Discerning the True Faith

Why the Three-Self and the Official Church Are Not the Orthodox Church of China

A Booklet for New Believers
Annotated Historical Edition

辨明真道

三自与官方教会为何不是中国教会的正统

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English edition with background notes for readers outside China
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About This English Edition

A Note on This English Edition

This is an English edition of *Bianming zhendao* (辨明真道), a short book written in Chinese for new believers in China by a house-church author who writes under the pen name Sheng En (盛恩, "Abundant Grace"), signing himself "Servant of the Lord" (主仆). The original is the "annotated historical edition" of October 2026. It was written for Chinese readers who already know the setting. This edition is prepared for readers outside China, who often do not.

What has been kept. The translation follows the Chinese closely. Nothing of the author's argument, his documentation, or his repeated cautions about the limits of his sources has been removed. His chapter notes appear at the end of each chapter, as in the original. The final appendix, in which the author lists the points he has not been able to verify, is translated in full.

What has been added. Two kinds of material do not come from the author, and both are marked.

- Shaded boxes headed *Background* are inserted where an informed Western reader is likely to need context: who a person was, what an institution is, what a Chinese term implies, what happened elsewhere in the world at the time. They are brief, and they aim to explain, not to argue for or against the author.
- A *Who's Who* and an expanded *Glossary* are at the back, together with a short list of English-language reading.

Names and sources. Chinese names appear in pinyin, with characters at first mention for the main persons and terms. Titles of Chinese works are given in pinyin with an English gloss in square brackets; a gloss in brackets is a translation of the title, not

a published English title, unless the note says so. Where the author warns that a page number or quotation should be checked against the original, that warning is kept.

Scripture. Quotations are translated from the author's Chinese text, which follows the Chinese Union Version, in language close to the public-domain World English Bible. Verse numbers follow English Bibles.

A word about "Christianity." In Chinese official and everyday usage, *jidujiao* (基督教, literally "Christianity") means Protestantism. Catholicism (天主教) is treated as a separate religion with its own state-sanctioned bodies. The booklet is about Protestant churches throughout.

How to read the book. This is an argument made from within the Chinese house-church tradition, in an evangelical and Reformed voice, for a pastoral purpose: to help newly converted people understand why many house-church Christians do not regard the registered Protestant church as the orthodox church of China. It is not a neutral survey. The Three-Self institutions and their defenders read the same history differently, and some Western scholars assess the main figures, above all Bishop K. H. Ting, more sympathetically than the author does. The author says so himself at several points. He separates the system from the people in it, he acknowledges the sincerity of many in the registered church, and he turns the same standards on the house churches in Chapter 8. Readers who want other views will find a short list at the end of the book.

Orientation: Four Things to Know Before You Begin

BACKGROUND **The legal setting in one paragraph**

Since the 1950s the Chinese state has recognised five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. Each is represented by an official, state-sanctioned body. For Protestants these are two linked organisations, the **Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee** (三自爱国运动委员会, "TSPM") and the **China Christian Council** (中国基督教协会, "CCC"), together called the **Two Councils** (两会, *lianghui*). Congregations meet legally in registered venues, and clergy are certified through the Two Councils and recorded with the government's religious affairs authorities. Churches that decline to register are called **house churches** (家庭教会, literally "family churches"), though many now meet in rented offices and apartments, not in homes. Their legal status is precarious. The book's subject is whether the registered system can be called the true, orthodox church of China.

BACKGROUND **Where the author stands, and why the dates matter**

The author writes from within the house-church movement (Chapter 8 speaks to "the group I belong to"). Three dates in the book matter for orientation: **1950**, when the Three-Self movement began with a political manifesto; **1982**, when the Communist Party's Document No. 19 set religious policy for decades; and **2015–2025**, when regulation of religion tightened sharply under the policy of "Sinicization." The booklet was finished in October 2026 and refers to events as late as mid-2026.

Preface: Why This Booklet Was Written

You have only just come to faith, or you came to faith not long ago. Perhaps you first heard the name of Jesus at a gospel meeting, through an invitation from a friend, or in the upheaval of a family crisis. Perhaps you have already been baptised in some church building, sitting in a pew, listening to the pastor preach and singing hymns with your brothers and sisters. It is natural to assume that this is simply what the church is, and that the building in front of you is the whole of "the Chinese church."

This booklet wants to remind you gently of one thing: what you can see is not necessarily the whole church, and it is not necessarily what the church was meant to be.

In China today the word "church" points to at least two different things. One is the congregations and meeting points that are registered with the government and supervised by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the China Christian Council (together called "the Two Councils," 两会). People often call these "the official church" or "the Three-Self church." The other is made up of groups of believers who have not registered with the government and who meet in homes, in apartment blocks, or in rented premises. People call these "house churches." The difference between the two is not only an administrative matter of "registered" or "not registered." Behind it lies an old and serious question: who is the Lord of the church, and by what right is a church a church?

BACKGROUND **The "official church" and the "house church"**

Under Chinese law, religious activity by Protestants is lawful in registered "venues for religious activity," run under the Two Councils and overseen by the state's religious affairs authorities (see the *Background* box in the Note at the front of this book). A congregation that does not register has no legal protection, and its gatherings may be classed as "illegal religious activity." The size of the unregistered sector is unknown and much debated: official figures count roughly 38 million Protestants, and estimates of the total, registered and unregistered together, run considerably higher. "Three-Self church" (三自教会) is a common nickname for the registered church, taken from the name of its founding movement; many registered Christians do not use it themselves.

I want to make three things clear in writing this.

First, this is not a political argument. I have no wish to discuss whether a given political party is good or bad, and I do not urge anyone to resist the government. The Bible tells us to pray for kings and all who are in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–2), and to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1). What I want to speak about is the church's own business: who is the head of the church, what the church believes, and who gives the church its pastoral office and its sacraments. These are questions of doctrine, to be measured by Scripture and by the faith that the church of every age has confessed in common.

Second, this booklet is about the matter and not about persons. In the registered congregations there are pastors and believers who truly love the Lord; in the house churches there are also weak, mistaken, even deviant people. An elderly house-church pastor once said that the Three-Self had brought "only destruction and no building up" to the Chinese church, yet he also said that among those who meet in the Three-Self and serve in it there are "some, like Lot, who are truly saved and labour hard in the Lord's work."[1] What we are weighing is a system, a body of teaching, and a way of speaking. We are not pronouncing judgment on any brother or

sister, still less ruling on who is saved and who is not. The ground of salvation is Christ, not the sign above the church door.

> **BACKGROUND** **"Like Lot"**
> The elderly pastor's phrase is a biblical allusion. In Genesis 19 Lot lives in the corrupt city of Sodom and is rescued from its destruction, and 2 Peter 2:7–8 calls him a "righteous" man who was "tormented" by the lawless deeds he saw daily. The pastor was saying that a person can be genuinely saved and serve faithfully while living inside a compromised institution. The author uses the same allusion to separate his judgment on a *system* from any judgment on the *individual Christians* inside it.

Third, I want you to know a piece of history that perhaps nobody has told you. What I fear is that ten or twenty years from now, new believers will think "the church is just meant to be like this" and will no longer sense that anything is wrong. By then, perhaps nobody will remember why the church once wept over this matter, suffered over it, and why some gave their whole lives for it. This booklet is a reminder, set down for the record.

The material quoted in this book falls mainly into the following kinds: the speeches and writings of Ding Guangxun (丁光训, Bishop K. H. Ting) himself; documents publicly issued by the Three-Self and the China Christian Council; the research of Pastor Zhao Tian'en (赵天恩, Jonathan Chao) and other Chinese scholars; and the first-hand testimony of house-church believers of that time. The source of each quotation is given in the notes at the end of each chapter, so that you can look it up and judge for yourself. I also ask you not to believe something simply because the author says it. Be like the Bereans, who "searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

BACKGROUND **Two names that recur throughout**

Ding Guangxun (丁光训, 1915–2012; "K. H. Ting" in English) was an Anglican bishop and theologian. He was principal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, president of the China Christian Council from its founding in 1980, and chairman of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement from 1985. For decades he was the best-known Protestant leader in China and the main voice of the registered church abroad. He is admired by many for his intellect and ecumenical reach and criticised by others, including this author, for subordinating theology to politics. See the *Who's Who* at the back.

Zhao Tian'en (赵天恩, 1938–2004; "Jonathan Chao" in English) was a Chinese-American Presbyterian scholar who founded the Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong. His collections of documents and testimonies on the church under Communist rule are among the author's principal sources.

This is a booklet for new believers, so I have tried to speak in plain words. May the Holy Spirit lead us all back to "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Servant of the Lord, Sheng En
October 2026

About This Annotated Edition

This is the "annotated historical edition" of *Discerning the True Faith*. Compared with the edition for new believers, it adds a great many specific facts and original texts to the history sections. The edition for new believers is suited to newcomers; this annotated edition is suited to leaders, teachers, and readers who want to investigate for themselves. The position and conclusions of the main text are unchanged. What has been added is detail and sources.

How to Read This Booklet

The book is in eight chapters. Chapter 1 sets the standard: it tells you on what basis we judge a church to be "orthodox," and it poses

three questions. Chapter 2 tells the history. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 answer the three questions in turn: Chapter 3 asks "who is the head of the church?" (the question of headship); Chapter 4 asks "has the content of the teaching been replaced?" (the question of the true doctrine); Chapter 5 asks "who decides, and who approves, the pastoral office, the sacraments, and the gatherings?" (the question of authority). Chapter 6 examines what the "three selves" actually mean in practice. Chapter 7 teaches you how to discern and answers several common questions. Chapter 8 turns around and speaks of the vigilance the house churches themselves need. The Conclusion measures the three standards one more time. At the end of every chapter you will find notes for that chapter, so that you can compare with the original.

You need not read it all at once. You might read one chapter a day, opening your Bible as you read and looking up for yourself the passages that the book cites. If some passage troubles you, please do not rush to a conclusion, and do not rush to argue with others. First bring it before God, and pray and search slowly. The truth can stand the test of time, and it can stand being checked.

Notes to the Preface

1. Zhao Tian'en (Jonathan Chao), *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce* [The Chinese Communist Party's Policy toward Christianity], which collects the responses of house-church believers in 1981–82 to the Nanjing Conference and to the Three-Self. The remark of "Pastor A" (甲牧师) is at about p. 187 of that book. The page number follows the edition the author used; please check against the original before citing.

Chapter 1: First, Set the Standard: What Counts as "Orthodox"?

Before we discuss the Three-Self and the official church, we must answer a more basic question: by what do we judge whether a church is orthodox?

> **BACKGROUND** **"Orthodox" (正统, zhengtong)**
> The Chinese word *zhengtong* carries two senses that English keeps apart. It can mean doctrinally **orthodox**, true to the received faith. It can also mean **legitimate**, as in the rightful line of succession of a dynasty or a lineage. In Chinese political and historical writing, "legitimacy" is the older and more common sense. The booklet uses the word mainly in the first sense, tying it to three doctrinal standards, and sets it against a different test, whether a church is "lawful" (合法) in the eyes of the state. Its title and argument ask whether the registered church can be called the orthodox church of China; both senses are in play. Throughout, "orthodox" in this translation does not mean Eastern Orthodoxy.

If we do not first settle the standard, everything that follows will turn into people talking past one another. You may have heard it said: "It is recognised by the government, so it is a proper church." You may also have heard: "A house church does not register, so it is illegal and irregular." These statements sound natural, but both use the same ruler: lawful or not lawful. The question is whether Scripture gave this ruler to the church.

1. Three Rulers We Should Not Use

The first ruler: lawful or not. The Bible has an example worth reading again and again. Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, feared that if the people went up to the temple at Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, their hearts would turn back to the king of Judah. So he made two golden calves, appointed priests, set up festivals, and arranged all the religious business in good order (1 Kings 12:26–33). From the standpoint of the state this

was an excellent way to unify the people and stabilise the regime, and it was entirely "lawful." Later, when the prophet Amos prophesied at Bethel, the priest Amaziah told him to leave: "Don't prophesy again any more at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is the king's palace" (Amos 7:13). The "sanctuary" was in name a place for worshipping God, but in fact it was "the king's."

> **BACKGROUND** **Jeroboam and Bethel**
> After Solomon's death (about 931 BC) the kingdom divided. Jeroboam ruled the breakaway northern kingdom. Fearing that pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem, in the rival southern kingdom, would draw his people's loyalty away, he built two rival shrines, at Bethel and at Dan, and installed his own priesthood. Biblical writers treat this as the model of a state-created religion: orderly, patriotic and politically useful, and yet false worship. Chinese house-church writers have often drawn this parallel.

The second ruler: how many. Jesus said that the gate that leads to life is narrow, the way is hard, and those who find it are few (Matt. 7:14). In church history the truth has often been in the hands of the few, and the side with superior numbers has not necessarily held the true faith.

The third ruler: how long it has lasted, or what it is called. The words "Christianity," "church," "gospel" and "Holy Spirit" can be used by anyone. Paul said that even if an angel preached a different gospel, he should be accursed (Gal. 1:8). That is because the name can stay the same while the content is swapped out.

2. Three Standards Held in Common by Scripture and the Church of All Ages

So what are the standards of orthodoxy? I think they can be summarised in three. These are not the invention of any one denomination; they are what the Christian church has confessed in

common throughout history. To make it easy to refer back to them in later chapters, I have numbered them.

Standard One: Scripture is the highest and final authority. "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). No other authority, whether the laws of the state, the speeches of leaders, the dominant values of society, or the church's own regulations, may stand above Scripture, still less be used to "dictate" how Scripture must be understood.

Standard Two: Hold fast the faith the apostles handed down. The letter of Jude says we are to contend earnestly "for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). In the first centuries the church gathered the core of the apostles' message into creeds: the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Christ as true God and true man; Christ dying for our sins and rising on the third day; salvation by faith; and Christ's future return to judge the living and the dead. If you have read the Apostles' Creed, you know that it is a Christian's common "identity card."

Standard Three: Christ is the one and only head of the church. "He put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body" (Eph. 1:22–23). "He is the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18). The church is not a society that people founded; it was bought by Christ with his own blood (Acts 20:28). So the church's legitimacy comes from no government's approval; it comes from Christ's calling: "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

In the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed the ancient church also described the essence of the church with four words: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.[1] This means that the church is one and not

a collection of self-governing little bodies; the church is set apart for God; the church belongs to the whole world and is not an appendage of any one people or regime; and the church stands on the foundation of the apostles' teaching.

3. The Same Ruler for Everyone

I must make one point especially clear: these three standards are for measuring every church and every system, the house churches included. "Not registering" is not in itself a mark of orthodoxy. If a church no longer believes that Christ is Lord, no longer believes in justification by faith, no longer takes Scripture as its highest authority, then whether it is public or underground, whether it numbers ten thousand or a handful, it needs to be tested.

At the same time, please keep two levels apart. One is the **system**: the whole structure in which the official church sits, administered by the Two Councils, registered with the government, with its pastors certified and filed for the record. This is what the book examines by the three standards. The other is **persons**: within that system there are pastors and believers who truly love the Lord, which is a cause for thanksgiving, and our examination does not change it. "Does this system measure up to orthodoxy?" and "Does this believer truly believe?" are two different questions, and this book speaks only to the first. So when we say that this system is in some respects hard to call orthodox, we do not mean that everyone within it does not believe in Christ. And the fact that the pure gospel is preached from the pulpit of one particular congregation does not make the questions that the system itself must answer disappear.

It is interesting that Ding Guangxun, the leader of the Three-Self movement, also cited these four marks in a speech in 1982, to argue that the Three-Self helps the church's "catholicity."[2] In other words, this ruler is accepted by both sides. We need only be honest in using it.

