao re*). Yet, these documents often spoke about Christian conversions amongst the so-called ‘four manys’

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Document No. 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period’, trans. in Donald MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 8-26.

(*si duo*) – many old, many women, many illiterate and many ill. This is a view that has also been propagated by individuals who are part of the state-registered church, like Bao Zhimin, who currently heads up the publication department of the China Christian Council (CCC) and TSPM.<sup>10</sup> While he was still a student of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary,<sup>11</sup> Bao wrote in 1989 that there was a systemic problem amongst Chinese Christians who possessed ‘backward feudalistic thinking, even ignorance’ making them susceptible to heretical teachings ‘which they follow blindly, unable to make distinctions’.<sup>12</sup> These opinions, however, were somewhat laden with a Marxist understanding that religion was a source of feudalism amongst the uneducated masses.<sup>13</sup>

This is perhaps not a complete picture of the Christian situation in 1980s China. Other research of that decade shows that 42 per cent of Chinese Christians in Shanghai’s urban TSPM churches had middle school education or higher, and the number of baptised believers under the age of 40 steadily increased from 15 per cent in 1980 to 27 per cent in 1990.<sup>14</sup> So while Chinese Christianity in the early-1980s was conceivably dominated by the marginalised of rural China, going into the 1990s, the Christianity fever was caught by younger and more educated urbanites. But this Christianity fever did not merely stop in the masses – it also spread within the academy. The late-1980s saw a growing number of academics in China’s secular universities and think tanks interested in studying Christianity for its abilities to contribute to China’s progress and modernisation. Known as ‘cultural Christians’ (*wenhua jidutu*), most of these academics from the humanities and social sciences

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<sup>10</sup> There is often a fair bit of confusion between the TSPM and the CCC due to the close nature of their respective work. While the TSPM is the main liaison between churches and the state, the CCC was founded in 1980 for training leaders and publishing Bibles and other Christian literature.

<sup>11</sup> Nanjing Union Theological Seminary is the flagship seminary of the officially-recognised Protestant church of China.

<sup>12</sup> Bao Zhimin, ‘Facing Reality and Responding to Challenges: On Ten Years of Chinese Church Reconstruction’, trans. Francesca Rhys, *Chinese Theological Review*, (1989), 1-6 at 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ryan Dunch, ‘Chinese Christianity’, in Randall L. Nadeau, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), pp. 261-282 at pp. 272-3.

<sup>14</sup> Luo Weihong, et. al., ‘Religion in Shanghai since the Period of Reform and Opening’, trans. W. Y. Poon, *China Study Journal*, 12:3 (1997), 5-23 at 8-9.

did not want to be part of any church, partly due to the perception that churches were too backward and too restrictive. Liu Xiaofeng, a core figure in this phenomenon, believed that he and his cohort of cultural Christians were amongst a cultural elite who emphasised individualism, scientific and reflective theology, and belonged to a ‘mystical’ church rather than any local congregation.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most significant shift in the demographics of Chinese Christianity begins to emerge in the 1990s after which sociologists of religion identified emerging forms of urban Christianity. Chen Cunfu of Zhejiang University described two new types of urban Christians which he terms ‘boss Christians’ (*laoban jidutu*) and ‘intellectual elite Christians’ (*zhishi jingying jidutu*), both of which he ties to the socialist market economy reforms of the 1990s. The former describes private business owners, business executives and other well-paid white-collar workers who have found both economic success and Christian faith. With regards to the latter group, he explains:

[T]here are the ‘intellectual elite’ Christians from major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou. They are no longer like the past urban [Christians] who were ‘petty bourgeois’ housewives, depending on the support of husbands and children, uncultured, and chiefly engaged with housework. These ‘intellectual elite’ Christians today, though small in number, are primarily in universities and secondarily in hospitals, research institutes, and Sino-foreign joint enterprises.<sup>16</sup>

In this article, Chen echoes Marxist undertones when he speaks of the earlier urban Christians as ‘petty bourgeois housewives’ who were uneducated and a burden on society. In contrast, these intellectual elite Christians are a growing alternative who bring something useful to China’s urban centres. Despite this recognition, Chen later writes that intellectual elites are

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<sup>15</sup> Tan Xing [pseudonym for Liu Xiaofeng], ‘Guanyu dangdai Zhongguo dalu “wenhua” jidutu de shenxue pingzhu’ [Theological Commentary about ‘Cultural’ Christians in Contemporary Mainland China], *Ding [Tripod]*, 6 (1990), 5-9 at 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Chen Cunfu, *Zhuanxingqi de Zhongguo jidujiao: Zhejiang jidujiao ge’an yanjiu [Chinese Christianity in Transition: A Case Study of Zhejiang Christianity]* (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe [Oriental Press], 2005), p. 51. Translation mine.

an insignificant minority of the overall Christian landscape of China and are not as important as the ‘boss Christians’<sup>17</sup> – one of the main subjects of the rest of his book.

