



# Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

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Brandner, Tobias (2013),  
The Political Contexts of Religious Exchanges: A Study on Chinese Protestants'  
International Relations, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 42, 3, 149–179.  
ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this article and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>

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Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies  
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Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield and Hamburg University Press.

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# The Political Contexts of Religious Exchanges: A Study on Chinese Protestants' International Relations

Tobias BRANDNER

**Abstract:** This article surveys the complex ecumenical, missionary and international church relations of Chinese Protestant Christians. It argues that the inter-church relations to other parts of Asia are overshadowed by relations to Christians in the West, thus reflecting a political preoccupation with relationships to the West. This is evidenced by an analysis of worldwide and Asian ecumenism as well as bilateral church and missionary relationships. The dominance of contacts with the West not only contradicts the idea of a multipolar world and increased South-South contacts, it also stands in contrast to the reality of growing and increasingly important Christianity in Asia. Methodologically, this paper analyses different kinds of international relations (multilateral and bilateral, inter-church and missionary) and develops a typology of different inter-church and inter-state relations to assess international church relations in Asia today. The typology shows how China's international church relations support its political relationships with its neighbours and beyond.

■ Manuscript received 13 August 2012; accepted 17 December 2012

**Keywords:** China, Christianity in China, international church relations, ecumenism in Asia, Christianity in Asia

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## Introduction

At a recent workshop for Asian Christians on issues of faith and mission in Asia, several participants expressed criticism of a specific form of mission: a so-called crusading Western-style mission. At some point – torn between loyalty to my new home in Asia and my old home in Europe, and also spurred by intellectual honesty – I voiced my concern whether this so-called crusading mission (which I equally reject) is really a matter of Western style. Is it, when found in the Asian context, simply an inheritance from the West? Or is Asia not itself home to indigenous crusading missions?

This article does not attempt to give an answer to this question. Rather, the event made me think about a dominant perception of bipolarity in Christian relations in Asia, the bipolarity of Asia and the “West” (used in a general sense, including parts of North America, perceived as lying east of China, as well as Australia and New Zealand, far to the south of China and Asia). Such bipolar perceptions belittle the independent development of Asian Christianity and neglect the diversity and complexity of inner-Asian church relations – a phenomenon that is the subject matter of this paper. Accordingly, this article aims to discuss international church relations within Asia and attempts, more specifically, to survey the complexity of ecumenical, missionary and inter-church relations between China and the rest of Asia. However, because such an analysis cannot avoid looking at the broader context of international relations of Chinese Protestants, it thus also includes relations to Christians in the West. This article limits its analysis to relations amongst Protestant Christians, because a discussion on the Roman Catholic Church would require taking into account additional factors that are related to its more centralised structure. Moreover, a paper of this scope can only briefly touch on the multiplicity of relations even when limited to the world of Protestantism in Asia.

## The Beginnings: Asian Christians as Part of the Worldwide Ecumenical Movement

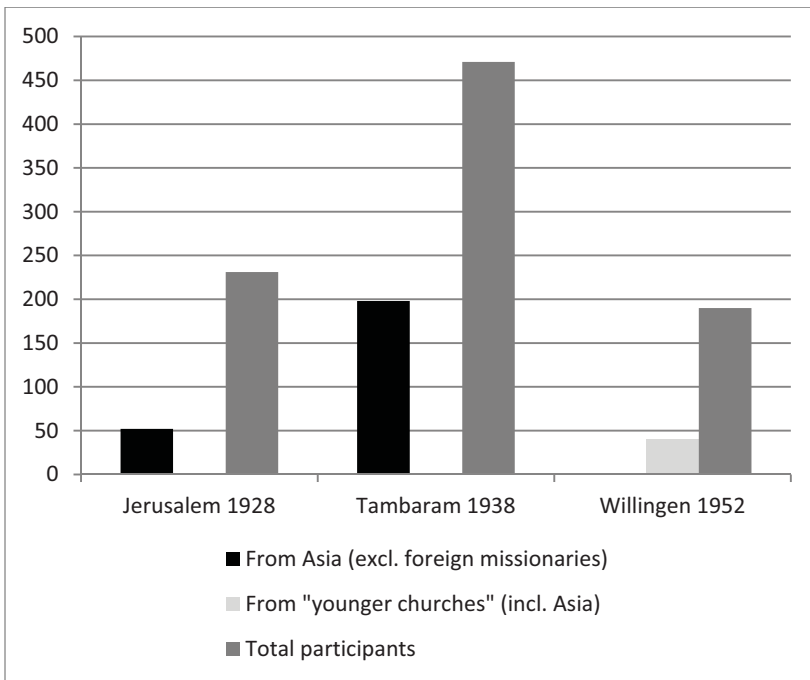
At the beginning of the worldwide ecumenical movement, representatives from Asia formed only a small minority of the people involved. Since then, Asian representation and the Asian contribution have gradually increased. Yet for a long time, worldwide ecumenism was defined by

concerns of the West. At the Edinburgh World Mission Conference in 1910, usually regarded as the first worldwide gathering of ecumenical Christianity, only 17 of the 1,200 participants were from the “younger churches”. (The term “younger church” is misleading, for in many areas of Asia, Christian churches can trace their origins back to the period when European churches were also being founded, or even before. For want of a better term, and because the term is widely used by representatives from non-Western churches themselves, it is used here.) Most of these participants came from Asia; however, they attended not as representatives of their own churches, but of Western missionary societies. Amongst them, the strongest impact came from the speeches of V. S. Azariah from India and Cheng Ching-yi from China (Hogg 1952: 135). Subsequent conferences saw a steady increase in the participation of representatives from Asia. However, Asian participation was only significant in the missionary branch of the ecumenical movement; it remained very small in the other branches like Faith and Order.