4. Three Questions to Carry as You Read

From the next chapter on, please carry three questions as you look at this history and these documents:

1. **Who is the head of this church?** (the question of headship, which corresponds to Standard Three)
2. **Is what this church teaches the gospel the apostles handed down?** (the question of the true doctrine, which corresponds to Standard Two and also touches Standard One)
3. **By whom are the church's pastoral office, sacraments, and gatherings decided, and by whom approved?** (the question of authority, which corresponds to Standard Three and also touches Standard One)

These three questions are the skeleton of the whole booklet. Chapter 2 tells the history; then Chapter 3 answers the first question, Chapter 4 the second, and Chapter 5 the third. At the end of each chapter I will look back and write a summary against the relevant standard; in the Conclusion I will measure all three standards in full.

5. Obeying the Government and Holding to Christ as Head Do Not Contradict

Having read this far, some may worry: does this encourage believers to oppose the government?

On the contrary. What the Bible says about a Christian's relation to the governing authorities is perfectly clear: "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher authorities. For there is no authority except from God" (Rom. 13:1). Peter also says: "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king" (1 Pet. 2:17). Christians are the best citizens of any society: they pay their taxes honestly, obey the law, pray for the country and its rulers, and seek the good of their neighbours.

But the same Bible gives us another principle that is just as clear: obedience has a boundary, and that boundary is Christ's command. The Hebrew midwives would not obey Pharaoh's order to kill the male infants (Ex. 1:17). Daniel would not stop praying to his God (Dan. 6:10). The three friends would not bow before the golden image (Dan. 3:18). The apostles Peter and John said to the council: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). They did not rebel and they did not use violence. They simply said, at the decisive point, clearly: this one thing I cannot do.

> **BACKGROUND** **Romans 13 and Acts 5:29 in the Chinese debate**
> Romans 13:1–7 and Acts 5:29 are the two texts around which most Chinese Protestant arguments about church and state turn. Leaders of the registered church often cite Romans 13 for patriotic submission; house-church writers cite both, with Acts 5:29 setting the limit. The author sides with the second group but frames his case so that the two passages are held together, as he does in this section.

So "obeying the governing authorities" and "insisting that Christ is the head of the church" can be done at the same time. A problem arises in only one situation: when the state's demand goes beyond its proper bounds and enters a realm that belongs to Christ alone, requiring the church to hand over to it the place of head. At that point what believers need is a gentle but firm attitude: no hatred, no revenge, and no giving way.

6. Why Settle the Standard Before the History

Finally I want to explain why I spend so many pages on the standard before telling the history.

When a matter is charged with emotion, people easily "start from the conclusion and look for reasons." Those who like the Three-Self will find its advantages; those who oppose it will find its faults. The result is that neither side persuades the other. But if we first agree that to judge a church we must ask who its head is, what

it teaches, and who decides its pastoral office and sacraments, then whatever material we read afterwards we can return to these three questions and check them one by one, without being swept along by emotion.

This was also the way the church of every age proceeded. When the Arians denied the deity of Christ, the church did not settle the matter by headcount or by the emperor's favour. It went back to the apostles' teaching and at the Council of Nicaea declared the truth plainly in a creed. The truth is not decided by a majority, and it is not decided by power.

7. The Four Marks Again in Everyday Words

"One, holy, catholic, apostolic" sound somewhat old-fashioned. Let me say them again in everyday language.

One: Christ has one body, not several. This does not mean that the church cannot have different denominations or forms of gathering; it means that in Christ all true believers are members of the same body. *Holy*: the church is set apart, not because of its own goodness but because of the blood of Christ, which sets it apart for God. *Catholic*: the church belongs to no one people, no one nation, no one age; it belongs to all believers under heaven and to all saints of every generation. *Apostolic*: the church stands upon the apostles' teaching; the gospel they handed on is the foundation of the church, and the church may not alter that foundation to follow the winds of the times.

You will notice that not one of these four marks is defined by "registration," "approval," "numbers," or "premises." They look entirely at the church's relation to Christ, to the true faith, and to believers throughout the world. That is why we use these four marks, and not some other ruler, to look at a church.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. The Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381): "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." Chinese translations differ slightly among denominations.
2. Ding Guangxun, "Sanzi zai renshi" [The Three-Self Reconsidered] (speech of 16 September 1982 at the enlarged meeting of the national Two Councils), in *Ding Guangxun wenji* [Collected Works of Ding Guangxun], pp. 316–331. In the speech Ding cites the four marks of the Nicene Creed to argue that the Three-Self is a necessary path toward the church's "catholicity."

Chapter 2: History: The Three-Self Was Never the Church

Many new believers suppose that the Three-Self church simply is "the Chinese church," and that the Three-Self is the church's own internal organisation. That impression does not fit the history.

This chapter proceeds in order of time: from the Three-Self Manifesto of 1950, to the denunciation campaign of 1951, to the elders of the 1950s, to the Cultural Revolution, and finally to the window that opened briefly and then closed again between 1979 and 1982.

1. What the "Three Selves" Were Originally

"Self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating" began in the nineteenth century as a missionary goal put forward by Western mission thinkers: a newly planted church should gradually mature until it could govern itself, support itself and spread the gospel itself, and need not depend on the mission society forever. It is a fine goal, and many Chinese church leaders, including later house-church leaders, sincerely agree with its direction.

The problem is not with the three words. The problem is who took them up after 1950, and what was done with them.

2. 1950: How the "Manifesto" Came to Be

BACKGROUND **China in 1950**

The People's Republic was proclaimed in October 1949, after a civil war and after a century of unequal treaties and foreign encroachment on China. Protestantism in China was widely seen as an import tied to Western missions and to the "unequal treaties" that had given foreign missionaries legal privileges. In June 1950 the Korean War began; by October Chinese forces had entered it against the United States and its allies. In December 1950 the United States froze Chinese assets, and Beijing froze American assets in reply. In this atmosphere a Christian in China who kept ties with American missions or funds was open to a charge of disloyalty. Foreign missionaries left or were expelled by the early 1950s.

Wu Yaozong (吴耀宗, 1893–1979; "Y. T. Wu"), a leading figure in the YMCA and a proponent of the Social Gospel, was the central Christian leader of the new movement. The manifesto discussed below is often called in English "Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China," or simply the "Christian Manifesto."

In 1950 Wu Yaozong and others issued *Zhongguo jidujiao zai xin Zhongguo jianshe zhong nuli de tujing* [The Path Chinese Christianity Should Strive for in the Construction of New China], commonly called "the Three-Self Manifesto." It called on the Chinese church to "give thorough support to patriotism" and to purge the influence of "imperialism." How did this manifesto come about? If we slow the story down, you will see that from the start it was not a document of the church's own making.

In April 1950 Wu Yaozong led nineteen church leaders in all, among them Deng Yuzhi, Liu Liangmo, Tu Yuqing, Cui Xianxiang, Zhao Zichen and Lu Zhiwei, and they met Zhou Enlai three times, described the real situation facing Christianity, and submitted "Preliminary Views on Handling the Problem of Christianity." In the same year the Manifesto was published. The first list of signers had 1,527 names, and the *People's Daily* printed the full text with an editorial. According to the official account, by 1951 180,000 of the nation's 700,000 Christians had signed, and by December

1953 the signers numbered 400,000, about two-thirds of the Christians then.[1]

Was this manifesto really the church's "own" decision? Wu Zongsu (吴宗素), the son of Wu Yaozong, wrote late in life an article remembering his father, and what he says deserves a careful reading. He writes that before the meeting with Zhou Enlai the delegates, his father among them, "had not the slightest mental preparation to issue a 'reform declaration,' and wanted only to ask the central government to issue a protection order," and that the manifesto was "entirely the result of Zhou's 'education and enlightenment.'"[2]

I should add that Wu Zongsu also fairly explains that his father's identification with socialism took shape well before any substantial contact with the Communist Party, so to call it mere opportunism would not fit the facts. This reminds us that a person may be sincere while the thing he joins is still being pushed along by others.

3. 1951: The Beijing Conference and the Denunciation Campaign

From 16 to 21 April 1951 the Religious Affairs Office of the Culture and Education Committee of the Government Administration Council convened in Beijing the "Conference on Handling Christian Organisations that Receive American Subsidies." One hundred and fifty-four church leaders from thirty-one denominations attended. At the start, for several days of small-group discussion, no one was willing to speak out in public. According to the records, on the afternoon of 18 April Cui Xianxiang, general secretary of the Church of Christ in China, stood up first and denounced the American missionary Frank W. Price (毕范宇); over the next two days eighteen people in all took the platform in turn and called their own co-workers "imperialists in religious clothing" and "the scum of Christianity." According to

later accounts, at the height of the meeting someone in the audience shouted out, "They deserve to be killed."[3]

> **BACKGROUND** **Accusation meetings (控诉会)**
> In the early People's Republic the "accusation meeting" or "denunciation meeting" was a staged public ritual in which a targeted person was condemned in front of an audience, often by former colleagues or friends, and then pressed to confess. It was used in land reform and in successive political campaigns, and it was the form taken here by the Christian "Accusation Movement." The point of such meetings was less to establish facts than to make everyone present take a side in public.

Wang Mingdao was not on the invitation list because his church had never accepted foreign funds, and he himself declined to attend. At the meeting Liu Liangmo of the YMCA publicly denounced him as an "anti-Soviet, anti-Communist element." The conference also established the Preparatory Committee of the "Chinese Christian Resist-America-Aid-Korea Three-Self Reform Movement," with Wu Yaozong as chairman.

Wu Zongsu's memoir also names the organisers behind the denunciation campaign: "the capable people who did the actual work" were Liu Liangmo, Han Wenzao, Shen Derong, Shi Ruzhang, Li Shoubao and others, who "hid within the YMCA." In name each small group was led by prominent figures of the various churches, but real power was in the hands of the "leftists."[4]

What was the mood in the church after the denunciations? Wu Zongsu writes that informants were also placed among congregations and that after the campaign pastors and preachers were generally careful in what they said and did, not knowing what to do. This is worth remembering: what the denunciation campaign left behind in the church was not only a handful of people named, but an atmosphere of mutual suspicion.

4. 1951–1953: Study Classes and the Merger of the Seminaries

After the denunciations the work was soon organised. In the summer of 1951, all clergy in Beijing and some lay believers were gathered at Asbury Church for a five-week study class, in order to learn their real attitudes toward Three-Self reform. They were then handled according to attitude: some of the churches' original leaders were removed and replaced with those "ideologically advanced," and activists were selected and sent to take part in land reform, to train a core of Three-Self cadres. In November of the same year the "First Cadre Study Class of the Three-Self Reform Movement" was held; Wu Yaozong wrote "The Communist Party Educated Me," and Chen Chonggui wrote "The Process by Which My Political Thinking Changed."[5]

In 1952 local Three-Self preparatory committees were set up one after another. Theological education was reorganised in the same period: in August 1952 eleven seminaries in East China decided to merge, and on 1 November Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (金陵协和神学院) was founded; in April 1953 the three seminaries in Beijing merged into Yenching Union Theological Seminary. From the meetings and the denunciations, to the study classes, to the merging of the seminaries, in a few short years the church's personnel and theological education were rearranged into one and the same administrative structure.

5. 1951–1952: Even the Most "Revolutionary" Church Was Not Tolerated

> **BACKGROUND** **The Jesus Family**
>
> The **Jesus Family** (耶稣家庭) was an indigenous Chinese Christian community founded in Shandong in the 1920s. Its members lived communally, held property in common and combined Pentecostal-style worship with manual labour; by 1949 it had many scattered "family" communities. Its commitment to shared property made it, in the early 1950s, the most obviously "socialist" of the Chinese churches.

The Jesus Family was a Christian community marked by living together and holding goods in common. In February 1951 *Tian Feng* (天风, "Heavenly Wind," the Three-Self movement's magazine) called it "the only proletarian church in China" and urged everyone to "look to the Jesus Family as the model." But in April 1952 the Three-Self preparatory body sent a work team to "assist the reform," and the Jesus Family was soon dissolved. After their "study," members of the Nanjing Jesus Family composed a *Song of Reform* which includes these lines: "October of this year we'll never forget, Chairman Mao's sunlight has reached this place. To liberate and save us, he leads us all in study together."[6]

Notice the words in the song: "liberate," "save," "sunlight." These words originally belonged to Christ, and they have been carried over onto a political leader. This is text that believers wrote with their own hands under pressure. Some of it may have been willing and some reluctant, but it shows clearly that when a church is asked to give up its own sovereignty, its language changes with it.

Wu Yaozong himself wrote in 1951, in "The Communist Party Educated Me": "The Communist Party made me recognise the class character of all organised Christianity ... and also made me recognise that the proletarian standpoint is the only correct standpoint."[7] Commenting on this period, Deng Zhaoming (邓肇明) points out that after the founding of the new China the Three-

Self became a question of political stance, and "whether one accepted, supported and took part in the political campaigns that the new China set became the only standard for whether a believer was patriotic and worthy to be a Chinese."

6. 1954: The "Movement" Becomes an Institution

In 1954 the National Christian Conference established the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches in China." In the same year the government's religious affairs bureaux were also set up.

Please notice a detail: the original name of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was a "movement," not a "church." Its constitution originally gave it no power to administer the internal affairs of the church. This is not my claim; Ding Guangxun himself admitted it in a public speech in 1988: the Three-Self organisation later took on the function of administering the church out of practical necessity, and that was not the original design.[8]

7. How Doctrinal Differences Came to Be Called Political Disloyalty

In the early 1950s many believers had misgivings about the Three-Self Manifesto. Their doubts were often doctrinal: may the church give way to a political movement? Should the internal affairs of the church be decided by the church itself?

The Three-Self side answered by labelling these doubts as political problems. In 1984, in a lecture at Rikkyo University in Japan, Ding Guangxun called the theological views that opposed the new regime "the theory that faith abolishes works" (因信废行论), and added: "Later we learned that some of them were originally Kuomintang."[9] In his account, theological dissent was folded into a classification of political positions. The consequence of such language is that a person's doctrinal convictions can be rewritten at any time as political "unpatriotic" conduct.

8. Those Who Did Not Bow

BACKGROUND **Three names**

Watchman Nee (倪柝声, 1903–1972; Ni Tuosheng) was founder of the "Little Flock" or "Local Church" movement, whose books on the spiritual life are read around the world. **Wang Mingdao** (王明道, 1900–1991) was pastor of the Beijing Christian Tabernacle and editor of the *Spiritual Food Quarterly*; his refusal to join the Three-Self made him the best-known symbol of principled non-registration, and his imprisonment is told in English-language biographies. **Lin Xiangao** (林献羔, 1924–2013; "Samuel Lamb") pastored an unregistered congregation in Guangzhou and became one of the best-known house-church leaders of the late twentieth century.

In the same period several elders of the house churches did not join the Three-Self:

- Watchman Nee (倪柝声) was arrested in 1952 and died in prison in 1972.
- Wang Mingdao (王明道) was arrested in 1955 and endured long confinement, not released until 1980. His wavering in prison is a heartbreaking testimony. His message left a deep mark on both the Three-Self side and the house-church side.
- Lin Xiangao (林献羔, Samuel Lamb), a preacher in Guangzhou, was imprisoned for more than twenty years.

They were not against loving one's country. Their stand was doctrinal: the church is not a department of the state, and the gospel is not an instrument of a political movement.

9. 1955: The Wang Mingdao Case: Who Has the Right to Say "This Is Not a Question of Faith"?