It is important to note that Chen Cunfu’s study, with its focus on the 1990s economic reforms and the rise of the ‘boss Christians’, makes no mention of a very significant event in recent Chinese history: the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement. After all, this event accelerated many of the economic reforms which gave rise to boss Christianity. In one sense, this omission makes sense since Chen Cunfu is a communist party member and is publishing his work through a Chinese press whose censors would hardly allow such content to be discussed. But this obscures the broader view of the developments of urban Christianity. When we look more closely at the newer urban intellectual churches, we find a good number of their leaders were actually involved in the 1989 protests. As one commentator describes, due to the military clampdown on June 4th, these young intellectuals became disillusioned by their pursuits. They would later find existential resolve in Christianity, yet still maintained the earlier fervour to transform Chinese society – this time, from within the context of the church.<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason that these urban intellectual churches have often termed themselves as being part of the ‘third church’ (*disan jiaohui*). In contrast with either siding with the government by being part of the legally-operating TSPM, or following the more separatist approach of traditional ‘house churches’, many leaders of urban intellectual churches consider themselves as being part of a third church – a new ecclesiology that attempts to engage the state in a new way.

But there has also been some pushback against the use of terms like the ‘third church’, the ‘third way’ (*disan daolu*), and the ‘emerging church’ (*xinxing jiaohui*) to describe the changing Christian situation in the urban centres of China. Liu Tongsu, a pastor

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Sun Mingyi (Sun Ming Yee), ‘Renshi zhongguo chengshi jiating jiaohui’ [Urban House Church In China], *Jumu [Behold]*, 26 (May 2007), <<http://www.oc.org/web/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3175>> [accessed 25 September 2013]. See Yang Fenggang, ‘Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald’s: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44:4 (2005), 423-41 at 435-7.

in a Chinese diaspora church of Northern California, and Wang Yi, a pastor of an urban church in Chengdu province of China, have argued that such terminology is misleading and oversimplifies the recent changes in the church. Moreover, they believe the use of such categories breaks the continuity between traditional house churches and the growth in urban Christianity outside of the TSPM – ultimately causing a break in church unity.<sup>19</sup> In their view, the main change that has occurred in recent years has been the rapid urbanisation of China and, accordingly, the rapid urbanisation of Chinese Christianity. On the one hand, they try to highlight the continuity of a tradition whose identity is found through its opposition against the state and the state-sanctioned TSPM. On the other hand, Liu Tongsu and Wang Yi importantly highlight the multifaceted nature of urban house churches, many of which are based on different socioeconomic groupings. They bring to focus often-overlooked congregations like those predominantly made up of university students or migrant workers.<sup>20</sup> In other words, there is a great degree of unity in the diversity of non-TSPM churches throughout the generations, both in the urban centres and in the rural countryside.

However, one of the challenges of this approach is that it ignores the theological nuances that may be visible amongst various groups. This is particularly true amongst churches led by urban intellectuals who have emphasised a unique interest in the theologies of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition. The theology of most Protestants in post-Mao China have tended to emphasise theologies rooted in fundamentalism, pietistic, and so-called ‘Pentecostal’<sup>21</sup> persuasions, all of which have lent themselves towards a more separatist approach to the greater Chinese society. In contrast, as we shall see, this revival in the teachings of the Swiss Reformer and his followers has become an important contextual

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<sup>19</sup> Liu Tongsu and Wang Yi, *Guankan zhongguo chengshi jiating jiaohui* [*Observation on the China's House Churches in Cities*] (Taipei: Christian Arts Press, 2012), p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>21</sup> While it is quite common to describe Chinese Christianity as ‘Pentecostal’, the use of the term is a bit of a misnomer. See Gotthard Oblau, ‘Pentecostal by Default? Contemporary Christianity in China’, in Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, eds., *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), pp. 333-53.



theology – a five hundred year old tradition finding sociopolitical vitality in contemporary China.