At the Jerusalem World Mission Conference in 1928, nearly one-fourth (52 out of 231, Hogg 1952: 245) of the participants represented “younger churches”. Again, they were mainly from Asia, particularly China and India. Amongst them were Cheng Ching-yi, then general secretary of the National Council of Churches of China and moderator of the Church of Christ in China, T. C. Chao, C. M. Wei and David Z. T. Yui, who delivered a long presentation about the present situation in China (Yui 1928: 61–97). Ten years later, at Tambaram, India, more than half the participants were from non-Western churches. Unsurprisingly, the biggest delegation came from the host, India, while there was almost as strong a delegation from China (Hogg 1952: 292f; the member list of the Tambaram Report shows that out of the 471 delegates, 49 were from China, 59 from India and 198 from Asia, see International Missionary Council 1938: 188–193). At the 1952 World Mission Conference in Willingen, Germany, the participation of representatives from non-Western churches shrunk to only 40 participants out of 190, or around 20 per cent (Phillip 1999: 48f). The significant presence of Asian Christians in the ecumenical mission movement was not equally reflected in other parts of the ecumenical movement. At the 1927 Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne, only 2 out of 385 participants were native Asians (Tatlow 1967: 421). Ten years later, at the Second World Conference on Faith and Order in Edinburgh, 13 out of around 400 participants were from Asia. In 1925, at the first Universal Conference on Life and Work

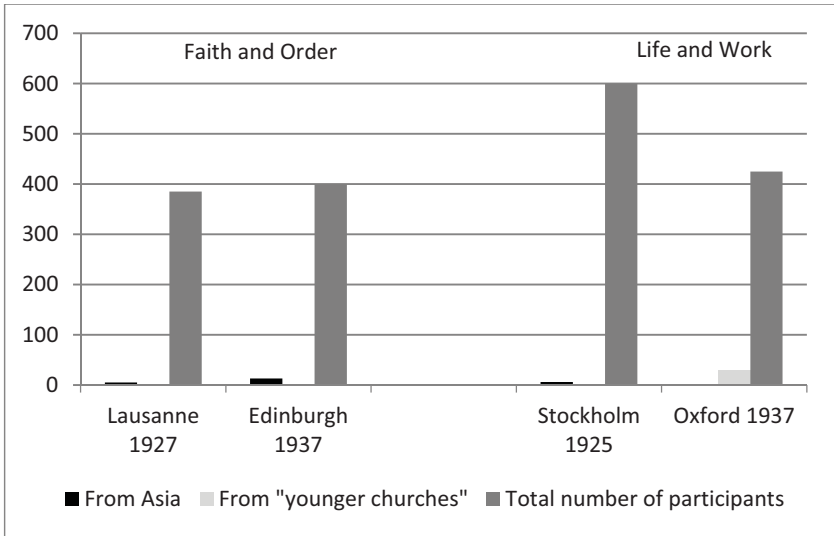
in Stockholm, only 6 out of more than 600 delegates were from Asia. Clearly, the view prevailed that these churches were the province of the International Missionary Council (Ehrenström 1967: 549). Twelve years later, at the second Universal Conference of Life and Work in Oxford, still only 30 out of 425 delegates came from “younger churches” (Ehrenström 1967: 589). At the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) held in Amsterdam in 1948, only 26 out of 351 official delegates were from Asia – of those, 6 were from China and 9 from India (Weber 1966: 220). Dr. T. C. Chao, one of the representatives from China, was elected to be one of the six presidents of the WCC and the only one from the non-Western churches (Latourette 1967: 387; Gao 1998). Six years later, at the second WCC Assembly in Evanston, no representatives from China were present although four member churches were still listed in the official report (Visser’t Hooft 1955: 299).

Figure 1: Participants from Asia/ “Younger Churches” in the Ecumenical Mission Movement



Source: Author’s own compilation.

Figure 2: Participants from Asia/ “Younger Churches” in the Faith and Order and Life and Work Movements



Source: Author’s own compilation.

All this showed how much the ecumenical movement, particularly Life and Work as well as Faith and Order, reflected Western concerns in its early stages. Even though Asian participation has grown since then, worldwide ecumenism has to some extent remained defined by concerns from the West. Core issues were the traditional historical and theological divisions. Politically, it was opposition to communism, the Second World War and later the Cold War that shaped worldwide ecumenical relations until 1989.

## The Emergence of Intra-Asian Ecumenism

With the foundation of independent Asian ecumenical bodies in the middle of the twentieth century, a more visible kind of contextual Asian ecumenism developed. While the worldwide ecumenical movement has been spurred by internationalism, Asian ecumenism has (since its early beginnings) been driven by a more national concern – in particular, the movement towards independent churches (Koshy 2004a: 36) and the establishment of national church councils (Koshy 2004a: 83).

The founding of the East Asian Christian Conference (EACC) in 1957 in Prapat, Indonesia, stood in close historical vicinity to the famous Bandung Conference of 1955 that led to the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade 1961. Ecumenism in Asia thus developed in a context of decolonisation, the affirmation of national independence and nation-building. It was linked to the nationalist struggle for independence and emancipation from the West. This origin in decolonisation and nation-building has shaped the ecumenical movement in Asia and given it a strong anti-colonialist orientation.