In 1955 Wang Mingdao was arrested. The public statements of the Three-Self side can still be found today. According to *Tian Feng*, Ding Guangxun said that if Wang Mingdao were allowed to continue like this, "it will damage the results our Three-Self

Patriotic Movement has achieved over these years. This is something patriotic Christians cannot tolerate," and that Wang's problem "is not a question of faith, nor a question of whether he has studied, but a question of his being politically very reactionary." In the same period Qin Mu (秦牧, Huang Peiyong), an intellectual within the church, wrote that hostility and opposition to the Three-Self itself "is not a matter of a religious nature at all; it is something political," because "unity" is a political term.[10]

Stop and think about this logic: who decides whether something is a "question of faith" or a "political question"? In these two statements the power to decide has been handed to the political side. And Wang Mingdao, as early as the end of 1954, had published in the *Spiritual Food Quarterly* "Obey Man? Or Obey God?" in which he wrote: "We ought to submit to the systems of men, and in so far as it does not contradict the commands of God, we should all be the most law-abiding and rule-keeping people. But if the systems and authority of men conflict with the commands of God, then we can only not obey man, but obey God."[11]

The disagreement between the two positions is not that one loves the country and the other does not. It is: who has the right to define what faith is?

What happened to Wang Mingdao after his arrest I will take up in Chapter 8: under heavy pressure he once confessed guilt and was released, afterwards repented, and went back to prison, where he stayed until 1980. As for Watchman Nee, he had been arrested as early as 1952, and in 1972, gravely ill, he was released from prison and died in the same month. Even the True Jesus Church, which did its best to cooperate with the Three-Self, was later marginalised for the label "spiritual faction."[12] This is not an isolated case; it is a system.

10. Lin Xiangao: A Man Who Nearly Gave Way and Then Never Wavered Again

Lin Xiangao (1924–2013) was a preacher at Damazhan (大马站) in Guangzhou. His life would be enough for a chapter of its own.

In 1955 the campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries swept the country. On the night of 14 September more than ten people suddenly appeared at the meeting place and searched Lin Xiangao's residence; they handcuffed him together with Wang Guoxian and Zhang Yaosheng and took them away. The *Southern Daily* ran a headline claiming that a "counter-revolutionary clique" had been uncovered in Guangzhou Christianity, and the Guangzhou Three-Self Committee then held a denunciation rally. According to the record, no concrete evidence was presented at the rally. After more than a year in custody they were released on 28 January 1957.[13]

> **BACKGROUND** **The campaigns of 1955 and 1958**
> The "campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries" (肃反运动, *sufan*) of 1955 was a nationwide security campaign aimed at supposed hidden enemies of the state, including religious leaders. In 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, the government compelled local churches to merge into "joint worship" (联合礼拜), and the denominations were folded into a handful of congregations per city; most church buildings were closed or put to other use. From then until the 1980s, Protestant worship in China survived mainly in private homes.

In March 1958 a nine-day Christian conference sponsored by the Christian United Association was held, and the "study" at it was meant to persuade Lin Xiangao to join the Three-Self. According to the record, under pressure and faced with "plausible-sounding arguments," he gave way for a time and prepared to go back and persuade his co-workers to join; but before he could act he was arrested again. Perhaps the reason his later stance was so clear is that he knew from the inside what that temptation was like.

This time he was sentenced to twenty years and served them in the Xiyu coal mine in Taiyuan, Shanxi, working as a "coupler," linking the coal cars one by one; he did this for fifteen years, coupling more than two million cars, and "my ten fingers are still here."[14]

After his release he resumed meetings, and the *Lingyin Little Series* (灵音小丛书) of booklets began to appear again. Before his arrest in 1955 he had already written fifteen of these booklets; the first new one published after his release was *Once Saved, Always Saved*, in May 1979. The first page of every volume was printed "No copyright," for free circulation. During the Cultural Revolution a brother put his manuscripts into an urn that had been meant for ancestral bones and buried it in the ground, and took it out only after Lin returned.[15]

From August to December 1988 the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau summoned him for talks six times, reading him a Guangdong Provincial People's Government document (Yue Fu [1988] no. 44) that required him to stop meeting and register with the Three-Self. He argued his case, saying that the activities of house churches did not violate the policy of religious freedom, and said: "Registration is meant to limit our faith. I would rather go back to prison than register." On the night of 22 February 1990 public security officers with a search warrant searched Damazhan and confiscated microphones, tape recorders, Bibles and hymnals, and took him away for questioning for twenty-one hours before returning him.[16]

When he died in 2013, nearly thirty thousand people, according to reports, attended the farewell service.

You will notice that there is not a single anti-government slogan in this story. There is only one man who, at every checkpoint, returned to the same question: who is the head of the church?

11. Fairness to the Early Three-Self Leaders

At this point I must say something fair on one matter.

The people who took part in the early Three-Self movement did not all act from self-interest or fear. Wu Yaozong and others sincerely reflected on the problems left by the missionary era: the church's dependence on foreign powers, Chinese believers having long been excluded from leadership, the gospel treated as an appendage of Western culture. Many ordinary believers identified with the "Three-Self" words because of a longing for the church to be "indigenous."

But the sincerity of a person's motives cannot guarantee the outcome of an institution. A movement begun with good intentions and placed inside a powerful political structure no longer has its direction decided by the wishes of those who began it. From 1958 on, "joint worship" was forced on churches everywhere, denominations were merged, and a great many church buildings were closed; from that year believers' gatherings retreated in large numbers into homes. This was not any one person's wish, but it was the result of the system running as it did.

So our attitude should be: toward persons, compassion and humility, because we do not know what we ourselves would have done in that situation; toward the system, clear-sightedness and discernment, because a system shapes generation after generation for a long time.

12. 1966–1976: The Cultural Revolution, and Two Testimonies

BACKGROUND **The Cultural Revolution**

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a decade of mass political mobilisation launched by Mao Zedong, in which Red Guards attacked "old" culture, institutions and people. All religious activity was banned, church buildings were closed or destroyed, and clergy of all religions were attacked. Leaders of the registered church and of the house churches alike lost their posts and their freedom. In 1982 he travelled to England, where he spoke at Lambeth Palace, the London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) all church activities were forcibly stopped. In an address at Lambeth Palace in London in 1982, Ding Guangxun said frankly that by ordinary estimation Christianity in Chinese history might be about to go into extinction for the fourth time.[17]

Some believers left oral accounts of that time. Please note that there are two testimonies here, of different kinds, and I will take them separately.

The first: a brother, Brother Cheng (成弟兄), said that early in the Cultural Revolution he was seized by Red Guards, and he suspected that someone had given the Red Guards information about what he had done in the church before. He believed that the one who gave this information was someone inside the Three-Self.[18] This is the doubt and judgment of someone who lived it, and we cannot confirm it on his behalf. The reason it is worth recording is that in those years what a person had said and done in church could be handed in as material.

The second: another brother, pressed by public security with a mixture of persuasion and force, bit his finger and wrote four characters in blood in a notebook: "Follow the Lord until death."[19] This testimony does not say who betrayed him, and it does not

point to anyone inside the Three-Self. I place it here not to illustrate "betrayal" but to let you see the pressure believers of that time bore, and what their answer was.

I need to be fair: these are testimonies from individual believers, not a claim that every member of the Three-Self did such things. But they remind us that institutional entanglement has had a cost in blood and tears in history.

13. 1979: Leading Religious Activity "Up to the Surface"

After the Cultural Revolution policy loosened somewhat. To understand what came later, we need to know two government documents; this is the first.

The Eighth National Conference on Religious Work, held in December 1978, produced a *Summary of the Conference* (Zhongfa [1979] no. 10), which proposed to lead religious activity "up to the surface."[20] This was a way of speaking about underground gatherings: they were welcome to come up to the surface, that is, to enter the framework of registration and management.

14. 1980: The China Christian Council Is Founded

In October 1980 a national Christian conference in Nanjing established the "China Christian Council," with Ding Guangxun as president. The resolutions of the conference put spiritual language and political commitments in one document: on one side "under the leading of the Holy Spirit, we prayed earnestly together" and "the Spirit of the Lord moves among us at every moment"; on the other, the commitment to "continue to hold high the banner of patriotism" and to contribute "to the return of Taiwan to the motherland and to opposing hegemonism."[21]

I want to point out one thing here: in this single document, "the Holy Spirit" and "opposing hegemonism" stand in the same

paragraph, in the same tone. The language of the church and the language of politics have been woven together.

15. 1980–1982: A Window That Stood Open Briefly

Pastor Zhao Tian'en records that from October 1980 to the end of 1981 the house churches enjoyed a "semi-legal" period. In a group discussion at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, a national advisory body that brings together Party and non-Party figures) at that time, Ding Guangxun said: "There are few churches open now, and the great majority of believers meet in homes ... To say they are illegal is something I, as one of the leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, cannot bring myself to say."[22] This remark should be read fairly: it shows that at the time he himself was unwilling to describe home gatherings as illegal.

Yet in the spring of 1982 the situation turned sharply. This is the second document we need to know. On 31 March 1982 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued *The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period* (Zhongfa [1982] no. 19), the full text of which is publicly available. Many researchers regard it as the foundation of religious policy for the decades since.[23]

> **BACKGROUND** **Document No. 19 (1982)**
> "Document 19" is the usual short name of the Party Central Committee's 1982 policy statement on religion. It affirms "freedom of religious belief" as a policy for the long term, while placing religion under tight state supervision: legitimate religious activity is to be confined to registered venues run by "patriotic religious organisations," religion is to be guarded against "foreign infiltration," and the Party's expectation that religion will eventually fade away with social progress is stated openly. Scholars of Chinese religion widely treat it as the charter of religious policy of the reform era. "Zhongfa" (中发) means a document issued by the Party Central Committee, followed by year and number.

Immediately afterwards, Zhao Tian'en reprinted a document said to have circulated inside the Party on 2 April 1982, which made plain the general line on religion: "gradually weaken the influence of religion, reduce its positions, and bring about its extinction," and said that carrying out the religious policy was "on the contrary, in order to weaken religion."[24] This document is an internal explanation of the policy spirit of Document 19, but because it comes from a reprint, readers should note its nature. The "golden age" of the house churches ended there.

16. What This History Means for You

You may ask: these happened decades ago; what do they have to do with my life of faith today?

There are three connections. First, it helps you see that "what the church looks like" today was formed in a particular history; it is not simply the way things have always been. Second, it reminds you that there were people in the church who would not compromise, that their price was real, and that we should not lightly forget it. Third, it lets you see that the same kind of question, the relation between the church and power, has not disappeared with time; it has only taken new forms. In the chapters that follow we will look at these new forms.

17. A Few Reminders about Reading Historical Sources

Finally I want to remind you that when you read this history for yourself, you should pay attention to the *type* of material, because different types differ in reliability and in how they should be used.

The first type is words that those involved published openly, such as the speeches and writings of Ding Guangxun and the resolutions of conferences. This type is the most secure, because it is in black and white and anyone can check it. The criticisms of

Three-Self theology in this booklet rest mainly on this type of material.

The second type is scholarly research and comment, such as the papers of Zhao Tian'en and Li Jinlun. This type has analytical value, but the reader should keep "material" and "comment" apart, looking at what the author cited and what conclusion he drew.

The third type is believers' oral testimonies. Their value is that they preserve the memory of those who were there and help us understand what the system did to individuals; but individual testimonies cannot be treated as accusations against everyone.

The fourth type is reprinted internal documents. The 1982 Party-internal document is one, supplied by someone else's reprint, and its source needs further corroboration. We cite it because it accords with the policy direction of the time, but the reader should know what kind of document it is.

It is the same with the Bible: we should not believe something just because one author said it, and we should not reject it just because of the camp the author belongs to. Like the Bereans, we search daily, to know whether these things are so.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. On the nineteen persons, including Wu Yaozong, meeting Zhou Enlai, the publication of the Manifesto and the number of signers, see the author's notes on sources. Accounts differ somewhat on specific dates and numbers; please check against the original documents before using.
2. Wu Zongsu, "Luohua youyi, liushui wuqing: wo suo zhidao de fuqin Wu Yaozong" [Falling Blossoms Mean Well, the Flowing Stream Does Not Care: The Father I Knew, Wu Yaozong], available on the Chinese Christian website cmchurch.org (2020). For the words about Zhou's "enlightenment," please compare the original page.
3. On the Beijing "Conference on Handling Christian Organisations that Receive American Subsidies" of April 1951, see the author's notes on sources. The phrase "deserve to be killed" comes from later accounts; please check.
4. Wu Zongsu, as above.
5. The author's notes on sources. Wu Yaozong, "Gongchandang jiaoyu le wo" [The Communist Party Educated Me]; Chen Chonggui, "Wo zhengzhi sixiang gaibian de guocheng" [The Process by Which My Political Thinking Changed].

6. Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing* [Vicissitudes and Predicament], chap. 6, "Yesu jiating" [The Jesus Family], pp. 29–33; *Tian Feng*, nos. 249–250 (3 February 1951).
7. Wu Yaozong, "Gongchandang jiaoyu le wo," *Tian Feng*, no. 271 (1951); Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, chap. 5, "Xin jiu sanzi" [The Old and New Three-Self], pp. 23–27.
8. Ding Guangxun, "Sanzi zuzhi he jiaohui de guanxi" [The Relation between the Three-Self Organisation and the Church] (13 December 1988, Shanghai, joint session of the standing committees of the national Two Councils), in *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 355–363. In the speech he concedes that the Three-Self organisation is "like a church yet not a church, like a government yet not a government."
9. Ding Guangxun, "Zhongguo de shenxue qunzhong yundong" [The Mass Theological Movement in China] (23 September 1984, Rikkyo University, Tokyo), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 21–33.
10. *Tian Feng*, nos. 475/476 (Ding Guangxun) and 473/474 (Qin Mu); cited from Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, chap. 9, "Wang Mingdao fan'geming jituan" [The Wang Mingdao Counter-Revolutionary Clique], pp. 42–46.
11. Wang Mingdao, "Shuncong ren ne? Shuncong Shen ne?" [Obey Man? Or Obey God?], *Lingshi jikan* [Spiritual Food Quarterly], 1 December 1954; cited from Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, p. 44.
12. Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, chaps. 7–8, pp. 34–41.
13. Lin Xiangao, *Lin Xiangao jianzheng* [Lin Xiangao's Testimony] (Chinese and English versions); related accounts are on the Lin Xiangao website and in memorial essays. Please check dates against the original.
14. Lin Xiangao, *Lin Xiangao jianzheng*, as above. The matter of the 1958 "study" is from accounts of Lin's life.
15. On the *Lingyin Little Series*, see the Lin Xiangao website (linxiangao.weebly.com) and *Zhi si zhong xin: zhuiyi Lin Xiangao bobo* [Faithful unto Death: Remembering Uncle Lin Xiangao]. The urn in which the manuscripts were buried is recorded in the memorial writings.
16. Lin Xiangao's English testimony (ce024); for the events of 1988 and 1990 see also contemporary overseas press reports. Please check document numbers and dates.
17. Ding Guangxun, "Fuhuo de zhenli" [The Truth of the Resurrection] (1 October 1982, Lambeth Palace, London), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 8–11.
18. Zhao Tian'en, *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce*, in the 1981–82 house-church responses, p. 168.
19. Zhao Tian'en, *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce*, in the 1981–82 house-church responses, p. 188.
20. Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, p. 238.
21. *Nanjing huiyi jueyi* [Resolutions of the Nanjing Conference] (13 October 1980), reprinted in Zhao Tian'en, *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce*, p. 312.
22. Zhao Tian'en, *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce*, p. 147, and p. 226 on the periodisation of the "semi-legal" period. Page numbers follow the author's edition; please check.
23. *Guanyu woguo shehuizhuyi shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce* [The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our

Country's Socialist Period], Zhongfa [1982] no. 19; the full text is available at the Chinese Wikisource; cf. Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, p. 238.

24. Zhao Tian'en, *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce*, pp. 251, 254. The document is marked as "supplied by persons arriving from Hong Kong"; its source is a second-hand reprint and academically should be regarded as material awaiting further corroboration. Readers are asked to note the nature of its provenance when citing it.

