

CHINA UPDATE *Samuel Chiang*

Collective wisdom with creative collaboration will accentuate the insight into the Church in China¹. My blind spots may eschew our learning experiences together.

I. A time of convergence (macro tensions in history, economics, technology, and events)

A. Turning points in world history

Many turning points in world history mark the course of civilization, empires, and nation-states. For example: AD 395 was a turning point for the Roman Empire, as it split into two--East Roman Empire and West Roman Empire; the Seljuq Empire in Asia Minor was split up, and this not only opened the way for the Crusaders four years later, but also allowed the Turkish Ottoman people to emerge in Asia Minor; this also brought about the rise of Islamic power in Europe and Asia in the coming centuries (1092); the Spanish navy lost their hegemony at sea (1588); the Bohemian reformation, Protestant reformation, and the English reformation have all left indelible etchings on the course of Western history. In fact, some have now bracketed a period of 1789 to 1989 as another pivotal era in history. For China, the re-convergence of history coincided with the opium war, on to the development of the modern era; 1911, 1949 and 1989 were three important turning points of Chinese history: nation-state replaced dynasties (1911), Communism became the ideology of the people (1949); an awakening to changes in the society (1989).

B. Turning points in Economy

China's opening to the West meant China has become the workshop for the world. Foreign Direct Investment has poured in and affected peoples' lives, and millions have been lifted out of the official poverty stats (but many are living just above the poverty line). The demand for raw resources has created a global shortage in commodities and oil. The Saudi government called upon China not for building up of new customer relationship, but for the security found in the new 'protector'. The new turning point of the 21st century Chinese economy will affect the whole world.

C. Turning points in Technology

Entering the global market place, China's technological investment in its telecommunications infrastructure has no rival. The equipment and set up is the envy of the West. This is the play ground where companies like Nokia and Motorola are releasing their latest play gadgets, experimenting in the consumer sector, perfecting the design, and then releasing it in the West.

D. Turning points through events

The WTO, 2008 Olympics, 2010 World Fair are now embedded into the fabric of Chinese history.

II. A time to look forward (governance tensions in accountability, transparency, proposals, environment, and the rural)

After a tight consultation process, and while monitoring the 111 million internet users carefully (amazingly the Chinese government is creating 'space' for the netizens through online surveys, focus groups, and opinions), China has a new 11th—Five Year Plan that encompasses Rural Society and Urban and Rural divisions, system reform, energy, and the

‘IZATIONS’—industrialization, urbanization, marketization, internationalization. There are over 30 measurable objectives. Here is a sampling:

- Gross Domestic Product to grow 7.5 percent annually to double the per capita GDP in 2000;
- Optimizing and upgrading industrial structure. Proportion of added value in service industry to GDP, and new employment to total employment will grow by 3 and 4 percentage points respectively; R&D expenditure will increase to 2% of GDP;
- Considerably improving efficiency of resource usage;
- Energy consumption per unit of GDP is to decrease by 20%. Water consumption per unit of industrial added value is to decline by 30 percent. Industrial solid waste recycling and conserving rate is to grow 60%;
- Urban and rural development is to grow balanced with urbanization rate growing to 47%;
- Basic public service is to be greatly reinforced. People’s average education is to increase to 9 years. Urban basic endowment insurance is to cover 223 million people. New rural cooperative medical care’s coverage will reach over 80%;
- Sustainable development capacity will be boosted. The total population will be controlled under 1.36 billion. Arable land will be maintained at 120 million hectares. Main pollutant discharges will be reduced by 10% and forest coverage will reach 20%;
- Relatively complete market economic system;
- People’s living standard continues to improve. Urban resident per capita disposable income and rural resident per capita net income will grow by an annual rate of 5% respectively;
- Reform and legal system construction and spiritual civilization construction will make new progress.

III. A time to follow trends (“me” generation tensions in aging, HIV/AIDS, divorcing, and the consumerism)

- A. Increased cultural & consumer outlets in China; yachting is the latest rise; divorce over 20% in the cities.
- B. “Me” Generation-- China is developing a unique consumer culture, the emerging cohort that can be summarized as follow:
 - In 2004 26% of Chinese want to live a life that suits ‘my own taste’; up from 10% in 1994.
 - Chinese workers are now interested in self satisfaction and self expression.
 - Only 30% of Chinese find that the mission or the purpose of their company makes them feel their job is important.
 - Consumer preference for domestic goods has dropped from 78% to 67% from 2000 to 2005.
- C. Urbanization with 80% of the people owning a mobile phone, and 33% of the same say they will buy another one.
- D. Rural women with highest suicide rates in the world, and 20—35 year olds have the highest unsuccessful suicide rates.
- E. Connection to the outside is everything, English is paramount. There are also hundreds of indigenous Christian websites within the ‘great fire-wall’ of China.
- F. HIV/AIDS is growing (about one million cases); epidemiologists, who watched the

African crisis develop have already written off the province of Yunnan (43 million people).