### **Resurrecting Calvin in China**

Calvinism is not new to China. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Reformed missionaries from Europe and North America established a number of Calvinistic churches in China. But after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the new communist state instigated unified worship services in 1958, which forced all Protestant churches in a given region to unite and worship together under the same roof, before ultimately being brought to an end by the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>22</sup> When churches were allowed to reopen in the 1980s, they were only permitted to do so under the auspices of the TSPM. Therefore, the past three decades have severely obfuscated denominational differences. Yet since the 1980s, the official Protestant church has described itself as having entered into a post-denominational era.

The theology of John Calvin and his followers has had mixed reviews within the officially-sanctioned church. For example, Bishop Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting), the head of both the TSPM and the CCC for nearly two decades, was highly critical of many Calvinist teachings on depravity and the atonement, as well as hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation like justification by faith.<sup>23</sup> This is perhaps due to the close association Calvinism has had in China with fundamentalism – a theological orientation that Ding has often challenged. Others within the government-sanctioned church like Wang Aiming, the Vice President of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary who completed a PhD in Reformation theology from

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<sup>22</sup> Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 219-27.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 100-109.

the University of Basel, have tried to highlight the importance of Calvin and Calvinism for the Chinese church. However, there has been an overall lack of embrace.

In contrast, John Calvin's teachings became a subject of growing interest in the Chinese academy since the 1980s. Particularly after the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policy, many scholars began debating Max Weber's thesis about the role Calvinism (and, more broadly, Protestantism) has played in the shaping of capitalism and modernity in the West, and therefore its value for China. But the academic interest in Calvin has been shifting to include other aspects of his thought and impact. According to a Chinese database for academic journals, there have been approximately 4,300 articles published between 1956 and 2010 mentioning Calvin or Calvinism. However, only 8 per cent of them were published before 1990 and nearly 20 per cent of them were published in 2009 or 2010.<sup>24</sup> This growing academic interest can be partly attributed to the growing urban intellectual churches, since many of their pastors and elders come from within the academy and see themselves as Christian scholars (*jidutu xueren*).<sup>25</sup>

### ***Rights Defence***

One of the major approaches to Calvinism amongst urban intellectuals comes in the form of the rights defence (*weiquan*), which includes lawyers and law scholars who advocate for the rights of individuals who have been oppressed by the government. In general, the rights defence movement (*weiquan yundong*) includes both Christian and non-Christian lawyers and law scholars. Perhaps one of the most famous non-Christians in this movement is Chen Guangcheng, the blind, self-taught lawyer who escaped house arrest and fled to the

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<sup>24</sup> 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), pp. 152-68 at p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> Chen Yaqian, 'Xueyuan yu jiaohui: Jidutu xueren jiqi kunhuo' [The Academy and the Church: Christian Scholars and Their Perplexities], *Jidujiao sixiang pinglun* [Regent Review of Christian Thoughts], 5, (2007), 215-26.

US Embassy in Beijing in April 2012, before relocating to the United States for study. But the number of Christians in rights defence is quite prevalent and tends to be shaped by Calvinist theology.<sup>26</sup> One prominent Christian example of this approach can perhaps be found in Wang Yi, already mentioned earlier in this paper. He was a law professor at Chengdu University from 1996 until 2008, after which he resigned to take up a full-time pastorate in the Early Rain Reformed Church (*Qiuyu zhi fu guizheng jiaohui*) – a congregation which began as a fellowship in his home in 2005. He is also a very active blogger and author of a number of articles that have become very popular on the Internet.

One of the intellectual debates Wang Yi has been deeply involved in has revolved around the notion of constitutionalism. The Chinese legal system has often been accused of operating as a rule *by* law system rather than a rule *of* law system.<sup>27</sup> This means that government officials wield the law to oppress the people, rather than are constrained by the law like other citizens as is often understood in Western theories of the rule of law. To fix this and other discrepancies, Wang believes that the Chinese government needs to implement a stronger sense of constitutionalism. While others like Jiang Qing have argued for forms of Confucian constitutionalism which Wang acknowledges, he believes the Chinese legal system can best learn from Western constitutionalism which was built upon Christian values.