During the early years of ecumenism in Asia, the challenge of communism and the question of the relationship to China were major themes at conferences (Koshy 2004b: 268–272). By the 1970s, however, an awareness had grown that many Asian countries needed a second liberation – namely, one from authoritarian governments. However, criticism of their own or other Asian governments posed a problem to many churches, as most of them were in a minority situation in their own country and had – in their respective processes of decolonisation – adopted an emphasis on non-interference from abroad. Political and social justice issues were partly seen in the framework of Cold War tension. In this context, criticism of autocratic governments could be avoided by pointing to the role of the hegemonic powers mainly in the West. Since the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, globalisation has become a core concern of Asian ecumenism. Again, globalisation is commonly perceived as Western-led economic expansion. Themes and concerns of the ecumenical and mission movement in Asia thus remained linked to a global framework of understanding rather than simply an Asian framework. It emphasised the need for independence from Western hegemony. As a consequence, intra-Asian ecumenism retained a focus on global East-West relations even in its emancipatory and anti-colonialist discourse.

## China's Theological Impacts on Asian Ecumenism and Beyond

One of the most crucial impacts of Christianity in China on Asian and worldwide ecumenism happened on a theological level – ironically as the result of a negative action on the part of the Chinese government. The victory of the Communist Party in China brought churches under steadily increasing pressure to disassociate themselves from all foreign links, in

particular from foreign missionaries. The expatriate Christian presence in China was accused of being a major instrument of colonialism and was forced out. This process led to a sense of crisis and much soul-searching in the worldwide ecumenical and mission movement. On the one hand, foreign observers recognised that the Chinese government had accomplished in only a short time many of the social reforms that the foreign missions had been advocating for years (Newbigin 1970: 173). On the other hand, the expulsion of all foreign missionaries was actually regarded as God's judgement on the missions' failure to distance themselves clearly enough from the colonial enterprise – as stated by a passionate China missionary from England, David Macdonald Paton (Paton 1996: 63–83).

China's radical policy of severing all foreign missionary contacts thus triggered a theological reflection process that gave a most significant impulse to ecumenical theology in the twentieth century. The immediate theological effect was that the 1952 World Mission Conference in Willingen, Germany, emphasised that mission does not come from or belong to the church but rather God (for a summary of this discussion, see Bosch 1991: 389–393). This new emphasis on the mission of God, deliberately formulated against what had come to be regarded as the misunderstanding of the church as a sending agency, led to an important shift in the understanding of mission and has profoundly shaped ecumenical mission theology up to the present time. There was, at the same time, a shift in ecclesiology, inspired by Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the "church for others" and the Second Vatican Council's discussions on the church as both a sign and instrument. This meant a renewed emphasis on the local church and a rediscovery of history as an important category for the understanding of God's salvific action in the world – ideas articulated by theologians like Pannenberg and Moltmann. With these intellectual developments, the understanding of mission was broadened quite radically. Ecumenical and mission theologians came to appreciate that mission is not so much the church's action, but the participation of the church in God's own salvific action in the world. God is not so much interested in the church as in the world.

This new understanding of mission reverberated throughout the Asian ecumenical movement. Churches in areas long regarded as mission fields, particularly in Asia, provocatively called for a moratorium on mission (Bangkok World Mission Conference 1972/1973) and emphasised national churches' independence from any foreign influence or interfer-



ence – particularly if these came from nationals of the traditional colonial power. This has also had an impact on inner-Asian relations: emphasising the local and national church meant that cross-national ecumenical relations were only possible on the basis of strict non-interference. Subsequently, missionary relations were rejected as a matter of principle as the local church was understood to be in charge of the propagation of faith.

## China and Institutional Ecumenism: Multilateral Church Relations

While China played an important role in the anti-colonialist discourse politically and was equally present in the early years of the worldwide ecumenical movement, Chinese churches were surprisingly absent from involvement in independent Asian ecumenical bodies. A major reason for this is that in the early years of Maoist China, churches were too occupied with their own survival and their adjustment to a new political reality – a reason more or less stated in an official letter by Y. T. Wu, who wrote that meetings and responsibilities in China made it impossible for the churches to send a delegation to the 1957 East Asia Christian Conference in Prapat (Yap 1995: 21). However, this alone cannot sufficiently explain their absence, for China also remained absent from later meetings. In fact, even since the introduction of more liberal religious policies, China has never joined the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) – the successor organisation to the East Asian Christian Conference.

The core and constitutional reason why the China Christian Council (CCC) has not joined the CCA is that, in contrast to the WCC which only accepts churches but not church councils as members, the CCA also accepts councils of churches as full members. The membership of the National Council of Churches of Taiwan in the CCA makes it impossible for the CCC to simultaneously participate, because doing so would be seen as an implicit acknowledgement of the independence of Taiwan. In fact, the National Council of Churches of Taiwan was one of the first members of the CCA. In addition, the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan is a vociferous and active member of the CCA and has been a staunch promoter of Taiwan independence at CCA meetings (Wickeri 2007: 323). Representatives from the CCC want to avoid facing claims for independence from Taiwanese representatives.