- G. “Power of the Returnees”—those who studied in Russia are in power, next to be in power are USA returnees.

IV. A time for spiritual cultivation (urbanization tensions--staying, leaving, arriving, exploring)

There is an ancient Chinese saying, “the most precious thing of all is to have peace with others”. However, the reality in China today is coldness among people, corruption everywhere, people lacking integrity, and a general lack of ability to distinguish between right and wrong. These “moral crises” are not created in one day, but due to the extension of the “religious crisis” during the Cultural Revolution (1966—1976). Ever since the promotion of atheism by the Chinese Communist Party, all moral foundations established by religions were obliterated, and religions were destroyed. The government promoted class struggles that created distrust among people leading to denying and distrusting everything. As a result, the people not only overthrew the moral standards of Confucius and other moral standards set by other religions, but also destroyed all moral values that were set by the Communist Party itself. Furthermore, the continuous struggles and critiques by the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution, meant the people did not know what to follow, and their spirits became hollow. As the economic reform started to soar, the population gained in materialism, but the moral compass of the mind was not evident; in fact, the relationship between man and nature and between men has become very tense. What could the government do? They decided to turn to Buddhism.

Buddhism is a religion that promotes “peace” and “heart”; although the Chinese government did not publicly announce that they need Buddhism to fill the void of social morale, they did admit that Buddhism and Confucianism are the essence of Chinese culture, having a worldwide value. This is currently promulgated through a strong media campaign. Although the Chinese government deems religions to be virulent, they are willing to acknowledge Buddhism, with over 2000 years of history, and with over 100 million believers (the Communist Party has only two-thirds of the number) in China. Being a country that wants to accept different cultures and wishing to build a harmonious society, the government is willing to use the influence of Buddhism. The Chinese President, Mr. Hu, announced this campaign--a harmonious society—unveiling it through the tenets of a socialist-value system: The “Eight Do’s and Don’ts” are the new moral standards for the 1.3 billion people of China. At schools, enterprises, troops’ quarters and the villages, many songs about this theme were created, such as: “Eight Do’s and Don’ts” moral song, “Eight Do’s and Don’ts” righteous song, “Eight Do’s and Don’ts” clap hands song, “Eight Do’s and Don’ts” seven word song, etc. This value system spells out the ‘eight honors, eight disgraces’. It goes something like this:

1. The honor of loving the motherland; the shame of endangering the motherland.
2. The honor of serving the people; the shame of turning away from the people.
3. The honor of upholding science; the shame of ignorance and illiteracy.
4. The honor of industrious labor; the shame of indolence.
5. The honor of togetherness and co-operation; the shame of profiting at the expense of others.
6. The honor of honesty and keeping one’s word; the shame of abandoning morality for profit.
7. The honor of discipline and obedience; the shame of lawlessness and disorder.
8. The honor of striving arduously; the shame of walling in luxury.

The government is sending a message that religion and teachings are all controlled by the “heart.” (This also is a tacit admission that the current system is bankrupt and the ‘heart’ belongs to the people.) “Religious freedom” and “Freedom of speech” are all basic rights of humans and also the two basic elements of modern civilization. To build a harmonious world, the Communist government says it must start with the “heart”, and one must treat properly the relationship between “Religious freedom” and “freedom of speech”.

The Communist government seems to subscribe to the Buddhist’s belief that everyone has self consciousness, everyone has the character of a Buddha, everyone has self worth, and all have unlimited hope and unlimited life worth.

V. A time for the Church in China to stand (leadership tensions in theology, mission, cults, and relevancy)

The “Mediterranean Sea era” lasted for 20 centuries, “The Atlantic Ocean era” lasted for 5 centuries, and now is the start of “The Pacific Ocean era”. Mission has moved similarly. The Church in China is undergoing a massive change, composed of fast-graying rural house churches, growing Three-Self Churches, and emerging business and professional churches. On this the 40th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, the citizens of China are experiencing another revolution! What has taken the West 400 years to experience, Chinese society is experiencing all within this generation, or within this decade; this is an invisible, but equally felt cultural revolution. The church is trying to respond to the massive societal, environmental, and sociological changes, but she is ill-equipped; in many cases, she is held back by a deeply rooted indigenous theology of suffering. Cross-cultural mission is commencing with people being sent into Central Asia and beyond; this is a re-birthing of the ‘Back to Jerusalem’ movement. Some ministries under this banner are yielding to Spirit-led initiatives!

The new push for religious freedom (in Buddhism only) will affect the people and the Church in China for generations to come. They have chosen before, 1949—for atheism, and God has shown them conclusively that this was wrong. Through prayer, God will move again!

(Endnotes)

1 References and resources are gathered from: Yazhou Zhoukan, Chinese World News, Business Week, Harvard Business Review, China Daily, various interviews.