Chapter 3: The Question of Headship: Who Is the Head of the Church?

The last chapter told the history. This chapter answers the first question: who is the head of this church?

This is the very heart of the doctrine of the church. The real issue with the Three-Self is not whether a given leader is good or bad. It is whether above the head of the church there has been set another "head."

1. The Answer of Scripture: There Is Only One Head

"For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the savior of the body" (Eph. 5:23). "He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).

In the New Testament the church has elders, deacons and pastors, and many kinds of office, but no office, and no organisation, may stand between Christ and the church. The church's pastors are given by Christ (Eph. 4:11); the elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28); in the church at Antioch the Holy Spirit said that Barnabas and Saul were to be set apart (Acts 13:2). The source of the church's life is always Christ, and not the approval of any institution.

2. Ding Guangxun's Reminder to Himself

It is interesting that a leader inside the Three-Self has himself pointed to this problem.

In December 1988, at a joint session of the standing committees of the Two Councils in Shanghai, Ding Guangxun gave a remarkably frank speech. He said:

- The original constitution of the Three-Self gave it no power to administer church affairs.
- Later, because funds were frozen during the Korean War and the administrative structures of the denominations collapsed, the Three-Self organisation, out of practical necessity, gradually took on these functions.
- As a result the Three-Self organisation became "like a church yet not a church, like a government yet not a government."
- This left the church's pastors and believers uneasy in spirit. He cited Ephesians 5, "Christ is the head of the church," and the Nicene Creed's article on the church, and acknowledged that this unease had a genuine theological basis and was not merely a matter of habit.
- Using the image of John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease," he warned that a preparatory movement which forgets that its task is to prepare the way, and wants to replace Christ, "will inevitably turn into its opposite."[1]

This is a very weighty piece of self-criticism. But in the same speech he also stressed that "the Three-Self is absolutely not to be abolished" and that it remains the guiding principle. In other words, the problem was seen, but the structure was not changed. To this day the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the China Christian Council are still jointly called "the Two Councils," and together they govern the official church in China.

3. "State Law Is Greater Than Church Rules"

In June 2026 Wang Hong (王红) put forward on a public occasion the statement "State law is greater than church rules" (国法大于教

规); the statement was published in the June 2026 issue of *Tian Feng*.[2] Connected with this, the *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Religious Clergy* (宗教教职人员网络行为规范), issued in September 2025 by the National Religious Affairs Administration (国家宗教事务局, the state agency for religion; since 2018 it has been part of the Party's United Front Work Department, see Chapter 5), requires in its Article 2 that the online conduct of clergy first "obey national laws and regulations and the relevant provisions on the administration of religious affairs," and then "conform to church rules and precepts," and "accept government supervision and public oversight"; Article 18 further provides that conduct carried out through overseas websites and platforms is covered in the same way.[3]

In daily life it is right for Christians to obey the laws of the state. But if "state law is greater than church rules" is used as a general principle of church governance, it means that the rules the church has set according to Scripture are placed, in rank, beneath the law of the state. This is exactly the old question that has recurred throughout church history: when the state has stepped on top of the church, is the church still the church?

> **BACKGROUND** **"Church rules" (教规, jiaogui)**
> The Chinese term *jiaogui* covers what Western traditions call canon law, church order and discipline: the church's own rules on doctrine, ordination, sacraments and membership. To say that state law "outranks" them is to say that, where the two conflict, the state's law decides. Chinese official statements normally present this as a plain matter of the rule of law applying to all citizens; the author reads it as a claim about who has final authority over the church's own life.

4. Why the Doctrine of the Church Matters So Much

Some will say: as long as the pastor preaches well, the structure of the church is not a big matter.

I would answer with Ding Guangxun's own image. He warned that a preparatory movement which forgets that it exists to "prepare the way," and instead takes the place of Christ, will see its "promoting" function inevitably turn into a "hindering" function. These words are worth applying to any church institution.

Structure shapes teaching over a long time. If an institution must answer both to Christ and to another power, then at every moment of choice it feels pressure: will this sermon, this phrasing, this testimony cause trouble? Year by year, over ten and twenty years, the teaching will slowly lean in the direction that is "easier to accept." This is no one's plot; it is what structure inevitably does.

So the problem of the doctrine of the church is an "upstream" problem. If the upstream is bent, the doctrine downstream will sooner or later be bent too. That is why we take up the question of headship before doctrine: it is like the source of a river, which decides where the water flows.

In the New Testament the church also faced something like this. In Acts 4–5 the council (the religious and political authority of that day) forbade the apostles to preach in the name of Jesus; the apostles' answer was to go on preaching and to accept flogging gladly: "they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name" (Acts 5:41). They did not organise resistance and they did not give up the true faith. They simply did not let anyone stand on top of Christ.

5. Summary: The Answer to the First Question

Returning to the three questions of Chapter 1, on "who is the head of the church" we have seen three things:

- The body that governs the official church is the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee together with the China Christian Council. The Three-Self was at first a "movement,"

not a "church" (Chapter 2), and Ding Guangxun himself admitted that it is "like a church yet not a church, like a government yet not a government."

- Leaders within the Three-Self themselves once saw this problem and acknowledged that it had a theological basis, but the structure did not change as a result.
- Today "state law is greater than church rules" is publicly stated as a general principle.

> **Measured against Standard Three:** the church's legitimacy comes from Christ's calling, and the church has only one head. On the question of headship, the system of the official church sets the state's approval alongside Christ's calling, and even puts the former first. This is not to say that the believers within it do not believe in Christ. It is to say that this system is, in its doctrine of the church, hard to call orthodox.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. Ding Guangxun, "Sanzi zuzhi he jiaohui de guanxi," *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 355–363.
2. Wang Hong, "Guofa da yu jiaogui" [State Law Is Greater Than Church Rules] (3 June 2026), posted on the website of the Two Councils (ccctspm.org/newsinfo/20413) and published in the June 2026 issue of *Tian Feng*.
3. *Zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan wangluo xingwei guifan* [Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Religious Clergy], issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration on 7 September 2025 (Guozongfa [2025] no. 12), Articles 2, 3 and 18.

Chapter 4: The Question of the True Faith: The Words Are the Same, the Content Has Been Changed

If only the structure of the church were in question, one might say it was an administrative arrangement. What troubles me more is the second question: is what this church teaches still the gospel the apostles handed down?

Before I begin, let me say a few fair words.

First, I am not saying that every sermon in every official congregation is flawed. In many places pastors still preach the cross. Some scholars have also noticed that the official language at the national and provincial level often differs from the actual preaching on Sundays in local congregations.

Second, I am not judging whether Ding Guangxun's own faith was sincere. He gave some very earnest theological addresses, for example "The Truth of the Resurrection" at Lambeth Palace in 1982, which has almost no political slogans in it; and his self-critical speech of 1988 also shows that he had a clear awareness of the problem of the doctrine of the church.

What I want to talk about is something else: an official theological discourse whose words are still "Christ," "love," "resurrection" and "salvation," but whose meanings have been slowly swapped out.

BACKGROUND **Theology in the registered church: "theological reconstruction"**

In 1998 the Two Councils launched a campaign called "theological reconstruction" (神学思想建设), at a meeting in Jinan, to bring the church's theology into line with what they described as the needs of Chinese society and the socialist context. K. H. Ting was its leading voice. Its supporters describe it as a contextual theology, in the tradition of efforts to indigenise Christianity, centred on the love of God and on the "Cosmic Christ"; its critics, in China and abroad, say it plays down justification by faith, original sin and the exclusiveness of Christ. This chapter gives the critics' case, drawn from three Chinese scholars who analysed Ting's writings, and it is careful to say which parts are the scholars' own evaluation.

1. "Theology Is Refined Politics"

Qiu Yan (囚焱), a scholar who has studied the collected works of Ding Guangxun, quotes Ding's own preface to the collection and points out that Ding held the view that "theology is refined politics"; and he comments that such a theology is "a political statement made in theological vocabulary, a pseudo-theology."[1] This is a sharp conclusion by one commentator, and readers can check the text for themselves and make their own judgment.

Another scholar, Chen Yang'en (陈仰恩), sums it up more directly: strictly speaking, the Three-Self has no theological foundation of its own, "only a political weathervane."[2]

Not everyone agrees with these comments. But if you read through several of the central themes of Ding Guangxun's collected works in order, you will find that these criticisms did not come from nowhere.

2. Salvation: From "Justification by Faith" to "Love Above Faith"

Paul says in Romans: "A man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). Ephesians says: "For by grace you

have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6). The apostle Peter says: "There is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12).

But in a speech in 1996 Ding Guangxun explicitly advanced the position that "love is higher than faith" (爱德高于信德). He cited letters from pastors saying that some people feel that "believers go to heaven and unbelievers go to hell, regardless of conduct," which in fact amounts to "the theory that morality is useless." He gave the examples of the Communist model figures Zhang Side, Lei Feng and Jiao Yulu, who although they had no faith, had selfless character; and from reading Matthew 25 he concluded that the final judgment is based on one's attitude to the poor, not on the confession of faith. He even said that to stress the doctrine of exclusive judgment without regard to its historical background "would inevitably damage the unity of the people and cause endless division."[3]

Pause here for a moment. He has put a theological question (on what ground are people saved?) and a political aim (the unity of the people) in the same sentence. This is exactly what I want to point out: theological conclusions are made to serve political needs.

The scholar Wang Ruizhen (王瑞珍), assessing Ding's doctrine of salvation, uses the traditional "order of salvation" as the standard and points out that Ding cites the *Liezi*, the *Three Character Classic* and lines of poetry by Mao Zedong to play down original sin; that he replaces Christ's atoning redemption with "creation is redemption"; and that he stresses only God's love and not God's justice.[4]

3. Christ: From "the Only" to "a Representative"

Another scholar, Li Jinlun (李锦纶), points out that after 1984–85 Ding Guangxun made systematic use of Teilhard de Chardin (德日进; the French Jesuit palaeontologist and thinker) and of process theology. Through the christology of Norman Pittenger (皮丁格, an Anglican process theologian), Christ's uniqueness is placed within a cosmic process of evolution and becomes "a representative point": "God's activity is not limited to Jesus Christ, but is illuminated by him."[5]

This differs greatly from the New Testament proclamation. The apostle John says: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The phrase "one and only Son" stresses uniqueness, not "one among others."

4. Hope: From "Resurrection" to "A Doctrine with a Mass Base"

Qiu Yan also points out that Ding Guangxun once described the resurrection of Christ as a teaching with a "mass base" (有群众基础), and called the conviction that "God is love" and the conviction that "China should take the socialist road" "a unity," even saying that "socialism is love on a large scale."[6]

For a Christian the resurrection is not a teaching with a "mass base"; it is an event that took place in history and is the foundation of our faith. "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith also is in vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). When the resurrection is turned into a symbol of social ideals, the word is still there but the content has changed.

5. It Continues Today

This is not merely history. In the 2020s Pastor Wu Wei (吴巍), president of the China Christian Council, still said at a seminar that the Three-Self "only advocates the Sinicization of the church," and that its aim is "to realise the transition from 'Christianity in China' to 'Chinese Christianity,'" and he stressed interpreting doctrine "under the guidance of the core socialist values."[7] That is, a political value system is made the premise for reading the Bible and doctrine. This is the exact opposite of Standard One in Chapter 1, that Scripture is the highest authority.

> **BACKGROUND "Sinicization" (中国化) and the "core socialist values"**
>
> "Sinicization of religion" (宗教中国化) became official policy at the national religious work conference of 2016 under Xi Jinping. It requires every religion to adapt to Chinese culture and to "socialist society" under Party leadership, with religious teaching expected to "support" the leadership of the Party. The "core socialist values" are a twenty-four-character slogan promoted from 2012 (prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony; freedom, equality, justice, rule of law; patriotism, dedication, integrity, friendship). The registered church's own five-year plan for the "Sinicization of Christianity" (2023–2027) is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Registered-church leaders generally present Sinicization as continuing the earlier effort to indigenise Christianity; the author reads it as placing a political framework ahead of Scripture.

6. A Simple Test

To discern a body of teaching you do not need to read many books of theology. You can ask yourself:

- Does it teach plainly that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour?
- Is salvation by grace alone, through faith?
- Is Scripture the highest authority, or must it first be "filtered" through some value system?

- Is the word "love" being used to replace sin, repentance, the cross and judgment?

If the answers are vague, you need to pray earnestly, search the Scriptures, and seek more help.

7. How the Line between Believing and Not Believing Became Blurred

In a speech in November 1979 Ding Guangxun put forward "three types of atheists": the first, atheists who stop at nothing; the second, atheists who doubt God's honesty because of the suffering in the world; the third, social reformers and revolutionaries. He was most sympathetic to the third, and quoted Archbishop William Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury, 1942–44): "An atheist moved by love is moved by the Spirit of God."[8]

Such a statement has its good will in dialogue and friendship. But put into a whole theological system it has a consequence: the line between faith and unbelief becomes fainter and fainter. Li Jinlun points out that Ding often used the image of the "semi-finished product," saying that the world is an unfinished work in which all people are included, thereby dimming the difference between believers and non-believers, and that the aim was to serve the needs of the united front work.[9]

BACKGROUND **The "united front" (统战)**

The **United Front** (统一战线) is the Communist Party's long-standing method for winning over and managing non-Party groups, including religious, ethnic, business and intellectual communities, so that they support Party leadership while keeping a degree of organisational identity. A department of the Party Central Committee, the **United Front Work Department** (中央统战部), is responsible for it. Since a 2018 restructuring, the state agency for religion, which used to report to the government, has been integrated into the Department. Scholars of the Three-Self movement, including Western ones, have used "united front" as an analytical term. In this chapter the author uses the term to name the political purpose he attributes to some of Ding's language (see this section); he does not claim that every registered Christian shares it.

The New Testament, on the other hand, is plain: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who disobeys the Son won't see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). This does not mean we may be proud toward unbelievers; the very opposite. Precisely because the line is real, we have an urgent heart to preach the gospel, and we should be like Paul, who had "great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" for his own people (Rom. 9:2).

8. How "the Words Stay the Same and the Content Is Changed" Happens

Finally, I want to explain in the most ordinary way how the content of a word gets replaced.

Take the word "love." In the Bible the highest expression of love is the cross: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son." But if someone says that "love" means social harmony, the unity of the people, the strength of the state, then the cross has no place in this vocabulary. People still say "love," but it is no longer the same love.

Or take "unity." Unity in the Bible is unity in the truth: "Being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph.

4:3). But if "unity" is understood as no longer discussing doctrinal differences, then those who contend for the truth will be called people who "damage unity."

Three scholars, each reading Ding Guangxun's texts by a different method, reached similar conclusions: the political aim takes priority over theology; "love" becomes a container for political content; and core doctrines such as the resurrection, original sin, atonement and judgment are hollowed out and refilled.[10] This is not to say that all were doing it on purpose. Often a person sincerely believes he is helping the church. Sincerity cannot guarantee that the content will not be swapped. That is exactly why we need to measure with the ruler of Scripture.

9. The Reality at the Grassroots May Differ from the Documents

Once more, a word of fairness.

What I have cited so far is mainly national documents, leaders' speeches and scholars' analyses. These represent the direction of the official theological discourse. But in each particular congregation, on the Sunday pulpit, one often sees another picture: many pastors, in difficult circumstances, are still preaching the Bible, caring for believers and praying for them. Some researchers have also observed a gap between high-level political language and preaching at the grassroots.

This is a thing to be thankful for, and also a reminder: we must distinguish "the direction of the system" from "the faithfulness of individual pastors." The direction of the system we weigh by Scripture; the faithfulness of individual pastors we regard with love. We cannot decide that every pastor is flawed because the documents are flawed, and we cannot decide that the whole system is sound because a certain pastor preaches well. These two things must be seen separately.