Still, relations between the CCC and the CCA exist on an informal level. The first visit of a representative from the CCA to China after the end of the Cultural Revolution took place in October 1980 when the then general secretary of the CCA, Yap Kim Hao, was welcomed as an overseas Chinese and representative from Asia. This visit was followed by a CCA-sponsored consultation with representatives from the CCC in Hong Kong (Yap 1995: 88–93). However, these and several later contacts, including a 1997/1998 CCA youth programme in Nanjing, failed to lead to the membership of the CCC in the CCA.

This non-participation on the Asian level stands in contrast to the Chinese churches' initial participation and their later participation (from 1991 onwards) on the level of the WCC (although Taiwanese churches were equally represented there and voiced their independence). Until the sixth WCC Assembly in Vancouver in 1983, where Bishop K. H. Ting was present as an observer, representatives from China's churches had been absent from all of the WCC's meetings since the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly (where four Chinese churches were amongst the founding members of the WCC). At the seventh WCC Assembly in 1991 in Canberra, the CCC officially resumed its membership. However, it only joined the WCC on the basis that the WCC accepted its "One China" stance; Ting was reassured on this point by a letter from the WCC's general secretary, Emilio Castro (Wickeri 2007: 323). The CCC does not participate in international denominational bodies (e.g. the Lutheran, Reformed and Baptist churches), because of CCC's post-denominational self-understanding.

## China's Bilateral Church Relations

When looking at bilateral church relations, it is not surprising to find only a few such contacts in the early years, hardly any during the period of Maoist ascendancy, and a strong increase since the 1980s. International church relations were understandably not of high priority during the early period of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The first priority of the churches was rather to deal with and adjust to the new political situation. There is an element of randomness in how international church relations develop, depending on who happens to have the opportunity, resources, staff and interest to visit as well as who happens to already have a basis of friendship with church representatives in China. Still, certain patterns of international church relations can be identified.

What appears to be the most important characteristic of China's international church relations is that there is a strong bias towards relations to churches in the West. The first Christian group to visit China after the founding of the PRC was a delegation of British Quakers in 1955 (Wickeri 2007: 130). Important visitors at this time included Josef Hromádka, a Czechoslovakian theologian and ecumenical and peace activist, and Bishop Manikam from India. Meanwhile, visits from China included those to Christians in the ecumenical movement, Christians in Hong Kong (particularly in the Anglican community), and former China missionaries. However, from the mid-1950s until the end of the Cultural Revolution, foreign relations became more difficult. With the Korean War, the hardening climate of the Cold War and the political realities in China itself, the international and ecumenical church community was perceived to represent Western interests and lack sensitivity to the churches of the communist world. Contacts were only slowly resumed towards the end of the Cultural Revolution when Bishop Ting started to receive guests from North America and Europe (Wickeri 2007: 182–184). Despite the early visit of an Indian bishop, relationships between churches in India and China did not further develop. Since the liberalisation of religious policy after the Cultural Revolution, international relations have resumed and continuously increased. A considerable part of these relations went through the Amity Foundation, which facilitated cooperation while maintaining the strict principle of mutual non-interference and respect. Such exchanges primarily took place with churches and councils in Europe and North America, and to a lesser extent with churches in other Asian countries.

Obviously, numerous contacts of all kinds occur as individuals and small groups visit China or Chinese representatives travel abroad. The CCC visited India and Japan in the mid-1980s, while Japanese and Chinese church representatives have visited each other seven times since 1983. In the 1990s, Ting led church delegations on visits to Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines (Wickeri 2007: 325). In the late 1980s, particularly following the visit of Billy Graham to China in April 1988, the CCC began to establish contacts beyond ecumenical circles, not least with those evangelical Christians in the West who were not hostile to the CCC – for example, the Christian Leadership Exchange, which brings together US evangelical Christians and CCC representatives, and the increased contacts with the Fuller Theological Seminary. Since 1996, many important visits have been reported in the *Amity News Service*. Al-

though the aforementioned publication does not report all contacts, it is useful for assessing the Chinese church's international church relations. Besides church leaders' visits to Hong Kong and exchanges with ecumenical and international organisations like the WCC, the United Bible Societies, the World Assemblies of Religions for Peace, and certain missionary organisations (like the participation of a representative from China at the annual conference of the Finnish Lutheran Missionary Society, see ANS 1997b: 26), the *Amity News Service* mentions several visits to and from the United States and Europe:

- A delegation from the NCCUSA visiting the CCC/ Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in Shanghai (ANS 2009: 20).
- A China Christian Council delegation visiting Fuller Theological Seminary (ANS 2007: 16).
- An official delegation from the Church of England to China (ANS 2006a: 17).
- The Anglican Archbishop John Neill from the Church of Ireland visiting Shanghai (ANS 2006a: 17).
- A CCC/TSPM delegation visiting Churches in the United States (ANS 2005b: 2).
- Representatives from the Anglican Church, the United Church, and the Presbyterian Church of Canada visiting China (ANS 2005c: 21).
- Chinese and German Churches opening a “new page” in their friendship (ANS 2005a: 9–11).
- A Chinese religious affairs delegation visiting North America (ANS 2003a: 1f).
- A CCC/TSPM delegation visiting Europe (ANS 2003b: 3f).
- A Chinese church delegation visiting Sweden and Denmark (ANS 2001: 11).
- A NCCUSA delegation visiting China (ANS 1998: 1f).
- Representatives from the American Bible Society visiting China (ANS 1997c: 20).
- A delegation of 25 from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) visiting China (ANS 1997b: 27).
- The general secretary of the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland, Dr. John Reardon, leading a delegation to China (ANS 1997b: 27).
- The Asia-Pacific Region Coordinator for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reverend Insik Kim, leading a delegation from the US Presbyterian Korean Church to China (ANS 1997b: 27).

