



Toward a Better Understanding of China

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Prejudice and hostility have been directed against many minority groups and those perceived as “other” throughout US history. During difficult times, politicians often stoke social division for political advantage. People of Asian heritage have been frequent targets of scapegoating, like with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or the internment of Japanese during World War II.

There seems to be a particular animus towards China in America’s society and politics. During today’s campaign season, candidates from all parties tend to speak of China with at least subtle suspicion. Some politicians use more virulent anti-Chinese rhetoric, like calling COVID-19 “kung-flu,” which has contributed to sporadic acts of violence against anyone who appears Asian.

We should reject this reflexive discrimination against China and Chinese people. It would help to gain a fuller understanding of the diversity of China’s population and greater appreciation of the dignity of the Chinese, irrespective of geo-political conflicts between the US and Chinese governments.

Countering this prejudice is an important role for churches and other civil society groups with partnerships in China. Since the early nineteenth century, many U.S. churches have had strong relationships with Christians in China, and have supported Chinese Christians who emigrated to the United States. Today most ecumenical churches have a close partnership with the China Christian Council (CCC) and its related Christian humanitarian and development organization, the Amity Foundation.

Recently a delegation of leaders from the China Christian Council visited US church representatives in several US cities. In Chicago, a forum was held to share experiences of the Chinese and American churches since the COVID-19 pandemic in various areas like theology, education, ministry, and social service. US participants came to understand the depth of our shared experiences as well as to respect the China churches' need to embrace uniquely Chinese expressions of Christian identity—a process which has come to be known as “Sinicization” or “Chinafication” of Christianity.

Many Americans may be surprised to learn of the vitality of the Christian churches in China. Christian communities have existed for nearly 1500 years in China, ever since the introduction of Christianity by the Nestorians. During a visit to Xi'an in March this year, I was gifted a scroll nearly 10 feet long that is a facsimile of a stone tablet erected during the Tang dynasty in 781 which documents 150 years of early Christianity in the region.

Indeed, Christianity in China didn't start with the nineteenth-century Western missionary movement, nor does it depend on the conversionary schemes of modern evangelicalism from outside China. During my March visit, I attended a Sunday morning worship at Trinity International Church in Kunming in western Yunnan Province. I was amazed not only that all three floors of the sanctuary were packed, but that when I exited the church there was a line of people down the block waiting to enter for the next of five services held there that morning. There are over 50,000 churches affiliated with the China Christian Council and the CCC's many seminaries can't keep up with the pace of new clergy needed for new churches every year.

After the service in Kunming, I visited a small village in the mountains of Yunnan Province. The modest wooden benches in the small church were full of indigenous Miao worshippers, and we took communion and sang hymns in the local language accompanied by three different choirs that morning. During a later visit to a local bible school in Baoshan, I met with the elderly pastor who founded the school some decades ago. I asked him what he thought about the tension between the United States and China and whether he thought bridges of understanding could be built between our two countries. Smiling he replied he never thinks about what goes on in Beijing or Washington and had never been bothered by government authorities in all his

years of ministry. He doesn't feel there is gap between Chinese and Americans nor understood why there should be. I heard a similar word of assurance about the good relations between Chinese Muslims and the government and with Americans from a leader at the Grand Mosque in Xi'an.

I am not naïve enough to think that there is no social discord or tension between the government and religious or minority groups in China, not do I mean to suggest that the most positive cultural factor in China is due to the active ministry of Chinese Christians. But rather I have come to appreciate that the people of China are diverse and perspectives are nuanced. I understand how Euro-centric Americans tend to hold prejudices about China and the Chinese that are reinforced by unhelpful stereotypes and that have been exploited by politicians seeking to sow fear and division in our communities, both locally and globally. Especially during this election season, we would do well to distinguish more favorably, as we do with other countries, between China's people and whatever policies of its government we may disagree with. We should do better in seeking to understand China and its rich culture and people.

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