At the same time I must remind you that this gap will not last for ever. When a system makes its demands on teaching more and more specific, the pressure is passed more and more heavily down to the grassroots. So new believers should not look only at one Sunday's sermon; they should look over a long time and as a whole: is the biblical teaching here steady, and is the hope here in Christ?

10. The Same Person on Different Occasions: 1989

Finally, I want to use a concrete example to show how "occasion" affects speech.

In September 1989, in a speech in Beijing marking the fortieth anniversary of the CPPCC, Ding Guangxun publicly welcomed the new leadership formed after June Fourth (the military suppression of the Tiananmen protests of 4 June 1989), saying the news was "warmly welcomed," and praised the doctoral dissertation of the American scholar Philip Wickeri (魏克利; an American scholar whose study of the Three-Self and the united front was published as *Seeking the Common Ground*, 1988) as helpful to overseas understanding of the united front work.[11]

I do not mean to judge anyone's heart by this. Some say that in such circumstances anyone might have said it. I only want you to see that the self-critical speech of 1988 and this speech of September 1989 are far apart in tone. This reminds us that to examine a theology we must look not only at what it said on one occasion, but at how it changed in different periods and circumstances.

As to Ding Guangxun's position after that year, a person who spent a long time within the system once proposed in an article a sharper claim, that the government had a showdown with Ding at that time and gave him the treatment of a vice-chairman of the CPPCC. This claim comes from the recollection of one who was

there. We cannot confirm it here, and the reader should be cautious and not take it as settled.[12]

11. Summary: The Answer to the Second Question

Returning to the three questions of Chapter 1, on the second, "Is what is taught the gospel the apostles handed down?", we have seen that in the main texts of the official theological discourse, salvation ("love above faith"), Christ ("a representative point"), the resurrection ("a doctrine with a mass base") and the line between belief and unbelief (the "semi-finished product") all show signs of being refilled with new content; and that today the premise for interpreting doctrine has been explicitly written as "guided by the core socialist values."

Also keep in mind the two fair statements at the beginning of this chapter and in section 9: this is an examination of the direction and the texts of the official theological discourse, not a verdict on the preaching of every pastor; and from the grassroots pulpits many are still preaching the cross.

> **Measured against Standards Two and One:** the faith handed down by the apostles is the triune God, the uniqueness of Christ, justification by faith, and the resurrection of Christ; Scripture is the highest authority. On the question of the true faith, the core texts of the official theological discourse depart from what the apostles handed down in their teaching on salvation, christology and resurrection; and in the premise of interpretation they put a value system ahead of Scripture. This discourse is hard to call orthodox.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Qiu Yan, "*Ding Guangxun wenji* jiedu" [A Reading of the *Collected Works of Ding Guangxun*], in Zhao Tian'en, Li Jinlun et al., eds., *Sanzi shenxue lunping* [Critical Studies of Three-Self Theology], pp. 115–124; the quotation is on p. 124 and in the preface cited there.
2. Chen Yang'en, "Ding Guangxun de zhengzhi shenxue fenxi" [An Analysis of Ding Guangxun's Political Theology], in the same volume, pp. 101–114; conclusion on p. 114.

3. Ding Guangxun, "Tan jidutu yige sixiang shenchu de wenti: lunli daode" [On a Question Deep in Christians' Thinking: Ethics and Morality] (1996), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 291–295.
4. Wang Ruizhen, "Ding Guangxun jiuenlun jianping" [A Brief Assessment of Ding Guangxun's Doctrine of Salvation], *Sanzi shenxue lunping*, pp. 84–99.
5. Li Jinlun, "Ding Guangxun sanzi shenxue de lilun jichu" [The Theoretical Foundations of Ding Guangxun's Three-Self Theology], in the same volume, pp. 71–81; Pittenger's words are quoted on p. 209.
6. Qiu Yan, in *Sanzi shenxue lunping*, pp. 115–124; the passages in *Ding Guangxun wenji* are at pp. 108, 186 and 214.
7. Wu Wei, opening address at the seminar on the Sinicization of Christianity (Hong Kong, co-organised with the Hong Kong Christian Council). Please check the date and source against the original.
8. Ding Guangxun, "Yige Zhongguo jidutu zenyang kan wushenlunzhe" [How a Chinese Christian Views Atheists] (November 1979), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 139–146.
9. Li Jinlun, *Sanzi shenxue lunping*, pp. 71–81; the "semi-finished product" idea is on p. 79.
10. See Qiu Yan (pp. 115–124), Li Jinlun (pp. 71–81) and Wang Ruizhen (pp. 84–99), all in *Sanzi shenxue lunping*.
11. Ding Guangxun, "Qingzhu Zhengxie sishi zhounian" [Celebrating the Fortieth Anniversary of the CPPCC] (September 1989, Beijing), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 482–484.
12. Li Ke, "Sanzi aiguo yundong liushi nian de sikao" [Reflections on Sixty Years of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement], cmchurch.org, July 2020. This is the personal recollection of a former insider; the author has been unable to corroborate it independently.

Chapter 5: The Question of Authority: Who Decides Pastoral Office, Sacraments and Gatherings?

The third question is: by whom are the church's pastoral office, sacraments and gatherings decided, and by whom approved?

This chapter takes the word "approval" apart, because many people who hear that "the official church has to be approved" ask: approve what? Approved by whom? What happens if it is not approved? To avoid confusion, let me first explain two terms that often appear:

- **The Two Councils** (两会): the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the China Christian Council. Under current regulations they are the "religious bodies" (宗教团体) of the Protestant church.
- **The religious affairs authorities** (宗教事务部门): the government's religious administration, established in people's governments at county level and above. From 2018 the National Religious Affairs Administration was merged into the Party's United Front Work Department (see the timeline in Chapter 6).

BACKGROUND **How religion is regulated: the main instruments**

Three layers of rules matter in this chapter. (1) The **Regulations on Religious Affairs** (宗教事务条例), a State Council regulation revised in 2017 and in force from 1 February 2018. It requires religious venues and bodies to register and sets penalties for violations. (2) The **Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy** (宗教教职人员管理办法), issued as Order No. 15 of the National Religious Affairs Administration and in force from 1 May 2021. It governs who may be recognised as clergy. (3) Codes and circulars issued by the religious affairs administration, such as the 2025 online-conduct code discussed below. Two terms recur and are easy to mistranslate: **certification** (认定, *rending*), a formal recognition of a person's status by the religious body, and **filing for the record** (备案, *bei'an*), a report to the government that is formally a notification and not an application for permission. The author's question in section 2 is whether filing is in practice a form of approval.

In what follows we take them in order: how a pastor comes to be, how a place of worship comes to be, what "guidance" the pulpit and the gatherings receive, and who guards the sacraments and discipline.

1. Who Confers Pastoral Office?

A key test of whether a church is truly a church is this: how do its pastors come to be? Who has authority to ordain?

The answer of the New Testament is that the church, by prayer, fasting and the laying on of hands, sets apart those whom the Holy Spirit has called (Acts 13:1–3; 1 Tim. 4:14). The calling comes from God, and the recognition comes from the church.

How is it arranged in the system of the official church? The *Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy* (Order No. 15 of the National Religious Affairs Administration) have been in force since 1 May 2021. Their basic arrangement is as follows:[1]

- **Who certifies.** To obtain status as clergy a person must be certified by a religious body and filed for the record with the religious affairs authorities (Art. 13). For Protestantism, the certifying body is the Two Councils. Certification must follow the procedures set by the national religious body, and the conditions for certification must include what Article 3 provides: love of the motherland, support for the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support for the socialist system, obedience to the law, practising the core socialist values, adhering to the principle that religion be independent and self-run, adhering to the direction of the Sinicization of religion, and so forth.
- **Who files.** After certification, the religious body must within twenty days file the matter, level by level, with the corresponding religious affairs authority of the government (Art. 14).
- **How the authority handles it.** The religious affairs authority must give a written reply within twenty working days, and if it does not reply by then, the filing is deemed to have been handled (Art. 17). There are two situations in which a filing is "not accepted": where the person was not certified according to the certification procedures, and where the filing materials submitted are not true (Art. 18).
- **Issuing the certificate.** Those whose filing is complete are issued a clergy certificate by the religious body (Art. 20).
- **Heads of congregations.** For the "chief clergy" who preside over a place of religious activity there is likewise a set of procedures: the rules for appointment are drawn up by the national religious body and filed with the National Religious Affairs Administration; within ten days after the proposed person has been chosen, the venue files with the religious affairs authority; there are three situations in which filing is not accepted; and only after filing is complete may the

installation ceremony be held (Arts. 22–26). The term of office is three to five years (Art. 27).

2. Is "Filing for the Record" "Approval"?

Judging by the words of the provisions, this is "filing," not "approval." But notice: there is examination here, there is a time limit for a reply, and there are situations of "not accepted for filing." Moreover Article 4 of the Measures says plainly that the religious affairs authorities "administer clergy according to law," and Article 47, when it lists the violations of church bodies, uses the very words "failing to certify or approve clergy in accordance with the rules."

So if a church chooses a pastor, it cannot decide the matter itself. This person must first be certified by the Two Councils under the certification procedures, and the conditions of certification themselves contain political requirements; then he must be filed with the government's religious affairs authority. If the filing is not accepted, then under the Measures' own definition (Art. 2: "persons who have obtained the status of religious clergy according to law and who may engage in religious affairs"), he has not obtained clergy status and cannot receive a clergy certificate, and as head of a place of worship his installation ceremony cannot be held according to procedure. If a church does not act according to the rules, Article 47 provides that the religious affairs authority orders correction, and for refusal to correct, penalties apply under Article 65 of the *Regulations on Religious Affairs*. The Regulations (revised 2017, in force from 1 February 2018) provide in Article 65 that where a religious body or venue has acted in ways such as "failing to complete the procedures for changes of registration or filing as required," the religious affairs authority orders correction; in more serious cases the registration authority or the authority that approved its establishment orders the removal of the responsible persons directly in charge; in grave

cases it orders the suspension of regular activities and the reorganisation of the governing body, and if rectification is refused, the registration certificate or the licence of establishment is revoked according to law. Where clergy themselves violate the rules, Article 73 provides that the religious affairs authority gives a warning and confiscates illegal gains; in serious cases it recommends that the religious body or venue suspend the person from presiding over religious affairs or cancel his status as clergy, and holds the persons in charge of the body or venue responsible. This is the consequence as written; how far any individual case has actually gone, this booklet has no material on, and the author draws no inference.

This is the relation between "calling" and "approval." I am not saying that every pastor within this system is not called by God. Ding Guangxun said publicly in 1994 that the whole country then had only about twelve hundred pastors to care for several million believers, many of them ordained in the 1940s.[2] That fact is itself a heartbreaking piece of history.

What I am saying is: when a person is to become a pastor, and he needs both the church's recognition and filing with a state agency, then which comes first, "calling" or "filing"? This is not the problem of an individual but of the system.

3. Who Gives the Church Its Legitimacy?

Within the official framework, a church's place of meeting must register with the government and become a "venue for religious activity." Ding Guangxun, explaining the reasons for the registration system to delegates of the International Baptist Federation in 1994, used the government's own wording: the government mainly wanted to prevent hostile foreign forces from using religion for subversive activity, and therefore required all venues of religious activity to register.[3]

These few sentences deserve a slow reading. The "registration" here began in the government's security concerns. The existence of the church must first pass the state's examination before it counts as a "lawful church." But the Lord Jesus said: "On this rock I will build my church." The legitimacy of the church comes from Christ, not from a registration certificate.

I must make one thing clear here: I do not advocate that believers disrespect the government's administration. The Bible tells us to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1) and to live at peace with all as far as it depends on us (Rom. 12:18). The key is the boundary of obedience. When the government's demand conflicts with Christ's command, the answer of the apostles Peter and John was: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, judge for yourselves" (Acts 4:19); "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

4. Pulpit and Gatherings: What Does "Guidance" Actually Mean?

Some will say: "Filing" and "registration" are only formalities; the church's internal affairs are still managed by the church itself. What about the pulpit and the gatherings? The common saying is that church affairs must "accept the guidance of the religious affairs authorities and the united front system." What does this "guidance" concretely mean? Does it mean "must"?

On the material this booklet relies on, the following are the main aspects that can be seen:

- **The content of preaching and the direction of exposition.** Article 7 of the Measures requires clergy to study those parts of doctrine and church rules that are "conducive to social harmony and the progress of the times" and to "integrate them into their preaching of the Scriptures and sermons, to play a role in advancing the Sinicization of

religion in our country." The *Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for the Sinicization of Christianity* of 2023 carries "Sinicization" down to the level of theological construction; and the president of the China Christian Council has said explicitly that doctrine is to be interpreted "under the guidance of the core socialist values" (Chapter 4). These are requirements of direction; the text of the provisions contains no phrase about "reviewing sermons one by one."

- **Online preaching and online gatherings.** The *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Clergy* issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration in 2025 provides that preaching and conducting religious education and training online "may be done, and only done" on platforms built by religious bodies, schools and churches that hold an *Internet Religious Information Service Licence* (Art. 5); apart from this, one may not evangelise by live streaming, short videos, online meetings, WeChat groups or the "Moments" feed, and may not organise or take part in online worship, baptisms and similar activities (Art. 13) (see Chapter 6).
- **Minors.** The same Code provides that one may not spread religious ideas to minors through the internet, or organise minors to take part in religion-related education and training or summer (winter) camps (Art. 10); earlier rules already restricted religious education of minors (Chapter 6).
- **Place of gathering and contacts abroad.** Article 12 of the Measures lists as things clergy must not do: "organising, presiding at, or taking part in unapproved religious activities held outside venues for religious activity," "being controlled by foreign forces and accepting appointment as clergy from a foreign religious body or institution without authorisation," and "accepting donations from within or outside the country in violation of state regulations." Article 11 requires that

going abroad for religious exchange follow the prescribed procedures; and Article 34 requires that working across provinces needs the consent of the religious bodies in both places and filing in both places.

- **Church rules.** Article 37 of the Measures requires religious bodies to draw up management rules and codes of conduct for clergy and to establish systems of reward and punishment and of entry and exit; see also "state law is greater than church rules" (Chapter 3).

As to whether this "guidance" is "mandatory," I want to speak in three layers, neither exaggerating nor minimising:

1. What has been written into laws and rules, such as registration and the certification and filing of clergy, must be obeyed and carries administrative responsibility. The Measures themselves say that the religious affairs authorities "guide religious bodies, religious schools and venues for religious activity in training and managing clergy" (Art. 4), and that clergy are to "accept management according to law by the religious affairs authorities and other relevant departments" (Art. 6(2)). In the text, "guidance" and "management" are tied together.
2. The *Code* issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration on clergy's online conduct has explicit measures for dealing with violations: an order to correct within a time limit; in serious cases the religious affairs authority recommends that the religious body or venue suspend the person from presiding over religious affairs or cancel his status as clergy, and holds the persons in charge of the body or venue responsible (Art. 17). It has practical binding force.
3. The "guidance" formed by the meetings, documents and work requirements of the united front system draws its binding

force from the system itself and not from any one public provision. The material this booklet relies on is not enough to explain its legal nature item by item, and the author does not offer a conclusion.

You may want to know about some other specific matters. The table below honestly sets out how far this booklet's material can answer; where there is no material it says "not seen":

Matter	**What the material relied on in this booklet can say**
Ordination (certification) of pastors and preachers	Express provisions: certified by the Two Councils, filed with the government's religious affairs authority (this chapter, sections 1–2).
Making of church rules	Religious bodies draw up management rules and codes of conduct for clergy (Measures, Art. 37); internal church rules rank below state law (Chapter 3, section 3). Who makes a congregation's own rules: no express provision seen in the material relied on here.
Whether sacraments need approval	No provision seen requiring advance approval of each baptism or Communion (this chapter, section 5).
Whether sermon topics must be reviewed	No provision seen requiring advance review of sermon topics; there are requirements of direction, such as Art. 7 of the Measures, "integrate into preaching" (this chapter, section 4, first item).
Approval of service ministries	Not addressed in the material relied on here.
Children's Sunday school	Online religious education and camps are restricted (this chapter, section 4, third item); the specific rules on offline children's Sunday school are not addressed in the material relied on here; please check the original.
Bible translation	Not addressed in the material relied on here.