An important tool of international church relations in the years after 2004 was a Chinese Bible exhibition in Europe and the United States. Apart from the visits to Japan, the only two exchanges between Chinese and Asian church leaders mentioned for the period after 1996 were a visit by officials from the church in Laos to the church in China (ANS 1997a: 20f.) and a visit by a delegation from the NCC of South Korea in 1997 (ANS 1997b: 27). One contact to church leaders in Africa was mentioned following the visit of two Nigerian archbishops, Peter Akinola and Joseph Akinfenwa, to the CCC/TSPM headquarters on 20 July 2006 (ANS 2006b: 19). Further exchanges between Chinese and Asian churches are mentioned on the official website of the CCC; although it should be noted that such news items remain online only briefly. In addition to various exchanges with church leaders from Europe and the United States, the website has reported on exchanges with churches in Singapore, South Korea and Japan in the past three years.

Another characteristic is that international church relations developed along the lines of existing friendships. For instance, K. H. Ting (engaged in the ecumenical movement between 1946 and 1951) maintained international and ecumenical friendships after his return to China. This pattern has continued to shape the international relations of the churches in China – evidenced by younger leaders similarly maintaining relationships established during overseas visits or studies.

A further characteristic of the international church relations of China is their pragmatic character. Although one might assume that the CCC as a national church body is primarily interested in establishing relations to other national church bodies, it has – in fact – worked equally hard to establish contacts with individuals, denominations, ecumenical bodies and even missionary agencies. The guiding principle is more the distinction between friends of the CCC and enemies, which is the same principle that has shaped the united front policy of the Chinese Communist Party. Accordingly, contacts with Asian Christians followed the same pragmatic pattern, with relations being most easily established with overseas Chinese Christians in Asia and with old ecumenical friends.

## Missionary Relations between China and Other Parts of Asia and Beyond

International church relations develop not only through the channels of institutional churches, but equally through a wide network of mission-

and charity-minded Christians. The Three-Self principle of the CCC precludes any cross-border evangelism because this would contradict the principle of self-propagation of the gospel. This prevents the CCC itself from developing any missionary vision beyond its boundaries. Despite such official concerns, missionary relations still exist. Also, rather than being a one-way road, they include both Christians from within China who move beyond China's international boundaries and Christians from elsewhere who try to work in China.

Due to the nature of these relations, a clear distinction between Asian and non-Asian partners in missionary relations is not possible. While a significant proportion of these relations are made up by missionaries from the West (many of them overseas Chinese), an increasing number of Asian Christians of Evangelical and Pentecostal backgrounds are involved. They work from various Asian countries to reach people in China and point to the many ethnic or social groups that would not be reached without cross-border mission – a principle famously stated by Ralph Winter at the International Congress for World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974 (Winter 1999: 339–353). At the same time, Chinese Christians mainly (but not only) from independent churches develop evangelistic visions beyond their borders. Clearly, it is beyond the scope of this article to give a thorough overview of the enormous diversity of mission movements linking China and the outside world in general, or Asia in particular – such a task merits extended research in its own right.

In absolute numbers, most overseas Protestant missionary activities within China probably still originate from the United States, or South Korea (see below). The *Mission Handbook 2007–2009*, edited by the Evangelism and Missions Information Service at the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, lists 65 US-based Protestant agencies that are active in China with a total of 334 US personnel, 1,036 local Chinese personnel supported by the US mission agency, and another 40 personnel from other countries serving in China (Weber and Welliver 2007: 408f). This list is not comprehensive and does not include those agencies and missionaries who, due to the sensitivity of evangelistic work in China, operate clandestinely or do not issue public information about their work. Some of the agencies listed (inter alia, Reformed churches, Lutheran churches and the United Church of Christ) are linked to mainstream US churches that maintain contact with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the CCC. Other agencies (such as East Gates Ministries International, founded and headed by Ned Graham, the son of Billy

Graham) come from evangelical backgrounds, but still uphold a good relationship with the CCC/TSPM. Working legally and in partnership with the CCC, East Gates Ministries has foremost been active in distributing bibles and Christian literature, providing training, supporting orphanages and homes for the elderly, and providing resources to build new churches. (Information about this and other organisations discussed below is, if not stated otherwise, taken from the organisations' official websites.) Many of the listed agencies do developmental work in China and refrain from evangelism. However, some of the listed agencies openly discuss their evangelistic work in China and their cooperation with what they call underground churches. In terms of numbers, the biggest agency appears to be the Christian Aid Mission, which supports four hundred local Chinese personnel (Weber and Welliver 2007: 408). For many years, it has been supporting independent churches and their seminaries. According to Christian Aid Mission's own information, it has helped to establish and support 155 bible institutes and missionary training centres all over China (story on "Indigenous Missions at Work in China", 7 March 2012, see website).

Several international mission organisations are based in Asia and work in China. They are financially supported and staffed by Christians from all over the world, but recruit a significant and growing part of their missionaries from within Asia. Numerically speaking, probably the most significant of these is the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) – the successor organisation to Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission. According to the OMF website in 2006, around 1,200 missionaries from over 25 nations were active throughout East Asia, particularly in China – many of whom were nationals of Asian countries. The OMF, like other Christian missions operating in China, works secretly under a strategy called "mission to creative access nations", meaning that traditional and open mission is impossible due to governmental regulations.