The law scholar turned Reformed pastor writes, ‘We can see a basic fact in the historical relationship between constitutionalism and Christianity, and that is, this kind of constitutionalist system with which we identify was birthed from the Puritan faith tradition.’<sup>28</sup> Wang Yi argues that the Puritan development of Calvin’s theology articulated the notion of a covenantal community that extended to Christians and non-Christians. Moreover, it has

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<sup>26</sup> Gerda Wielander, *Christian Values in Communist China* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 108-29.

<sup>27</sup> Randall Peerenboom, *China’s Long March Towards Rule of Law* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2002), pp. 63-71.

<sup>28</sup> Wang Yi, ‘The Possibility of Political Theology: Christianity and Liberalism’, *Chinese Law and Religion Monitor*, 8:1 (2012), 96-118 at 113-14.

formed the basis for Anglo-American constitutionalism.<sup>29</sup> He points out that this is very much seen when the Puritan notion of covenant was later carried to North America with the creation of the Mayflower Compact of 1620, the first governing document of the Plymouth Colony.<sup>30</sup> Wang is not saying constitutionalism must be built upon Christian theology and not upon new interpretations of Confucianism, humanist values like the French enlightenment, or a return to foundations articulated in the Magna Carta of 1215. Instead, he wants to assert the superiority of the perspective of Puritan Calvinism in its simultaneous pursuit of a constitutional polity and a transcendent power, which thereby provides a stronger basis for the separation of church and state.<sup>31</sup>

Along with Wang Yi, a number of other well-known Christian intellectuals like Yu Jie, Bei Cun, and Fan Yafeng have emphasised a connection between Calvinism and political engagement. Yu Jie and Bei Cun, both famous writers and social critics, have even argued that the best way to do this is for Chinese Christians to ‘evangelise culture’ (*wenhua fuyin hua*) by using artistic expressions as vehicles for communicating and bringing about spiritual and political change in Chinese society.<sup>32</sup> This may seem uncharacteristic of John Calvin and the iconoclasm often associated with him, but would not be a fair assessment of Calvinism as a larger tradition.<sup>33</sup> In fact, these Calvinist thinkers see evangelising culture as part of a greater vision of creating a Chinese ‘Geneva’ that can radically change China and Chinese society.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Constructive Dialogue***

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 106. See Witte, John, ‘Blest Be the Ties That Bind: Covenant and Community in Puritan Thought’, *Emory Law Journal*, 36 (1987), 579-601 at 584fn11, 590-8.

<sup>30</sup> Wang Yi, ‘Shengyue yu xianzhengzhuyi’ [The Covenant and Constitutionalism], *Fangzhou*, 2 (April 2006), 97-101 at 100-101.

<sup>31</sup> Wang, ‘The Possibility of Political Theology’, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Fällman, ‘Calvin, Culture and Christ’, p. 154.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremy Begbie, for instance, argues that this is quite contrary to many Dutch Neo-Calvinist thinkers who believed there was a very strong connection between Christian theology and the arts. Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 81-163.

<sup>34</sup> Fällman, ‘Calvin, Culture and Christ’, pp. 161-2.

In contrast with the approach of rights defence, a second group of urban intellectuals who leverage the theological tradition of John Calvin is perhaps best represented by the Shouwang Church, highlighted at the outset of this paper. This approach views the church as a vehicle for constructive dialogue (*duihua*) with the government, by existing as autonomous from the state but insisting on directly registering with the government as a social grouping – without the intermediary of the TSPM.<sup>35</sup> The possibility for this type of registration was opened up by a change in the regulations on religious affairs that came into effect in 2005.<sup>36</sup> In 2008, Shouwang’s Pastor Jin Tianming, a graduate of the prestigious Tsinghua University, explained that his church’s approach of dialogue with registration has hoped to move beyond the deadlock within the Chinese church between the ‘illegal’ house churches and the ‘adulteress’ TSPM.<sup>37</sup> The traditional house church model is akin to the separatist approach of the Anabaptists during John Calvin’s day. Jin, following the legacy of Calvin,<sup>38</sup> was promoting a view that the church must have a more positive relationship with the civil government without compromising the gospel as the TSPM has done. If Shouwang Church is successful in registration with the government, it would provide a lawful means of church existence.