5. Church Discipline and the Guarding of the Sacraments

Finally, one more point, often overlooked: church discipline and the sacraments.

In Matthew 18 the Lord Jesus entrusted a particular authority to the church: if a brother sins against you, you are first to speak to him privately; if he will not listen, take one or two others with you; if he still will not listen, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt. 18:15–17). Then the Lord says: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will be released in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). The church has authority, according to Scripture, to declare what is sin, what is repentance, and who may receive the Lord's Supper. This authority was given by Christ directly to the church.

The sacraments are the same. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not rites of an association but instruments of grace instituted by Christ himself, administered by the church according to Christ's command. Who guards the sacraments? That is a question every church must answer.

Here I must first set out a fact: in the material this booklet relies on I have not seen a provision requiring each baptism, each celebration of the Lord's Supper or each act of church discipline to be applied for in advance from the government. So I will not say that the sacraments of the official church are "approved one by one." What I want to point to is a more structural situation:

- Who may preside? Only clergy who have been certified and filed (this chapter, sections 1–2).
- Where are they administered? In registered premises (this chapter, section 3).

- To whom are they administered? Religious education of minors is restricted (this chapter, section 4).
- By what is church discipline measured? Church rules rank below state law (Chapter 3, section 3).

These frames place what belongs only between Christ and the church inside limits set by a power outside the church. If the boundaries of this kind of matter are drawn by an agency outside the church, then the authority Christ gave to the church has in practice been shared.

This is not to say that the church should have no cooperation whatever with society. For example, the church can obey general regulations on fire safety, hygiene, building and the like; these are normal social responsibilities. What we are speaking of are matters that belong only between Christ and the church: who may be ordained, what may be preached, who may be baptised, and who needs discipline. These matters cannot be handed over to any power outside the church.

6. Summary: The Answer to the Third Question

Returning to the three questions of Chapter 1, on the third, "by whom are the pastoral office, sacraments and gatherings decided, and by whom approved?", we have seen:

- Pastors are certified by the Two Councils; afterwards they must also be filed with the government's religious affairs authority, which has situations in which it "does not accept the filing";
- A church's premises must be registered with the government to count as a lawful venue for religious activity;
- The pulpit and the gatherings stand within a layered system of "guidance" and regulation, containing both express laws and regulations and requirements within the system;

- For sacraments and discipline, this booklet has seen no express provision for "approval case by case," but who presides, where, and for whom are all placed inside a framework outside the church.

> **Measured against Standards Three and One:** the legitimacy of the church comes from Christ's calling, and the church's rules are according to Scripture. On the question of authority, the system of the official church has the recognition of pastoral office and the legitimacy of premises pass through state agencies; and the church's own rules rank, in order of authority, below state law. This is not to say that the believers within it do not believe in Christ. It is to say that this system is, in respect of authority, hard to call orthodox.

Notes to Chapter 5

1. *Zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan guanli banfa* [Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy], Order No. 15 of the National Religious Affairs Administration, promulgated 18 January 2021 and in force from 1 May 2021; full text on the website of the Chinese government (gov.cn). Article numbers cited in this chapter follow that official text.
2. Ding Guangxun, "Women zhengzai zenyang banhao jiaohui" [How We Are Running the Church Well] (April 1994, Nanjing, International Baptist Federation meeting), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 122–126.
3. Ding Guangxun, "Women zhengzai zenyang banhao jiaohui," as above.

Chapter 6: Why the "Three Selves" Do Not Live Up to Their Name

"Self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating" sounds like such a fine goal. The official church has also always said: we are the "Three-Self church," a church run by Chinese people themselves. So are the three "selves" true to their name today?

Let us look at them one by one, and compare each with the Bible.

1. Self-Governance: Who Is Governing?

"Self-governance" means that the church governs itself.

The reality. We have already seen that Ding Guangxun himself admitted the Three-Self organisation is both like a church and like a government (Chapter 3). Pastors must be certified by the Two Councils and filed with the government; premises must be registered; the pulpit, the internet and the affairs of minors lie within layers of regulation (Chapter 5, section 4, which sets out item by item what the "guidance" concretely is, what is in express provisions, and what has no material). The *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Clergy* of 2025 requires the online words and conduct of clergy to "accept government supervision and public oversight" (Art. 2); in 2026 the statement "state law is greater than church rules" was put forward. The church has been placed inside a layered network of administration.

More noteworthy is that in recent years some cities have brought religious affairs into community "grid management." For example, the city of Shenyang has a "micro-grid" mechanism with "red grid stewards" and "building-block heads," and practises "blow the whistle and report in" and "one case, two investigations"; the city of Chongqing has proposed a rule-of-law administration of religious affairs that is "systematised, digital-intelligent and standardised." These documents use neutral language, such as

"illegal religious activity," but in actual enforcement they point mainly at the house churches.[1]

> **BACKGROUND** **"Grid management" (网格化管理)**
> In "grid management," a city is divided into small units ("grids"), each with a designated official or volunteer who reports on residents and local problems, including unregistered religious gatherings. "Blow the whistle and report in" (吹哨报到) means that when a grid worker raises a problem, the relevant departments must respond. "One case, two investigations" (一案双查) means that both the violator and the official responsible for the area are investigated, which gives local officials a strong incentive to report. The documents the author cites from Shenyang and Chongqing are municipal documents on community and religious-affairs governance; the author gives no document numbers (see note 1).

The Bible's comparison. "It shall not be so among you, but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). The church's governance is founded on Christ's authority and on servant-like shepherding, not on tiers of administration.

2. Self-Support: Who Is Supplying?

"Self-support" means that the church is supported by its own offerings.

The reality. Documents of the 1980s already set out "eight prohibitions," which include accepting aid from abroad.[2] The church's finances are brought under official supervision. Article 12, item 4, of the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy* also lists "accepting donations from inside or outside the country in violation of state regulations" among the things clergy may not do, and Article 42 requires religious bodies to strengthen supervision and management of the acceptance of donations from inside and outside the country. Of course, a church ought, according to the Bible, to support itself, and that direction is itself

good. But if "self-support" at the same time means that no love gift from brothers and sisters abroad may be accepted, this differs from the tradition of mutual care among New Testament churches: the churches of Macedonia and Achaia contributed for the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26). Paul kept up exchange and mutual support among many churches.

Some readers will ask: without love offerings from abroad, is the official church really "self-supporting"? Does it receive government funding? This is a question that should be asked. In plain truth, the material this booklet relies on contains only the "eight prohibitions" and the provisions bringing finances under supervision. It has no verifiable data that could explain the make-up of the income of official congregations, nor any reliable data on government subsidies; so the author does not assert anything here and does not wish to guess. Readers who want to investigate may begin with the financial disclosure of their own congregation and the source of its property and buildings, and compare these with the official financial regulations (the regulations of 2022; see the timeline in section 10).

The Bible's comparison. The church is a body for the whole world: if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it (1 Cor. 12:26).

3. Self-Propagation: Who Has the Right to Preach the Gospel?

"Self-propagation" means that the church itself spreads the gospel.

The reality. In a public speech in Japan in 1984, Ding Guangxun said: "No overseas group, whatever the colour of its members' skin, may carry out this work in China without the permission of the China Christian Council."[3] This is a monopolistic claim over the right to preach the gospel: to preach the gospel within China one must first obtain an institution's permission.

The *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Clergy*, issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration in 2025, is more specific: preaching online is limited to platforms built by religious bodies, schools and churches holding a licence (Art. 5); one may not evangelise by live streaming, short video, online meetings or WeChat groups, and may not organise online worship or baptisms (Art. 13); one may not spread religious ideas to minors online or organise them to take part in religion-related education, training and camps (Art. 10); and one may not use artificial intelligence to evangelise (Art. 16).[4] Before this, religious education of minors had already been restricted by earlier rules.

There are two questions here to be answered separately.

First, is the Three-Self side itself preaching the gospel? In official congregations, pastors preach the gospel from the pulpit and baptise people; that is a fact (see Chapter 4, section 9). So what we criticise is not that "the Three-Self does not preach the gospel" but the very premise that "preaching the gospel must first be permitted."

Second, did the Three-Self take part in drawing up this *Code*? The official text on which this booklet rests was issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration (Guozongfa [2025] no. 12), and the notice requires local religious authorities to "guide the religious community to carry it out conscientiously"; the text does not say that the Two Councils took part in drafting. So the statement "jointly issued by the Two Councils" which I wrote in my first draft cannot now be confirmed and cannot be used as an argument, and I have deleted it. What the material can support is another kind of relationship: in serious cases of violation the religious affairs authority "recommends that the relevant religious body" suspend the person from presiding over religious affairs or cancel his status as clergy (Art. 17), and for Protestantism that religious body is the Two Councils.

The Bible's comparison. The Lord Jesus' great commission has no precondition of "permission required": "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). In the book of Acts, when the authorities forbade Peter and John to speak in the name of Jesus, their answer was: "We cannot help telling the things which we saw and heard" (Acts 4:20).

4. The Consequences of Violating the Rules: Who Enforces Them?

Are house-church believers really penalised for gathering and preaching the gospel? According to public reports by monitoring organisations such as ChinaAid, there have been many cases in recent years. For example, in 2025 the Zion Church (锡安教会) in Beijing was subjected to a large-scale crackdown; pastors in Guizhou, Anhui and other places have been sentenced. Earlier, Wang Yi (王怡), pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church (秋雨圣约教会) in Chengdu, was sentenced in 2019 to nine years' imprisonment.[5]

BACKGROUND **Zion Church and Wang Yi**

Zion Church (锡安教会) of Beijing, founded in 2007 by Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri (金明日), grew into one of the largest unregistered urban congregations and a network in many cities. On 10 October 2025, police detained Pastor Jin and a number of church leaders and members in several provinces in what rights groups called the largest single operation against a house church in decades. Pastor Jin was released in July 2026 after about nine months in detention; according to Human Rights Watch in September 2026, eight others remained detained. The case is still developing, so readers should consult current reports.

Wang Yi (王怡) was a legal scholar who became pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. He was detained in December 2018 and sentenced in December 2019 to nine years' imprisonment for "inciting subversion of state power" and "illegal business operations." He had publicly rejected the state's claim to authority over the church. His case is the best-known example of the penalties the author has in mind.

ChinaAid (对华援助协会) is a U.S.-based Christian advocacy organisation that documents the persecution of Chinese Christians.

I cite these not to stir up anger but to make a fact clear: this regulatory system is not only a system on paper, it has real power of enforcement.

At the same time I must be clear, so that you do not misunderstand: the reports on which this booklet is based do not say that these cases were carried out by Three-Self people, and I am not saying that Three-Self people took part in arrests or sentencing. The enforcers in these cases were the public security, judicial and other government departments. The relation of the Three-Self to this regulatory system is of another nature: it is an institutional relation, namely, as already explained, the Two Councils certify clergy and in cases of serious violation cancel their status according to the rules, and the Two Councils together with the government's religious affairs authorities form the administrative framework of the official church. What I mean to say is "the system in which the official church sits has the power of enforcement," not "the Three-Self took part in a particular case."

5. The Reality Behind the Name "Three-Self"

Taken together, the actual meaning of the "three selves" today is:

- Self-governance: self-governance within the state's framework of administration;
- Self-support: self-support under the state's financial supervision;
- Self-propagation: self-propagation within the scope of the state's permission.

In other words, a condition is hidden in front of each "self." In his *Reconsidering the Three-Self* of 1982 Ding Guangxun described the Three-Self as "scaffolding," which is temporary, and in the same speech he stressed that "the scaffolding still has much work to do."[6] Over forty years have passed, and the scaffolding has not been taken down; it has been put up ever more densely.

6. Not the First Time in History

I must remind you that this absorption of the church into the system of the state is not unique to China.

Japan. In 1941 the Japanese government forced the Protestant denominations to merge into the United Church of Christ in Japan (the *Kyōdan*). In 1942, in the suppression of the Holiness Church, officials publicly welcomed the crackdown.

Germany. In 1934 the Confessing Church of Germany issued the Barmen Declaration, proclaiming that "Jesus Christ is our only Lord," and refused the "Reich Church" under National Socialism, and paid a heavy price.

The Soviet Union. Part of the Orthodox Church was absorbed into the official system, and part went to the "catacombs," becoming the non-conforming "True Orthodox Church."[7]

BACKGROUND **Three comparisons**

In **Japan**, a law of 1939 brought religious bodies under state control, and in 1941 some thirty Protestant denominations were compelled to form a single United Church of Christ in Japan; in 1942 leaders of the Holiness Church were arrested. In **Germany**, the Barmen Declaration of May 1934, drafted largely by Karl Barth, rejected the claim of the "German Christians" that the church should conform to National Socialist ideology; the Confessing Church that issued it was persecuted. In the **Soviet Union**, after Metropolitan Sergius's declaration of loyalty to the state in 1927, the official Russian Orthodox Church operated under state supervision, while some believers rejected that arrangement and met in secret as the "True Orthodox" or "catacomb" church. The author uses these cases to argue that Christians have faced this temptation before.

These examples remind us that for the church to be absorbed by political power has been a recurring temptation in history. Every time, the church has had to answer the same question afresh: who is Lord?

7. What Dissent Gets Called

Here I want you to notice a phenomenon of language: when people in the church hold differing opinions, how are they named?

In his *Reconsidering the Three-Self* in 1982, Ding Guangxun called the position of "being forever opposed to those in power" "poison in the cloak of revolution," and said that such a position is equivalent to anarchism, counter-revolution and subversion.[8] In the language of denunciation of the Cultural Revolution period such wording was commonplace. Its function is to rewrite disagreement with a practice as a political characterisation of a person.

It is the same pattern as the "theory that faith abolishes works" and the "Kuomintang" remark of the 1950s mentioned earlier: doctrinal dissent is rewritten as political hostility. In such a linguistic environment a new believer easily feels that to disagree

with the official line is to be unpatriotic and a poor Christian. I hope you know that the Bible does not teach us this. The apostle Paul once said to the Corinthians: "Now I beg you, brothers, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). The unity he asked for is unity in Christ, not agreement on a political position.

8. What This Means for New Believers

To a person who has just come to faith, I would say three things.

First, do not be afraid. Wherever you came to faith, God's grace does not change with the place. Second, do not look down on anyone. Do not despise the brothers and sisters around you because of this history, and do not think you have now "sorted everything out." Third, take root. In a place of pressure, the firmest protection is not argument but familiarity with the Bible: "But you remain in the things which you have learned and have been assured of" (2 Tim. 3:14).

9. We Must Not Throw Away the Original Meaning of the "Three-Self"

Having written this far, I want to say especially: I am not denying the three words "self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating" themselves.

Nineteenth-century missionary thinkers such as Henry Venn (1796–1873, of the Church Missionary Society) and Rufus Anderson (1796–1880, of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions) put forward this goal because they hoped that young churches could mature and stand, and not depend for ever on foreign missionaries. This is a very good direction, and it is the direction that many Chinese house churches have in fact been striving toward: training their own pastors, supporting themselves

by their own giving, preaching the gospel themselves, and even sending missionaries around the world.

So the true "three-self" is not the name of an institution but a state of church maturity. It should arise out of the church's loyalty to Christ, not out of external approval. The true three-self is the result of the church growing toward Christ; it is not a way for the state to manage the church. What we should do is not throw these three words away, but to bring them back from the hands of a political body into the hands of the church, into the hands of Christ.