Many mission organisations operating in China are based in Hong Kong. One of the early mission organisations entering China under Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy was the Jianhua Foundation (建华, JHF), which was founded by four Hong Kong evangelical businessmen in 1981 (for a thorough description of JHF, see Hirono 2008: 101–129). JHF developed its work in China on the basis of close relationships with senior Chinese government officials. It contributed particularly to the "software" aspect of development and refrained from openly propagating Christianity, while still placing strong emphasis on evangelism.

Some mission agencies are based in and focus more broadly on Asia – an important example, both charitable and evangelistic in nature, is Asian Outreach (AO), founded in 1966 in Hong Kong. AO seeks to holistically transform lives by providing physical, social and spiritual help to oppressed people in Asia. In its evangelistic ministry, AO works in strategic partnerships with local churches, indigenous community initiatives and evangelistic groups. Its programmes include equipping local workers for church planting and short-term missions, supporting Christian workers, and producing essential literature and resources. The Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (ALCWE) is less an operative mission agency than a network of missionaries. China Ministries International (CMI), founded in the United States in 1987 by Reverend Jonathan Chao and relatively small in terms of budget (with only 720,771 USD in revenue in 2011 according to the Ministry Watch website), is known for being highly critical of the CCC. The CMI has offices in Asia and overseas (Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, South Korea and the Philippines). Its purpose is to train and send missionaries to spread the gospel in mainland China. Similarly, the Chinese Christian Mission (CCM), established in 1961 in the United States, tries to reach China through broadcasting.

Due to difficulties in directly preaching the gospel in China, many groups originally dedicated to this purpose have adjusted their mission strategy and now focus on ministry amongst Chinese people overseas – particularly Chinese students in the West who are relatively receptive and have the potential of becoming social or economic leaders upon their return to China. One of these groups is the China Outreach Ministries (COM), which began its work with Christian radio broadcasts into China in the 1950s under the name of Chinese Overseas Christian Mission (COCM). It changed its name to COM following its decision to focus primarily on campus ministry.

Apart from missionary relations that are often organisationally based in Hong Kong and operated through ethnic Chinese contacts, Korean missionaries based in China and countries neighbouring China form a significant group whose numbers and impact are difficult to assess (see overall Moon 2008: 59–63; for a critical assessment of the Korean mission movement, see Kim 2005: 463–472). South Korea is the country with the highest number of missionaries relative to its population worldwide. An estimated 15,000–20,000 Korean missionaries work abroad, many of them in China.



Moon (2008: Table 1) counts 14,905 Korean missionaries overseas for the year 2006, while an article by the *Asia Times* magazine (Lee 2007) mentions 17,000; Park (2000: 546–547) estimates 5,804 missionaries for the year 1998. This number has quite likely grown since then. An exact number is, however, impossible as individual congregations send out missionaries without informing a central agency. Different estimations are also the result of diverse definitions of the term “missionary”. For instance, does the term include short-term missionaries? If yes, what length of time qualifies somebody to be called a short-term missionary? Does it include businesspeople who conduct missionary activities in addition to their work?

These missionaries operate independently and are usually supported at a very simple level by one or a handful of congregations in South Korea. They not only focus on the Korean ethnic minority in northeastern China and on North Korean refugees in China, they also move beyond these regions and penetrate all parts of China – mainly working with independent churches. They see China as the first step of a missionary movement to which they have been called – the movement of carrying the gospel back to Jerusalem. This is a point where Korean and Chinese missionary visions merge. The vision of carrying the Christian faith to Israel and thus completing the journey of the gospel around the world is a vision that also inspires many Christians in China. It is a motive that turns Christians in China from mere recipients of mission into missionary agents of the spread of the Gospel themselves.

One organisation that reflects and advocates such a missionary vision for Christians in China is the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (CCCOWE). The CCCOWE was established in 1976 after the Lausanne Congress of World Evangelization and its leading figures were Thomas Wang, Philip Teng, and Hay-chun Maak. Since its inception, its goal has been to mobilise and inspire Chinese Christians to get involved in evangelism and to reach beyond national boundaries to establish missionary relations with China’s neighbours. The group does not have centralised operations, but coordinates activities from affiliated churches. Organised in different districts and operating independently of each other, many of these churches have contacts both to churches of the TSPM movement and to independent Christian groups in China (Anonymous 1). They inspire and guide these churches with a vision that reaches beyond national borders. Another much smaller organisation that similarly started with the vision of encouraging Chinese Christians

to turn from mere recipients to missionary agents is the Christian Mission Overseas (CMO), founded in the 1960s. It has offices based in Taiwan, California and Chiang Mai and – with support mainly from Chinese churches in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States – operates outside of China with ministries in Myanmar and northern Thailand that are comprised primarily of missionaries from Taiwan.

A significant part of this cross-border missionary vision from within China, similar to that of some Korean mission movements, is referred to as the Back to Jerusalem (BTJ) movement (for a more thorough discussion of this movement see Brandner 2009: 317–332; Chan 2005: 55–74). The BTJ movement views China's Christians as having a special calling to carry the gospel from China through Asia to its origins in Jerusalem. BTJ envisions a Christian revival along the ancient Silk Road that would radically transform an area that has, from a Christian point of view, been most resistant to evangelism. BTJ is not a clearly defined movement, but rather a vision to which various agents in and outside China refer when describing their missionary goals (see for instance the website of the US-based group Christian Aid Mission, which describes its ministry in China with reference to this same vision, Christian Aid Mission 2012).