Moreover, Jin Tianming believes that registration enables the Chinese church to move beyond a merely spiritual focus, towards an embrace of mission to society. This is particularly underscored in several special issues of Shouwang Church’s own online and print periodical, *Almond Flowers (Xinghua)*. The Autumn 2008 issue, for example, had the theme of ‘Social Concern’. This special issue focused on the disastrous May 2008 earthquake in

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<sup>35</sup> See Sun, ‘Urban House Church In China’.

<sup>36</sup> Despite the change in policy, this reality has hardly been realised in the last few years and continues to encourage the ambivalent legal status of non-registered religious communities in China. Lauren B. Homer, ‘Registration of Chinese Protestant House Churches Under China’s 2005 Regulation on Religious Affairs: Resolving the Implementation Impasse’, *Journal of Church and State*, 52:1 (2010), 50-73.

<sup>37</sup> Jin Tianming, ‘Tuidong jiaohui dengji dao jintian’ [The Promotion of Church Registration], *Xinghua [Almond Flowers]*, (Spring 2008), 40-2 at 40-1.

<sup>38</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.20.

Sichuan province, spoke about the aid given through the church, and emphasised the need for the church to be a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that participates in serving the civil society. This was followed by the Winter 2008 special issue on ‘The Cultural Mandate’, focusing on the theological notion developed by Dutch Neo-Calvinists. One article in this issue challenges the Chinese church to think beyond its historical foci of making converts and emphasising spiritual sanctification. The author concludes, ‘God’s word or biblical truth must enter into a culture and, expressing itself in every domain of this culture, become God’s common grace in human society. This is the church’s cultural mandate.’<sup>39</sup>

Oddly enough, Fan Yafeng, another rights defence lawyer like Wang Yi who writes a great deal about covenantal theology and constitutionalism, has attacked Shouwang’s approach of dialogue saying that it is not a mature theology and does not have a basis in evangelicalism or Reformed theology.<sup>40</sup> Shouwang Church unsuccessfully tried to register with the government in 2005 and 2006, and was subsequently evicted from its rented premises. They raised funds to purchase an office space, but due to pressures from the government, the property manager refused to give them the keys to the premises. As a result, church members assembled for worship outdoors. Fan asserts that Shouwang had navigated the two extremes of ‘registration application and struggle in the street. There is no middle road for rights defense in accordance with the law.’<sup>41</sup> He believes the Shouwang Church has since abandoned her approach of constructive dialogue by initiating public worship services, and its members now must be described as rights defence activists. But, Fan concludes, this is a step in the right direction since rights defence is based on Reformed theology and

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<sup>39</sup> Sun Mingyi, ‘Zhongguo jiaohui chengsheng guan ji wenhua shiming lianxiang’ [The Relationship Between Sanctification and the Cultural Mandate in the Chinese Church], *Xinghua* [Almond Flowers], (Winter 2008), 25-31 at 31. Translation mine.

<sup>40</sup> Fan Yafeng, ‘On the Transition Mode of the Relationship Between the State and the Church: The Mode from Rights Defense by the Church to Rights Defense in Mean Course’, *Chinese Law and Religion Monitor*, 6:2 (2010), 18-28 at 22.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Calvinist political theology, which prefers an open and legal status over the clandestine and illegal approach of older house churches.<sup>42</sup>

However, Shouwang leaders see the practice of constructive dialogue to be a bit more nuanced than how Fan Yafeng has portrayed. A good example of this would be Sun Yi, an elder of Shouwang and a professor of philosophy at Beijing's Renmin University of China. Sun Yi wrote his PhD on the theology of Søren Kierkegaard, but has since published a number of articles on Calvinism, was involved in a recent translation of Calvin's *Institutes* into Chinese, and was one of the two editors of a recent volume discussing the significance of Calvin's thinking in China.<sup>43</sup> In an article published in 2012, Sun Yi states that urban intellectual churches after the 1990s have broken from the various approaches of earlier generations of house churches and now pursue a goal of 'openness and integrity' (*gongkai zhengti xing*).<sup>44</sup> In general, this means seeking legal status as an NGO to more actively impact the greater society and work towards a civil society. Continuing the themes of Pastor Jin Tianming and other Shouwang members writing in 2008, Sun Yi pens these thoughts in 2012, a year after church leaders like himself were put on house arrest and church members were detained in public worship services. He underscores that there is a public nature to the church and her theology. Quoting from Matthew 5:14, he reminds his readers that the church is to be a light of the world and a city on a hill which cannot be hidden. Like Abraham Kuyper's teachings on sphere sovereignty, Shouwang leaders see the church and the government as independent, sovereign entities that can and should publicly engage one another in constructive dialogue.