I also want to remind brothers and sisters in the house churches: if we ourselves also depend on a certain person, a certain overseas group, or a certain kind of resource in order to survive, then we too must ask ourselves whether we have truly achieved "three-self." Those who criticise others must themselves be measured by this ruler.

10. Since When Has There Been Management? A Timeline

Some people, reading the regulations of recent years, think that before 2015 the Party and the government governed not so much, and that governance has increased only since 2015. This impression is not accurate.

"Managing the churches" has in fact always covered many things. Look back at the earlier history and you will see that the study class of 1951 was already "removing" the church's original leaders and sending in "ideologically advanced" people to take over: that is personnel. The merger of seminaries in 1952–1953: that is theological education. The "eight prohibitions" of the 1980s already touched on foreign aid, that is, money. And as for the content of the pulpit, from the "denunciations" of the 1950s and the label of "the theory that faith abolishes works" it was already

tied to political characterisation. So well before 2015, personnel, theological education, funds and the pulpit were already within the scope of administration.

What, then, has changed since 2015? The change is not from "nothing" to "something," but that management has become finer and denser, and has increasingly entered the levels of laws, regulations and the internet. The timeline below is drawn up from the material I have gathered, for you to compare. For the specific provisions, readers should check the original texts themselves.

> **BACKGROUND** **The cross-removal campaign in Zhejiang**
> Beginning in 2014, authorities in Zhejiang province, a region with a very large Protestant population, removed crosses from the roofs of well over a thousand churches (estimates vary), registered churches among them, under a campaign against "illegal structures." The campaign is widely reported in the international press; the author reads it as an early public sign of the change he describes.

- **2015:** Large-scale demolition of church crosses in Zhejiang. Some researchers consider this a public sign that the Three-Self began to move from a "buffer zone" to an "enforcer."
- **2016:** The National Religious Work Conference sets "Sinicization of religion" as the general direction.
- **2018:** The National Religious Affairs Administration is merged into the Party's United Front Work Department; the newly revised *Regulations on Religious Affairs* come into force. Religious affairs move from "administrative management" into "united front work."
- **2021:** The *Regulations on United Front Work* are promulgated and religious affairs enter Party internal regulations; the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy* come into force.

- **2022–2025:** Rules on finances (2022), venues (2023), the internet (2025) and foreign contacts (2025) are issued in quick succession.
- **2023:** The *Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for the Sinicization of Christianity (2023–2027)* carries "Sinicization" down to the level of theological construction.
- **September 2025:** The National Religious Affairs Administration issues the *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Religious Clergy* (Guozongfa [2025] no. 12).

The point of this timeline is not to make you feel that "all is lost" but to let you see that the content of management has moved from "managing the churches" (personnel, venues, theological education, funds) to something finer: "managing the pulpit, the internet, funds and foreign contacts." The further on one goes, the harder it is for new converts to sense that there is any difference. This is just why I have written this booklet.[9]

> **Measured against Standards One and Three:** Scripture is the highest authority, and Christ is the one head of the church. The "three selves" were originally the goal of a church's maturity; but in their actual meaning today, a condition stands before each "self": self-governance within the state's framework of administration, self-support under the state's financial supervision, self-propagation within the limits of the state's permission. This is hard to reconcile with "Christ is the one head of the church" and "Scripture is the highest authority."

Notes to Chapter 6

1. Shenyang municipal document on grassroots "micro-grid" governance of religious affairs; Chongqing municipal document on "systematised, digital-intelligent and standardised" rule-of-law building in religious affairs. Please check document numbers and dates against the originals.
2. See the documents of 1982 and related provisions cited in Zhao Tian'en, *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce*; the "eight prohibitions" are at the relevant place in that book.
3. Ding Guangxun, "Sanzi weihe biyao?" [Why Is the Three-Self Necessary?] (28 September 1984, Doshisha University, Kyoto), *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 34–46.

4. *Zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan wangluo xingwei guifan*, National Religious Affairs Administration, issued 7 September 2025 (Guozongfa [2025] no. 12), Articles 2, 5, 10, 13, 16 and 17.
5. For the reports see public reports by ChinaAid and similar organisations. Please check details of the cases against the original reports.
6. Ding Guangxun, "Sanzi zai renshi," *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 316–331.
7. For the facts of the United Church of Christ in Japan, the Barmen Declaration and the Soviet catacomb church, see the relevant works on church history.
8. Ding Guangxun, "Sanzi zai renshi," *Ding Guangxun wenji*, pp. 316–331.
9. See the author's notes on recent religious regulations; for the provisions mentioned, such as Articles 24–25 of the *Measures on Venues* and Article 20 of the *Detailed Rules on Foreign Contacts*, please check the official originals.

Chapter 7: Discernment: What a New Believer Can Ask

If you are a new believer, hearing all this may leave you a little uneasy. You may think: is my congregation bad? Was my baptism invalid? Are my pastor and my group leader all in the wrong?

Please take a deep breath first. The foundation of faith is Christ, not any one church building.[1]

1. Some Things You Often Hear

"Only what the government recognises is a proper church."

This is the first false ruler we discussed in Chapter 1. Jeroboam's golden calves were "lawful," and Amaziah's Bethel was "the king's sanctuary," and also "lawful." Whether a gathering is orthodox is not determined by whether it has an official document; what counts is whether it holds the true faith the apostles handed down and whether it takes Christ as head.

"House churches are unpatriotic and oppose the government."

The Bible tells us to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1) and to pray for kings and all who are in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Most believers in house churches are people who earnestly keep these commands. The difference is not whether one loves one's country but whom one obeys when the state's demand conflicts with Christ's command. A church can love its own country and at the same time not treat the state as the head of the church.

"There are churches everywhere; why distinguish so carefully?"

Paul told the Galatians that if anyone preaches another gospel, he should be accursed (Gal. 1:8). John says: "Beloved, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John

4:1). Discernment is something the Bible tells us to do. It is not a lack of love.

"There are many good pastors and good believers in the Three-Self, too."

Yes, that is true. The elderly pastor mentioned earlier said that among the Three-Self there are people like Lot who are "truly saved and labour hard in the Lord's work." We acknowledge this and give thanks for them. What we criticise is the system and certain teachings; we are not condemning individual believers.

"There is no politics in the preaching at our congregation."

Perhaps so. Thanks be to God. But please look at whether the content of the preaching clearly teaches sin, the cross, repentance, justification by faith and the return of Christ. If these are clear, you are in the true faith. Even so, the structure of the church will go on affecting it in the long run: who appoints the pastor? Who decides what is preached and what may not be?

2. I Was Already Baptised in an Official Congregation. What Now?

Please do not be alarmed. Most evangelical and Reformed traditions recognise that baptism administered in the name of the triune God is baptism in the name of Christ; baptism belongs to Christ and is not invalidated by the place where it was performed.[2] I encourage you to:

- go on reading the Bible and praying, taking Scripture as the highest standard;
- study seriously the core of the gospel: who Christ is, and what he has done for us;
- if you find that what you are taught does not accord with Scripture, search it out together with mature brothers and sisters;

- keep a loving heart toward your brothers and sisters, and do not judge them because of these differences.

3. A List of Ten Questions

The ten questions below can be used to examine any church, house churches included:

1. Does it take Scripture as the highest authority?
2. Does it teach that Jesus Christ is true God and true man?
3. Does it clearly proclaim the cross and the resurrection of Christ?
4. Is salvation by grace alone, through faith?
5. Are the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) administered according to Scripture?
6. Do the pastors have a clear calling, and are they accountable to the church?
7. Does it allow believers to test the teaching of the pulpit by Scripture?
8. Does it take Christ, and not any person, as head?
9. Is it joined to the faith of the churches of all ages and of the church worldwide?
10. Do the saints there serve one another in love, and love the world too?

4. How to Get on with Brothers and Sisters in Official Congregations

- Treat them as brothers and sisters, not as enemies;
- Pray for them, because they live under greater pressure;
- You may talk about the truth, but you need not win in the argument;

- Remember: "For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (2 Cor. 13:8).

5. A Common Worry: Will This Hurt Relationships?

Many new believers have a natural worry: my parents, my spouse, my friends, even the person who led me to faith are in an official congregation. Now that I know these things, how should I get along with them?

My advice is: go slowly, love first, talk afterward. Do not hurry to throw what you have read at those around you, and certainly do not argue publicly at gatherings. First serve in love, show concern, and build mutual trust. When they are willing to listen, share gently what you have read and your own confusions, not your conclusions. The Bible says: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Col. 4:6).

For some people these matters may not be discussable for the time being, and that is all right. You were not called to win arguments; you were called to bear witness to Christ. Truth takes time, and love takes time.

6. For Co-Workers Who Lead New Believers

If you are a teacher or a group leader of new believers, I would offer a few suggestions.

First, teach the Bible first and the history afterward. If the newcomer does not yet know Christ, do not begin with these questions; let them come to know the gospel first. These questions only make sense after they have begun to grow. Second, use the original words and the sources. Ask the newcomer to read Ding Guangxun's own words and the text of the resolutions, and not only to listen to your retelling. Third, do not attack persons.

"About the matter and not about the person" is the principle we set at the beginning. Fourth, admit that you too have blind spots. In discussion, to admit your own shortcomings candidly makes others more willing to listen. Fifth, let believers decide for themselves. Our responsibility is to make the truth clear, and to let brothers and sisters, led by the Holy Spirit, make their own decisions, and not decide for them.

7. A Prayer

Lord, keep every new believer, and let their faith be built on your word and not on any person. Give us wisdom to discern what is from you and what is not; and give us love, so that in the truth we do not lose love, and in love we do not lose the truth. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Notes to Chapter 7

1. For the principle of discernment in this chapter see 1 Timothy 4:16 and Acts 17:11 (the Bereans who searched the Scriptures).
2. On the validity of baptism the views of denominations differ somewhat; it is advisable to ask the pastor of one's own church or to consult the confession of faith of one's own denomination.

Chapter 8: The House Churches' Own Vigilance

Having written this far, I must turn and say a few words to my own group. If this booklet criticised only the Three-Self and offered only praise to the house churches, it would be dishonest, and it would not accord with the standard we ourselves have used.

1. Not Registering Does Not Mean Orthodox

The house churches today are a large group, and there are all sorts of people in them. I want to say candidly: not registering is not a mark of the church. The marks of the church in the Reformed tradition are the pure preaching of the gospel, the right administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline. If a church lacks these, then even if it does not register, even if it is banned, it does not thereby become orthodox.

Here we should link up with the distinction made in Chapter 1: what we measure is the church's teaching, headship and authority, and not the piece of paper called "registration." Our examination of the official church is directed at its system (Chapters 3–6); our examination of the house churches is likewise directed at the reality of their teaching and governance. As for the faith of each individual believer, on either side, only Christ himself knows it.

2. Real Problems within the House Churches

- **Heresy.** In the house-church environment there are no official seminaries, and systematic training is not easy to come by, which leaves room for heresy. "Eastern Lightning" (东方闪电, also called the Church of Almighty God) is a typical example: it denies the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ, declares that Christ has returned a second time as a woman, and practises deception and violence against

believers. Such teaching, however much it "opposes the Three-Self," is not the true faith.[1]

> **BACKGROUND** **Eastern Lightning (Church of Almighty God)**
> Founded in Henan province in the early 1990s by Zhao Weishan, this movement teaches that Christ has returned in China in the person of a woman, called "Almighty God," and that her writings supersede the Bible. It recruits largely from house churches, and Chinese and international sources have reported its members' use of deception and coercion on Christians; the Chinese government classes it as an "evil cult" (邪教) and it has been the object of repeated crackdowns. It was linked to a notorious killing at a restaurant in Zhaoyuan, Shandong, in 2014. The author's point is that "opposing the Three-Self" is not in itself a sign of orthodoxy.

- **Personality cults.** A charismatic leader can become the "head" of a whole group. This is for the same reason as our criticism of the Three-Self: the church has only one head.
- **Division and closedness.** Because they have been persecuted, some groups have become suspicious and closed, will not associate with each other, and even split over trifling differences. This does not agree with the nature of the church as "one" and "catholic."
- **Finance and accountability.** Without outside supervision, there is also easily a lack of internal checks and balances.
- **Spiritual pride.** Taking pride in "having suffered" and "not compromising," and looking down on others. Paul told the Corinthians: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands be careful that he doesn't fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

3. What Is Not Negotiable

The house churches' position should not be built on what they are *against* but on what they *hold fast*. What we hold fast is the headship of Christ, the faith handed down by the apostles, and the

supreme authority of Scripture. If one day registration no longer meant giving up the headship of the church, we should not treat "not registering" as if it were the faith itself; conversely, if one day registration meant giving up any of the above, then whatever the cost, the church would still have to answer: "We must obey God rather than men."

That is also why the testimony of elders like Wang Mingdao and Lin Xiangao was not "against the government" but "unable to let go of the headship of Christ." They were very imperfect people, too, but the place where they stood was the right one.

4. Some Suggestions for the House Churches

1. **Return to the Bible and to the creeds.** Use the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as a common basis of faith.
2. **Value theological formation.** Train pastors, and train believers who can read the Bible and discern.
3. **Connect with the church of all ages and with the church worldwide.** Avoid becoming an isolated little circle.
4. **Build accountability.** Let the affairs of the church be openly examined among elders and co-workers.
5. **Reach out to brothers and sisters in official congregations.** Not to make them leave, but to have fellowship in the truth.

5. A Fair Conclusion

The conclusion of this chapter is: the standard by which we discern is not "registered or not registered" but "whether Christ is truly the head." This ruler measures the Three-Self, and it measures us as well.

6. The Elders Were Sinners Saved by Grace Too

I would like to end this chapter with the experience of Wang Mingdao.

Wang Mingdao is one of the best-known figures in the history of the house churches. He was arrested in 1955, and under heavy pressure he for a time signed a confession of guilt and was released. Afterwards he repented of this deeply, was arrested again in 1958, and thereafter spent a long time in prison, until he was released in 1980. His repentance and his later steadfastness have been an encouragement to many believers.

I mention this not to belittle him but to say: even an elder like this was once weak. It reminds us that house-church believers stand not by their own strength but by the grace of Christ. If we have anything to boast about, it can only be to boast in the Lord.

So our criticism of the Three-Self should not come from a sense of superiority but from a humble recognition: that we stand today is not because we are better than others, but because of God's mercy. When we think this way, we shall be a little more understanding toward the brothers and sisters still in the official system, and a little more dependent in our own weakness.

7. The Cost and the Hope of Not Registering

Finally I want to say candidly that choosing not to register has a cost: the meeting place may at any moment be required to move; pastors and co-workers may at any moment be summoned or detained; believers' families, work and children's education may be affected. Some believers have been displaced as a result.

So I do not encourage anyone to regard "not registering" as a kind of "badge of honour in the faith." For each particular church, how to make a wise choice between obeying Christ and carrying out one's social responsibilities needs to be judged carefully by the elders and co-workers in prayer. The cost ought to be borne by

those willing to pay it, voluntarily, under Christ's call, and not by being pushed into it by others.

At the same time, we also have hope. The history of the church tells us that whether in the persecution of the Roman Empire or in the pressures of modern times, the church has not been destroyed. "The gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). This is our final hope.

8. More Than One Person Has Wavered

Finally, I should add one more detail.

In the nine days of "study" in 1958, Lin Xiangao was for a time persuaded and prepared to go back and urge his co-workers to join the Three-Self (see Chapter 2). Wang Mingdao signed a confession under heavy pressure and afterwards retracted it. Both of these elders, later honoured by countless people, were weak at one moment.