## A Preliminary Summary: Patterns of Relationships

This less-than-comprehensive examination of relations between churches in China and abroad does not reflect any clear patterns. The agents and levels of activity involved (individuals, Christian charitable or missionary organisations, free churches with low public accountability, more traditional and institutional churches, and church bodies like the TSPM with high political accountability) are too diverse for this. The origins of the groups and individuals involved (China; members of the Chinese diaspora; and Christians in Asia, North America and Europe) are also too distinct for simple generalisations. And finally, the nature of the relationships into which Chinese churches enter (bilateral or multilateral, planned and structured or random, recurring or one-off) also makes for great diversity. But some generalisations can be attempted before moving on to a concluding contextual assessment:

- All relations, both bilateral and multilateral relations through official church channels and those mediated through various missionary channels, show a continuing dominance of relations between China and the West. Relations between China and its Asian neighbours

appear less developed. The oft-cited South-South exchange is still far less important in this context than the relations between “East” and “West”.

- A significant part of international church relations (both institutional and missionary in nature) operate through ethnic Chinese channels.
- The near-complete absence of relations between Chinese and Indian Christians is particularly striking.
- As is typical for missionary relations, international and cross-border relations of a missionary (non-church) nature are more flexible and more prepared to establish contacts with areas where no previous contacts existed.

## A Contextual Assessment of International Church Relations between China and the Rest of Asia

When we try to contextually assess the overall orientation of international church relations between China and Asian partners, a number of points are obvious.

First, the dominance of exchanges with churches in Europe and North America is hardly surprising considering the numerical strength of these churches and the fact that they are still relatively rich in resources. In contrast, Christians in Asia are a small minority of the overall population and have fewer resources to engage in cross-border relations. Second, the important role of international, intra-Chinese channels and relations through ethnic Chinese partners from Asia and beyond is a natural development, especially when we take into account the linguistic difficulties of communication with partners in China. Third, even though official Chinese Communist Party ideology still views mission agencies with suspicion, the pragmatism with which relations to mission bodies are maintained (as long as the latter abide by the framework of mutual respect and cooperation and thus act as “friends”) is typical of the current pragmatic and non-ideological way in which Chinese policies are put into practice.

International church relations do not happen in a vacuum, however, but are – like theology and church life in general – shaped by their surrounding cultural, social, economic and political contexts. In the following, we shall concentrate on the political context and ask how the context of China’s international political relations shape China’s international

church relations, particularly within Asia. Again, the following thoughts are preliminary reflections (not a thorough investigation into religious-political relations) intended to contribute to the wider issue of religion in international relations. This discussion has often centred on the question of how religions influence political relations and how religious factors affect social and political conflicts (presented by Huntington 1996 and Juergensmeyer 2000). Scholarly focus has been on integrating the religious dimension in the understanding of international relations (Fox and Sandler 2004; see also Dark 2000: 198–216 who describes the religious influence on international political relations in Asia. Although Dark argues based on questionable figures regarding religious followers in different Asian states, the overall trends that he describes still make sense). The following thoughts focus not so much on how religions affect international relations, but on how churches' international relations themselves are one element in the wider context of international relations at state level.

When trying to describe the political context of international church relations between China and the rest of Asia (see overall Loh 2005: 167–174), several points of reference should be remembered. First, the rise of China as a global power coupled with its growing economic clout shapes all of China's international relations in one way or another. Second, although relations with the United States remain a high priority in China's foreign policy, it has become more actively engaged in Asia. Third, in Northeast Asia, China maintains an ambiguous relationship with the Korean peninsula. On the one hand, China continues to be the only significant political ally of North Korea, which is technically still at war with South Korea. On the other hand, it constructively engages in economic exchange with and maintains diplomatic relations (since 1992) with South Korea. Fourth, Sino-Japanese relations are still fraught with unresolved historical issues and disputed territorial claims. Nevertheless, both sides are still important economic partners. Fifth, China's relations with Southeast Asia are centred on its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Even though many member states fear China's growing regional hegemony and have unresolved conflicts with Beijing regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea and China's unilateral damming of the Mekong River (Loh 2005: 172), relations with most ASEAN members have generally improved over the past decade (Ba 2003: 622f). Sixth, the relationship with South Asia is shaped by strong ties to Pakistan and Myanmar and a more tense