### **The Public Role of Calvinism**

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 23-4.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Chan (Chen Zuoren) and Sun Yi, eds., *Jia'erwen yu hanyu shenxue [John Calvin and Sino-Christian Theology]* (Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Sun Yi, 'Jidujiao jiuguo qingjie dui jiaohui guan de yingxiang' [The Influence of Christian National Salvation Complex upon Ecclesiology], *Xinghua [Almond Flowers]*, (Winter 2012), 34-40 at 37-40.

These are two of the major appropriations of Calvinism amongst urban intellectuals in China today. There are others like the economist Zhao Xiao who champions Weber's thesis about Puritanism and capitalism. Zhao has even begun to give training seminars to Christian entrepreneurs in China and makes a point of connection between Chen Cunfu's 'boss Christians' and 'intellectual elite Christians'. By and large, this resurgent interest in Calvinism is addressing public concerns which are sensitive to the sociopolitical context of Chinese society today. Despite their varied approaches, how are we to understand these urban intellectual Christians with their emphasis on the teachings built upon John Calvin?

The sinologist Fredrik Fällman has tried describing this phenomenon a Chinese 'New Calvinism' – borrowing a term used to describe the revival of Calvinist thought in North America amongst individuals like John Piper, Mark Driscoll and Albert Mohler.<sup>45</sup> But this is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the foreign voices which are often seen to be promoting Calvinism in China like Samuel Ling (Lin Cixin), Stephen Tong (Tang Chongrong) and the late Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tianen) can hardly be considered New Calvinists, but 'Old' Calvinists with connections to historically Reformed institutions like Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Westminster Seminary California. But secondly, in the Western context, 'New Calvinism' – and Calvinism in general – is often associated with soteriology. That is, 'Calvinism' is often a shorthand for salvific categories articulated at the Synod of Dort such as election, predestination, the limits of atonement, etc., summarised in the so-called five points of Calvinism. Moreover, New Calvinists like Piper and Mohler, both of whom are part of Baptist denominations, do not hold to teachings on infant baptism which are vitally important to the covenantal theology of many Reformed thinkers. Hence, Michael S. Horton from Westminster Seminary California has pointed out that the North American phenomenon of New Calvinism focuses on five-point Calvinism and

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<sup>45</sup> Fällman, 'Calvin, Culture and Christ', pp. 153-68.



rarely, if ever, involves covenantal theology, the five Reformation *solae*, and other components characteristic of confessional, Reformed Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

Like Horton and other Reformed thinkers of the West who differ from New Calvinism, the Chinese interest in the teachings of John Calvin today is shifting away from soteriology and towards an embrace of ecclesiology. This is reinforced by Samuel Ling who, as a foreign voice, has recently argued in the Chinese-language periodical *Church China* (*Jiaohui*) that Chinese Christianity needs to teach a more comprehensive understanding of Reformed theology rather than merely focusing on soteriology.<sup>47</sup> In an odd way, this is a contextually-sensitive shift in Chinese Christianity. TSPM leaders like Chen Zemin and Bishop Ding Guangxun have lamented that the post-denominational Chinese church does not have a strong ecclesiology.<sup>48</sup> This is reinforced by scholars like Liu Xiaofeng who, after experiencing the institutional debacle of communism during the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, wanted nothing to do with the institutional church and argued for a type of mystical ecclesiology in the early 1990s. In contrast, these younger urban intellectual Christians focus on building a strong ecclesiology. This is of course a subject discussed in great depth in the fourth book of John Calvin's *Institutes*. It can be recognised that this revival in Calvin's thinking has resulted in a heavier emphasis on the sacraments,<sup>49</sup> the nature and the polity of the church,<sup>50</sup> and the church's relationships with the magistrate, the state and the civil society. There are even rumblings amongst urban intellectual churches of the development of structures mirroring Congregational and Presbyterian denominations, the latter of which includes the development of regional

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<sup>46</sup> Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), pp. 110-113.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Ling, 'Cong wujie dao xinshang: Gaigezong xinyang dui Zhongguo jiaohui de baogui jiazhi' [From Misunderstanding to Appreciation: Commending the Treasures of the Reformed Faith in the Chinese Church], *Jiaohui* [*Church China*], 23 (May 2010), 13-17. See Fällman, 'Calvin, Culture and Christ', pp. 157-8.