This makes me think of the apostle Peter. He denied the Lord three times, but after the resurrection the Lord still entrusted his sheep to him to feed (John 21:15–17). The church's succession is not carried by a company of people who never fell, but by a Lord who never gives them up. So while we criticise a system, we must keep compassion for every person living within it.

Notes to Chapter 8

1. On Eastern Lightning (the Church of Almighty God), see scholarly works on contemporary new religious movements in China and research reports from the Christian community.

Conclusion: Back to the Faith the Apostles Handed Down

Dear brothers and sisters:

This booklet is not meant to make you hate anyone or oppose anyone. Before you close it, let us take the three rulers of Chapter 1 and measure once more, and then I ask you to remember three sentences.

The Three Standards, Measured Again

Standard	What this book found	Result of the comparison
Standard One: Scripture is the highest and final authority	The premise of interpretation is explicitly written as "guided by the core socialist values" (Chapter 4, section 5); the church's own rules, set according to Scripture, rank below "state law" (Chapter 3, section 3; Chapter 5, section 6).	The system and discourse of the official church place another authority ahead of, or beside, Scripture. Not met.
Standard Two: Hold fast the faith the apostles handed down	Salvation ("love above faith"), Christ ("a representative point"), the resurrection ("a doctrine with a mass base"), and the line between belief and unbelief (the "semi-finished product") show signs of being refilled with new content in the main texts of the official theological discourse (Chapter 4, sections 2–7).	The content of core doctrines departs from what the apostles handed down. Not met. But this is an examination of the direction and texts of the discourse; at the grassroots many pastors still preach the cross.

Standard	What this book found	Result of the comparison
Standard Three: Christ is the one and only head of the church	The Three-Self went from a "movement" to an institution "like a church yet not a church, like a government yet not a government" (Chapter 2, section 6; Chapter 3, section 2); pastors must be certified by the Two Councils and filed with the government; venues must be registered with the government (Chapter 5, sections 1–3).	The state's approval stands alongside Christ's calling, even in front of it. Not met.

This result speaks of the system, not of persons. There are brothers and sisters in the official church who truly love the Lord, and for them we give thanks. And these three rulers equally measure the house churches (Chapter 8): not registering is not a mark of orthodoxy; only that Christ is truly the head is.

Three Sentences

First sentence: the church has only one head, and that is Christ. Whether state, party, leader or any institution, none may stand between Christ and the church.

Second sentence: what the church preaches must be the gospel the apostles handed down. The words may be the same, but the content may not be exchanged. Christ is the only Saviour, salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and Scripture is the highest authority.

Third sentence: discernment is not for judging but for love. We love the brothers and sisters who are still in the official congregations, and we love also those who regard us as opponents. We discern because we love the truth, and love those whom the truth is meant to save.

In China the church has gone through persecution, and has also gone through temptation. Persecution makes believers weep; temptation makes believers sleep. My fear is that today a new generation of believers, because no one ever told them this history, will think "the church was just meant to be like this." May this booklet serve as a reminder.

Please pray for these: for pastors and believers in prison, such as Pastor Wang Yi and the co-workers of Zion Church; for pastors who faithfully preach the gospel in official congregations; for every new believer in this land; and also for those in authority, asking God to have mercy on this land and on us as well.

"Be sober and self-controlled. Be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, walks around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." (1 Pet. 5:8)

"Stand firm therefore, and don't be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." (Gal. 5:1)

May grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Servant of the Lord, Sheng En
October 2026

Appendix 1: Glossary

The first ten entries are the author's own. The additional terms after them are supplied for this English edition.

- **Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee** (三自爱国运动委员会, "TSPM" or "Three-Self Committee"): established in 1954; its full name is "Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches in China." It is the political organisation of the official church.
- **China Christian Council** (中国基督教协会, "CCC"): founded at the Nanjing Conference in 1980, responsible for church and theological affairs. The TSPM and the CCC together are called the "Two Councils."
- **Religious body** (宗教团体): under current regulations, the body that certifies religious clergy. For Protestantism, the religious body is the Two Councils.
- **Religious affairs authority** (宗教事务部门): the government's religious administration, established in people's governments at county level and above; since 2018 the National Religious Affairs Administration has been merged into the Party's United Front Work Department.
- **Official church, Three-Self church** (官方教会、三自教会): churches and meeting points registered with the government and supervised by the Two Councils.
- **House church** (家庭教会): groups of believers not registered with the government that meet in homes or rented premises.
- **United front** (统战): the Chinese Communist Party's united front work, the political work of winning over and uniting people outside the Party.

- **Registration** (登记): the registration of a venue for religious activity with the government's religious affairs authority.
- **Certification and filing** (认定与备案): clergy are first certified by the religious body, then the religious body files them with the government's religious affairs authority; only after filing is a clergy certificate issued (Chapter 5, sections 1–2).
- **Sinicization** (中国化): the official policy direction that requires religion to adapt to Chinese socialist society.

Added for this edition:

- **Accusation / denunciation meeting** (控诉会): a staged public meeting at which a targeted person is condemned; see Chapter 2, section 3.
- **Core socialist values** (社会主义核心价值观): the official twenty-four-character slogan of twelve values promoted since 2012; see Chapter 4, section 5.
- **Document No. 19** (中发〔1982〕19 号): the Party Central Committee's 1982 policy statement on religion; see Chapter 2, section 15.
- **Joint worship** (联合礼拜): the compulsory merging of congregations into shared services, from 1958; see Chapter 2, section 10.
- **Kyōdan** (日本基督教团): the United Church of Christ in Japan, formed under state pressure in 1941; see Chapter 6, section 6.
- **Orthodox / legitimate** (正统): see Chapter 1.
- **Tian Feng** (天风, "Heavenly Wind"): the magazine of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, founded in 1945.

Appendix 2: Brief Timeline

- **April 1950:** Wu Yaozong and other church leaders (nineteen in all) meet Zhou Enlai three times; in the same year *The Path Chinese Christianity Should Strive for in the Construction of New China* (the Three-Self Manifesto) is published.
- **February 1951:** *Tian Feng* calls the "Jesus Family" "the only proletarian church in China."
- **April 1951:** Beijing "Conference on Handling Christian Organisations that Receive American Subsidies"; the Accusation Movement begins.
- **1952:** Watchman Nee is arrested (released in 1972, dying the same month); the Jesus Family is dissolved; the East China seminaries merge into Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.
- **1954:** The Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee is founded; Wang Mingdao publishes "Obey Man? Or Obey God?"
- **1955:** Wang Mingdao is arrested; Lin Xiangao is arrested for the first time, and released in 1957.
- **1958:** Lin Xiangao is arrested again after nine days of "study" and sentenced to twenty years; "joint worship" is enforced in churches throughout the country.
- **1966–1976:** The Cultural Revolution; church activities are forcibly stopped.
- **1979:** *Summary of the Eighth National Conference on Religious Work* (Zhongfa [1979] no. 10); the first new book by Lin Xiangao after his release is published.
- **1980:** The Nanjing Conference establishes the China Christian Council, with Ding Guangxun as president; Wang Mingdao is released.

- **1982:** Document No. 19 (Zhongfa [1982] no. 19); religious policy tightens again.
- **1988:** Ding Guangxun delivers "The Relation between the Three-Self Organisation and the Church"; Guangzhou public security summon Lin Xiangao six times.
- **1990:** Damazhan is searched.
- **1994:** Ding Guangxun explains the government's reasons for the registration system in Nanjing.
- **2013:** Lin Xiangao dies; nearly thirty thousand attend the farewell service.
- **2015–2025:** Crosses are removed, the religious affairs bureau is merged into the United Front Work Department, new regulations and dense rules follow.
- **2019:** Pastor Wang Yi is sentenced to nine years.
- **2021:** The *Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy* come into force.
- **2025:** The National Religious Affairs Administration issues the *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Religious Clergy*.
- **2026:** Wang Hong puts forward "state law is greater than church rules."

Appendix 3: Further Reading

The author's list:

- *Ding Guangxun wenji* [Collected Works of Ding Guangxun] (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 1998).
- Zhao Tian'en (Jonathan Chao), *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce* [The Chinese Communist Party's Policy toward Christianity] and *Dangdai Zhongguo jidujiao fazhan shi (1949–1997)* [A History of the Development of Christianity in Contemporary China, 1949–1997].
- Zhao Tian'en, Li Jinlun et al., eds., *Sanzi shenxue lunping* [Critical Studies of Three-Self Theology].
- Deng Zhaoming, *Cangsang yu jiongjing* [Vicissitudes and Predicament].
- Studies by Hong Kong scholars, such as Xing Fuzeng (邢福增), on the relation between the Chinese church and the state.
- Wang Mingdao, *Wushi nian lai* [These Fifty Years].
- *Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy* (Order No. 15 of the National Religious Affairs Administration, 2021); *Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Religious Clergy* (Guozongfa [2025] no. 12); *Regulations on Religious Affairs* (revised 2017). Readers may read the provisions in the original and judge for themselves.

A note on the notes: the page numbers and quotations in this booklet are the author's compilation from the editions to hand, and some sources are cited at second hand; please check against the original when using them.

English-language works, added for this edition (not part of the author's list):

- Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Orbis, 1988). A detailed, generally sympathetic study of the Three-Self movement and K. H. Ting.
- Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Orbis, 2007).
- K. H. Ting, *No Longer Strangers: Selected Writings of Bishop K. H. Ting*, ed. Raymond L. Whitehead (Orbis, 1989). Ting in his own words.
- Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). The standard survey.
- Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (Yale University Press, 2010).
- Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Brazos Press, 2002).
- Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Brent Fulton, *China's Urban Christians: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden* (Pickwick, 2015).
- Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* (Routledge, 2018).
- Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (Pantheon, 2017).
- Wang Yi, *Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement* (2018). A collection of the writings of the Early Rain pastor.

Appendix 4: Editor's Note: Matters Still to Be Verified

The matters below are points in this annotated edition that still need to be checked against original documents. Before the text is finalised or printed, please check them one by one; where checking is not possible, they should be deleted or recast as "according to so-and-so's recollection."

- **The Three-Self Manifesto:** the date of publication, the number of first signers (1,527), and the numbers of signers in 1951 and in 1953; accounts differ somewhat.
- **The Beijing conference of 1951:** the number of participants, the number of those who made accusations, and the phrase "deserve to be killed" are all from later accounts.
- **Wu Zongsu's article:** quotations and page numbers; the sex of Wu Zongsu (he is the son of Wu Yaozong; please check against other sources).
- **Deng Zhaoming*, Cangsang yu jiongjing*:** chapter page numbers follow the edition the author used.
- **Lin Xiangao:** the year of release, the document number Yue Fu [1988] no. 44, and the date and name of the consular visit; please check against his English testimony.
- **Li Ke's statement about 1989:** a personal recollection that the author has been unable to corroborate independently, and has treated as "no conclusion drawn."
- **The Party-internal document of 2 April 1982:** a reprinted item whose provenance needs further corroboration.
- **Dates of regulations, 2015–2025:** please check against official originals.

- **The* Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy *(Order No. 15 of the National Religious Affairs Administration, 2021):** the articles quoted in Chapters 5 and 6 have been compared with the official full text on the website of the Chinese government; before finalising, please check the article numbers once more. No verifiable material exists on how the Measures are actually carried out (the consequences of "filing not accepted" in individual cases).
- **Questions from readers that the material relied on cannot answer for the time being:** the make-up of the income of official congregations and government subsidies; who makes church rules; whether sermon topics must be reviewed; approval of service ministries; the specific rules on offline children's Sunday school; Bible translation. These have been honestly marked "not seen" in the main text, and if reliable material becomes available at revision it should be added.
- **The original draft said that "in 2024 the Two Councils jointly issued the Code of Conduct for the Online Behaviour of Chinese Christian Clergy,"** together with phrases such as "institutional joint responsibility" and "Article 20." None of these is found in the official text (issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration in 2025, in eighteen articles); they have been deleted and the official text cited instead. On checking official sources, there is no 2024 version or "Two Councils version"; the only formal document is this one, issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration in 2025. This item is closed.
- **Quotations from Articles 65 and 73 of the* Regulations on Religious Affairs,* taken from a transcription of the full text on the website of the Chinese government; please check against the original before finalising.

- **Chapter 6, section 4:** the material relied on contains nothing showing that Three-Self members took direct part in carrying out the cases listed; the main text states this plainly. If reliable material comes to light later, it should be separately verified and dealt with separately.

Appendix 5: Who's Who

Added for this edition. Dates are given where well established; where the booklet itself gives no biographical detail, none is invented here.

The Three-Self founders and leaders

- **Wu Yaozong** (吴耀宗, 1893–1979; Y. T. Wu). YMCA leader and advocate of a social-gospel Christianity. Principal author and organiser of the 1950 Manifesto, first chairman of the Three-Self movement. His son Wu Zongsu's later memoir is one of the booklet's sources.
- **Ding Guangxun** (丁光训, 1915–2012; K. H. Ting). Anglican bishop and theologian. Principal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary; first president of the China Christian Council (1980–1996); chairman of the TSPM from 1985. For many in the West he was the voice of the Chinese church; assessments of him remain sharply divided between those who see a bold contextual theologian who protected the church through hard decades, and critics (including this author) who see a theology bent to political ends.
- **Wu Wei** (吴巍). President of the China Christian Council since November 2018, quoted in Chapter 4 on Sinicization.
- **Wang Hong** (王红). Author of the June 2026 statement "State law is greater than church rules," published by the Two Councils; the booklet gives no further details.

Church leaders who refused to join

- **Wang Mingdao** (王明道, 1900–1991). Pastor of the Beijing Christian Tabernacle; editor of the *Spiritual Food Quarterly*;

imprisoned from 1955 to 1980 (with a break after his first confession).

- **Watchman Nee** (倪柝声, 1903–1972; Ni Tuosheng). Founder of the "Little Flock" (Local Church) movement; arrested 1952 and died in 1972.
- **Lin Xiangao** (林献羔, 1924–2013; Samuel Lamb). Pastor of the Damazhan house church in Guangzhou; imprisoned about twenty years.
- **Wang Yi** (王怡). Pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church, Chengdu; sentenced in 2019 to nine years.
- **Ezra Jin Mingri** (金明日). Founding pastor of Beijing Zion Church; detained in October 2025, released in July 2026.

Scholars and sources cited by the author

- **Zhao Tian'en** (赵天恩, 1938–2004; Jonathan Chao). Founder of the Chinese Church Research Center, Hong Kong; his *Zhonggong dui jidujiao de zhengce* is the booklet's main collection of documents and testimonies.
- **Deng Zhaoming** (邓肇明). Author of *Cangsang yu jiongjing*, the booklet's main narrative source for the Three-Self history of the 1950s.
- **Li Jinlun** (李锦纶), **Qiu Yan** (囚焱), **Chen Yang'en** (陈仰恩), **Wang Ruizhen** (王瑞珍). Contributors to *Sanzi shenxue lunping* [Critical Studies of Three-Self Theology], edited by Zhao Tian'en, Li Jinlun and others; the booklet draws on them for its account of Ding's theology.
- **Wu Zongsu** (吴宗素). Son of Wu Yaozong; author of the memoir of his father used for the 1950–51 history.

- **Li Ke** (李克). Author of a 2020 reflection on sixty years of the Three-Self movement; the booklet treats his account of 1989 as an unverified recollection.
- **Philip Wickeri** (魏克利). American scholar and church worker, author of *Seeking the Common Ground*.

Others mentioned

- **Frank W. Price** (毕范宇). American Presbyterian missionary who had worked in China, publicly denounced at the Beijing conference of 1951.
- **Zhou Enlai** (周恩来). Premier of the People's Republic from 1949 to 1976; the Christian leaders of 1950 met him three times.
- **Henry Venn** and **Rufus Anderson.** Nineteenth-century mission theorists who formulated the "three-self" goal (Chapter 6, section 9).