

Linda Chin and Nathaniel Hahn

MAGT510 - International Business Management

### Chinese Christian Ministries:

A Cultural Perspective of Business Prospects for Christian Ministry Publications in the People's  
Republic of China

#### **Introduction**

China's rich philosophical history has important ramifications for its current religious environment. However, the Chinese communist government influence over cultural shifts exposes how rapidly fortunes and opportunities can change in modern-day China. In the United States, the religious publications industry's \$691 million in sales makes this industry an important part of the cultural fabric of the United States.<sup>1</sup> This analysis will address the prospects of the christian religions publications industry in China's complicated cultural landscape. Firstly, religious demographics inform the potential size of the Christian religious publications industry. Secondly, cultural analysis determines the background of the growth of the Christian religious movement. Thirdly, social institutions determine the organizations that provide the most influence over the development and direction of the Christian religious movement. Fourthly, informal trade barriers create situations that create a large amount of risk when entering the market. Lastly, this analysis will include business recommendations based upon these key factors to inform decision making regarding this particular industry within the People's Republic of China.

#### **Demographic Trends**

---

<sup>1</sup> [AAP 2015 Report](#)

Demographic information about the People's Republic of China reflects the unique character of its christian community compared with other countries with large christian populations. China has over 1.3 billion people, and around 5% of the nation's population is Christian.<sup>2</sup> While the percentage of christians in the country is small, China's large population makes it unusual as one of the nations with the largest christian populations in overall size while having a relatively low percentage of christian population compared with other large christian population nations. Out of a list of the ten countries with the highest christian population, the next lowest percentage of christian population was Nigeria, with 50.8% of the population reported as christian.<sup>3</sup> The non-christians in China are predominantly atheist, with 52.2% of the population reported as atheist. Even with only 5% of the population christian, this percentage represents a dramatic rise from the less than 0.5% of the population reported as christian before China's reform period in the 1980s. In addition, China has a large ratio of women to men present in the young generation, due to the effects of the one-child policy.<sup>4</sup> This China's demographics display a large opportunity for the overall christian population to grow in the future. When taking into consideration that the individuals affected by these demographic trends, they will likely want to have reading materials that teach them about their new religion or learn about a new rising popular religion in their country.

### **Cultural Analysis**

Over the course of the region's history, China has been home to a variety of different religions and philosophical systems. Two of the most prominent historical philosophical systems are Confucianism and Daoism, and these philosophical systems have had a broad ranging impact on both the historical governmental systems of China and the nation's cultural mindset. In modern

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/baylor-ir/bitstream/handle/2104/9326/WANG-THESIS-2015.pdf?sequence=1>

times, the Chinese Communist government has had an outside role in determining broader cultural trends based upon its political policies. The complex interplay of religious and philosophical history and modern government policy forms the background for how Christianity is viewed within Chinese culture.

Confucianism and Daoism both originated from philosophy teachers in ancient China, but the values portrayed in the religions are frequently at odds with one another. In Confucianism, there is an emphasis on the importance of ritual and social cohesion. There are defined relationships that, when followed accurately, create a society which will produce righteousness. In addition, respect for ancestors is important for the purposes of humaneness and being a righteous individual.<sup>5</sup> Daoism focuses on far more loosely defined philosophical goals. A key saying, “The way that can be spoken of is not the true way”, intends to show the importance of maintaining an empty mind. Rather than trying to define relationships in the way of Confucianism, Daoism promotes performing the least amount of action possible to be at one with the ways of the world. Rather than trying to change the world into a righteous state, followers of Daoism simply need to recognize the state of the world as it is and conform their minds to that state.<sup>6</sup> Both of these philosophical systems have touch points related to Christianity, and pointing them out would be important to selecting the religious publications most applicable to Chinese religious individuals. From the Confucian side, the emphasis on humaneness connects with the christian biblical message, and from the Daoism side, having a blank mind is similar to becoming “like a child” from a christian context. However, it is also important to realize that some aspects, such as ancestor worship in Confucianism and de-emphasis on morality in Daoism do not have effective parallels with christian religious beliefs.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://pascal.iseg.utl.pt/~cesa/Three%20Confucian%20Values.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iep.utm.edu/daoism/>

In the modern era, the Chinese Communist government has influenced Chinese societies in ways that may also contribute to the way that people approach religion. After the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949, the cult of Mao Zedong, the chairman of the communist party, developed as a way to fill in the gap left from the removal of the emperor and other forms of religious and political structure. In particular, the ideas of the cultural revolution created a suspicion of individuals who held too much knowledge, putting into practice some of the Daoist ideas from early China. After Mao's death, the reform period began in 1978. This period focused on modernizing the economy, and not focusing on developing a political cult. Rather, the government focused on leaving spiritual decisions up to individuals, so long as they remained loyal citizens to the People's Republic of China.