<sup>48</sup> Duan Qi, 'Contextualization in the Contemporary Chinese Church', in *Christianity and Modernization: A Chinese Debate*, eds. Philip L. Wickeri and Lois Cole (Hong Kong: Daga Press, 1995), pp. 33-58 at p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> For example, some churches like Wang Yi's Early Rain Reformed Church have upheld teachings on infant baptism based on the teachings of covenantal theology.

<sup>50</sup> Fällman, 'Calvin, Culture and Christ', pp. 158-64.

presbyteries and synods.<sup>51</sup> Overall, in the present context, a strong understanding of the church is necessary for the body of believers to be shaped as an institution that can effect change in the state and in the civil society.

Another term that has been employed to describe leaders of these urban intellectual churches is ‘public intellectual’ (*gonggong zhishifenzi*). The Chinese neologism was coined in the 2002 Chinese translation of Richard A. Posner’s study on the decline of public intellectuals, but became much more popular in 2004 when the Chinese periodical Southern People’s Weekly (*Nanfang renwu zhoukan*) produced a list of China’s 50 most influential public intellectuals.<sup>52</sup> The periodical’s liberal-leaning bias was somewhat reflected in the list, which became hotly debated within intellectual circles and by the communist party. Significantly, along with Confucians, political liberals, and other famous intellectuals on this list, the soon-to-be Reformed pastor Wang Yi was identified as part of this elite, yet notorious group. Whether or not they made the ‘official’ list, Christian intellectuals like those mentioned in this paper have found an ideological foundation in Calvinist theology essential for their public engagement. Though Chen Cunfu is correct in saying that the number of urban intellectual Christians are small, they are also significant voices within the public sphere who are involved in debates with other intellectual elites.

However, I am hesitant merely to call the leaders of this new form of urban Christianity ‘public intellectuals’ because of the type of theology these Christians represent. The various historical approaches of Christianity in China have tended to be monopolised by theologies that have either emphasised a separatist understanding of the church from the greater society or pursued goals to marry Christianity with Confucianism, Buddhism, or even

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<sup>51</sup> Sun Yi, in discussion with author, April 2013.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Yingxiang Zhongguo gonggong zhishifenzi 50 ren’ [The Influence of China’s 50 Public Intellectuals], *Nanfang renwu zhoukan* [Southern People’s Weekly], September 2004, <<http://business.sohu.com/s2004/zhishifenzi50.shtml>> [accessed 25 September 2013].

communism.<sup>53</sup> While some gravitate towards Richard Niebuhr's 'Christ against culture' motif, others tend towards an *ancilla theologiae* where the Chinese religiophilosophical tradition becomes the handmaiden of theology. In contrast, there has been an underrepresentation of Christian thinkers who, from a theological basis, possess a strong sense that it is their Christian vocation to be participants in God's work of transforming and redeeming the cosmos.<sup>54</sup> That is, until now. These urban intellectual churches have been theologically pursuing the transformation of Chinese society and state. Though it is correct to say these are 'Christian public intellectuals', 'Christian' should be understood as a substantival, rather than an adjectival quality of these individuals and their pursuits.

Perhaps rather than thinking of the leaders of urban intellectual churches as being Chinese 'New Calvinists' or Christian 'public intellectuals', it would be more useful to think of them as Chinese public theologians. As Jürgen Moltmann poignantly writes: 'As the theology of God's kingdom, theology has to be *public* theology: public, critical and prophetic complaint to God – public, critical and prophetic hope in God. Its public character is constitutive for theology, for the kingdom of God's sake.'<sup>55</sup> Likewise, these Chinese Christian leaders are sensitive to the public character of theology, have a particularly strong sociopolitical commitment, and use their Calvinist, theological orientations as foundational for discourse in the public sphere. They are pastors and elders who desire to articulate Christian theologies that are able to converse and engage issues of common interest in the public sphere with individuals inside and outside of the church.