### **Social Institutions**

There are three main categories of religious groups in China, "Red Area", "Gray Area", and "Black Area". The Red Area religious groups and organizations report directly to the government, such as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Gray Area religious groups are not recognized by the government, but are not actively persecuted by the government, such as Hinduism and small house churches. Black Area religious groups are actively persecuted by the government, such as certain forms of Tibetan Buddhism, Falun Gong, and christian movements that speak out against the communist government.<sup>7</sup> Of particular focus in our research was the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, a government organization established to promote Protestant Christianity, and house churches, which were not affiliated with the government.

The "legal" Christian churches in China are affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), with the three principles being self- governance, self-support and self propagation. The

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.purdue.edu/crcs/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Yang3Markets.pdf>

Chinese communist government uses this organization to promote its view of an acceptable form of protestant Christianity. This organization bears no tolerance to foreign administrations, missionaries, or influence. In addition, churches associated with this organization may not receive overseas funds. However, from the perspective persecuted Chinese pastors we interviewed, the imbalance of the thirst for true Christian teachings and the restricted christian publications triggered some “underground churches and underground publications”. These house churches usually have fewer than 1000 members, and sometimes cannot remain in the same place for long, if they draw the attention of political forces. These house churches often work with overseas christian organizations in missionary work and development of pastoral practices. In determining which organizations would be best to work with in terms of publishing religious materials, there is no clear answer. Working with the TSPM churches would require agreement with the overall association, which would be nearly impossible as a foreign organization, whereas working with the house churches would be difficult because of the small size and hidden footprints of individuals in those churches.

### **Informal Trade Barriers**

There are three major informal trade barriers present with christianity and christian publications in China. Firstly, all books that may be sold legally must obtain a Chinese ISBN number. Secondly, there is direct religious persecution that occurs for individuals who would be in the target market for such publications. Thirdly, the destruction of legitimately created churches by the Chinese government means that spiritual communities may not be as long lasting as you might hope for a target audience.

We discussed with one pastor, Ben, about his real life experiences regarding christian books in China. When Pastor Ben was in China and had no access to get christian books (custom officials will dump all the books if they found on board), they started to publish materials

themselves. Of course they had to do it “underground”, since the government would have definitely made troubles even at the point of applying for an ISBN, due to the government’s sensitiveness for religious materials and strict censorship. Rather than shipping materials from overseas, Pastor Ben rented a location to begin printing, and bought manufactory-sized printers. However, after several months, government officials came and destroyed the printer. Later on, the renting itself was also prohibited by the government officials. Officially, the cause for renting becoming prohibited was “illegal gathering”. Laws in the government tend to be loosely defined, to allow the communist party officials to adapt them to local circumstances and enforce them where they see fit.

Pastor Ben also shared another story of a Korean pastor who was in charge of publication of prayer journals in China. They published the Chinese version of the monthly notebooks, as they had also been published in English and Korean. They sold the journals at 3 dollars each, but after 4 years with \$40,000 dollars in sales, he was arrested and sent to prison for 7 years with the name of “financial crime”.

As a result of government concern over the growing popularity and influence of Christianity, even churches affiliated with the TSPM have undergone persecution. A very large and elaborate church constructed in Wenzhou was demolished after being labeled in violation with zoning laws. However, the church was initially constructed with the approval of local authorities.<sup>8</sup> This shows that groups may be subject to the changing whims of government perspectives on power and influence, and laws and local approvals within a given time cannot be fully relied upon. Effective relationships and understandings must be maintained continually if an organization performing work such as religious publications is to succeed.

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/04/sanjiang-church-demolished/>

## **Business Recommendations**

In order for a christian publications business to succeed in China, the first principle to accept is that there is a high possibility of reward in becoming influential in the christian publications market in the growing Chinese spiritual sphere, but there is also a very high risk of government intervention with the possibility of losing all of the business. There are a few other key factors to consider in regards to the materials and their publication. Firstly, recognize that women form a key part of the christian religious community, and are major influencers in their respective religious communities. Therefore, a focus on materials for women may yield better results than materials for men. Secondly, a small and nimble organization is necessary with a distributed marketing strategy is critical for the organization's success. Any large-scale operations will be recognized by the government, and may bring unwanted attention. Thirdly, working with local publishers will give the organization an air of legitimacy with the Chinese government, and allow publications of materials to occur alongside other publications, meaning that those publications can be hidden under other work products when necessary.

We interviewed another Christian outreach organization in the U.S which has a branch in China, and they admitted that it is now getting more difficult for ministries' publication and distribution. Even as a Chinese government registered organization, they cannot get their ISBN application approved, and had to sell in small bookstores with low volume, to keep their business below the government's radar. Shipping is trackable, and bringing materials with luggage by airplane is also risky. Their solution is to ship 2-3 books into different places at different times, and sometimes sell on their websites rather than in physical locations. In order to succeed in this market, you need to have a small, nimble, flexible organization that can work with the government when necessary, and work around the government when capable.