Moreover, the 'public sphere' has been reshaped with the advent of social media.<sup>56</sup> Hence, Chinese public theologians make ample use technologies such as blogs and

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<sup>53</sup> Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, pp. 7-13.

<sup>54</sup> See *Ibid*, pp. 85-128.

<sup>55</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1999), p. 5. Emphasis in original.

<sup>56</sup> Thérèse F. Tierney, *The Public Space of Social Media: Connected Cultures of the Network Society* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 22-38.

microblogs, as well as online and print magazines to discuss societal problems. This is dangerous business in a country like China where the central government has one of the most sophisticated Internet censorship platforms in the world, commonly known as the ‘Great Firewall of China’. Yet you have thinkers like Zhao Xiao who has on Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) over 6 million followers, and counting. So when he posts ideas about Calvinism and China, there are more individuals in China who get this on their daily newsfeed than there are people living in Scotland – a country with a current population of about 5.2 million and, incidentally, one of the historic origins of Puritan Calvinism so loved in China today. Chen Cunfu is correct in describing their numbers as few. But as evidenced in the outset of this paper by China’s state-run media outlet publishing an article to downplay the importance of groups like the Shouwang Church, these Christian public theologians are making significant headways that make the Chinese government quite uncomfortable.

## **Conclusion**

Reformed theology has been described as being ‘world formative’ – that is, serving the role of bringing a new shape to the society and the world around it.<sup>57</sup> However, there are a number of places in East Asia (as well as Europe and North America) where Reformed churches have once been very strong but have declined despite their public commitments. For example, though the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan has had a significant role in introducing a democratic system to Taiwan and, in recent years, Presbyterians still take up 7 per cent of the legislative seats, members of the church make up only 1 per cent of Taiwan’s overall population.<sup>58</sup> This can likewise be said about South Korea where Presbyterians (along with other Protestants) played a significant role in the twentieth century as a source of nationalism and has since become one of the biggest sources of missionaries in the world;

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<sup>57</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 3-22.

<sup>58</sup> Cheng-Tian Kuo, *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* (New York: SUNY, 2008), p. 44.

however, recent years have witnessed a noticeable decline in the Protestant population.<sup>59</sup> As with other contextual theologies, Calvinism in urban intellectual churches of China must continually be sensitive to its rapidly changing context, or suffer obsolescence.

Perhaps a closely related concern may be raised where Calvinism is often regarded as a strongly intellectualised theological system. TSPM and CCC leaders have recognised the low theological level of the officially-sanctioned church, while the more traditional house churches have tended towards a ‘primitivist Christianity’ which emphasises conversion and supernatural acts of healing or prophecy.<sup>60</sup> Hence, some of the more philosophical debates within the Calvinist tradition (e.g., the insistence on divine monergism<sup>61</sup>) have had difficulty squaring with the Chinese mindset. Moreover, China’s push towards rapid urbanisation has resulted in a noticeable migrant worker population moving from rural farmlands to urban metropolises, many of whom would likely have not had the same academic education as China’s public theologians. The risk that arises in the use of Calvinist theology is that these urban intellectual elite Christians may be a voice mainly for other intellectual elites, and their ability to engage other socio-economic strata of society may not be as strong.

Chinese Christian public theologians push the boundaries of church-state-academy relations. Not only do public theologians engage questions about the relationship between the church and the state, but they also continue to reshape the relationship between the church and the academy. Undeniably, their voice and opinions carry great weight, directly and indirectly upon other Christians, as they continue to engage in the Chinese public sphere through traditional and new media. Despite these concerns, and in contrast with the downplaying by the state or by certain academics, urban intellectual Christianity is a growing

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<sup>59</sup> The percentage of South Korean Protestants grew from 1985 to 1995, from 16 per cent to 19 per cent, but shrunk back to 17 per cent by 2005. In contrast, South Korean Catholics grew in all demographics from 5 per cent in 1985 to 11 per cent in 2005. Jibum Kim, et al., ‘Trends of Religious Identification in Korea: Changes and Continuities’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48:4 (2009): 789-93 at 791, 793.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel Bays, ‘Chinese Protestant Christianity Today’, *China Quarterly*, 174 (June 2003), 494.

<sup>61</sup> Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, pp. 52-4, 120-4.

minority with a lot of influence – particularly as its leaders take on roles as public theologians.