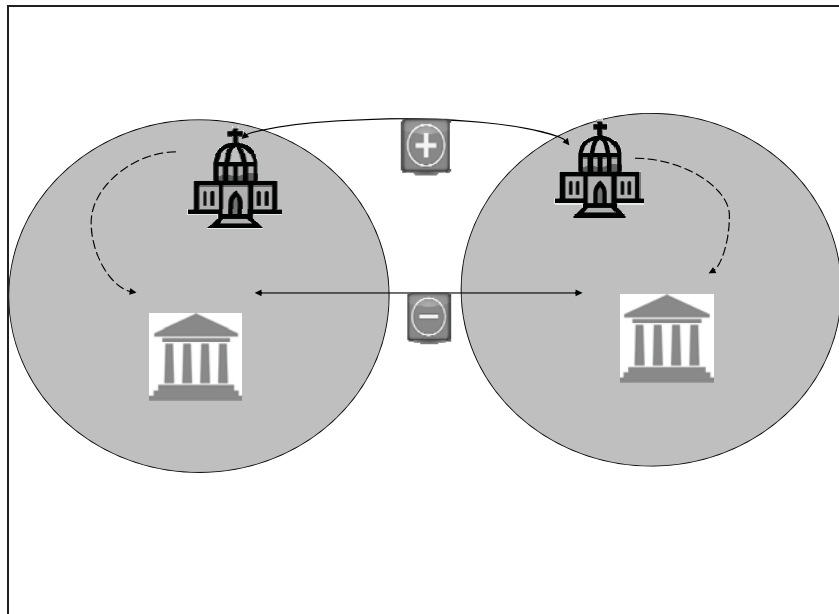
relationship with India. Myanmar not only provides important resources, but also – and more importantly – crucial strategic access to the Indian Ocean (International Crisis Group 2009). India and China are the two giants in Asia. Not only are they involved in territorial disputes and competing for regional influence, their increasing needs for resources for their fast-growing economies is putting a strain on their relations (Garver 2001; more positive about the parallel rise of China and India are some of the contributors to Lam and Lim 2009; Smith 2007 offers a more comparative approach to the two nations' rise, comparing their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with their future political, economic and social challenges). Sino-Indian relations can thus be described as lying between geostrategic rivalry and economic cooperation (Huchet 2008: 50–67) and driven by the contrasting interests of maintaining stable relations for mutual growth while also gaining regional influence (Holslag 2010: 142). According to a US army report (Pehrson 2006), the United States and India have noted that China has been successful with what they call a “string of pearls” strategy – a chain of strategically important port developments and diplomatic ties surrounding and potentially constraining the geopolitical power of India and securing important shipping lines. Seventh, further to the west, friendly relations with Iran are fed by joint opposition to Western global influence. Finally, China's relations with the Central Asian republics have grown significantly due to China's need to secure oil and other natural resources. Their joint interests are the defence against Islamic separatism and Western influence. China has fostered its ties with this strategically and economically important area through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which it takes a leading role (Ba 2003: 645).

The Asian political framework described in the outline above builds the background and context in which China's international church relations take place. When trying to describe the interdependence of interstate and inter-church relations, it is helpful to use a typology. While classic typologies (like H. R. Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, or Stephen B. Bevans' *Models of Contextual Theology*) are helpful in understanding the different patterns of how church and society, faith and world, or church and state relate to each other, we need to look for another typology in our case. We are not dealing with a dual relation, but one that includes four sides and two levels of interaction: church and state in international and inter-church relations. We can distinguish several forms, roles and functions in which international church relations relate to the surround-

ing political framework. I have identified the following six types of relations:

1. Counter-political relations are when church relations are characterised by mutual friendship and support within a context of strained inter-state relations. They thus oppose the dominant character of political relations between the states involved. International church relations may not directly affect political relations or a country's state-church relations, but they do open up an additional dimension in international relations that stands in contrast to the dominant political relationship. An example of such relations would be the ecumenical relations during the Cold War era, when churches from either side of the Iron Curtain gathered in the WCC and bridged the political confrontation between East and West. Overall, counter-political relations appear to be conspicuously absent in the Asian context.

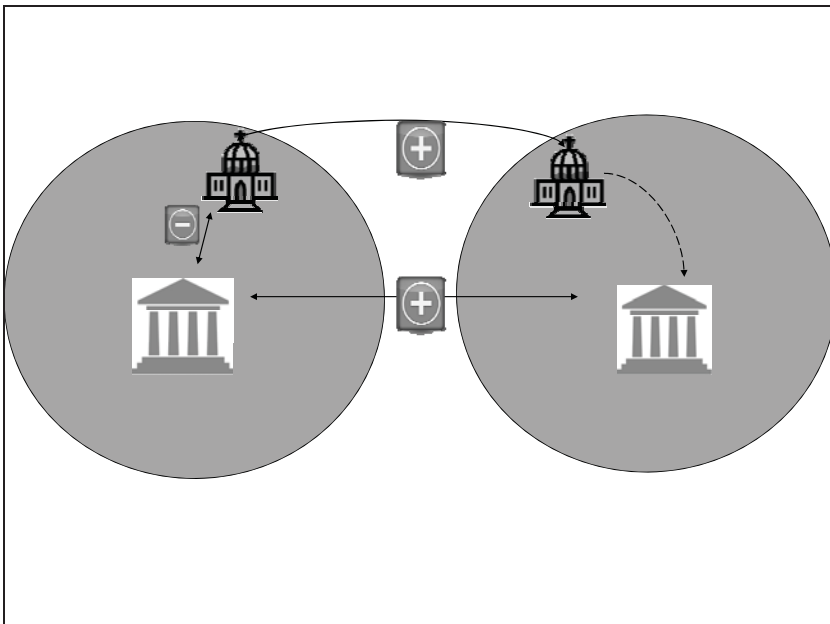
Figure 3: Counter-political Relations



Source: Author's own compilation.

- Oppositional relations can occur where the church in state A stands in opposition to its own government in a context in which both state A and state B are political and/ or economic allies. An effect of such a relation is that the church in state B, though originally not opposed to its own government, may take a critical stance against its own government's political and/ or economic relations with state A. An example of such a relationship is South African churches' resistance to apartheid in South Africa and the impact it had on church-state relations in the West. As an ally of the West during the Cold War, South Africa's apartheid regime enjoyed healthy relations with most Western states. However, many churches in the West supported the South African churches in their struggle against the apartheid regime. This resulted in tension (at times very serious) between Western churches and their own governments. Again, this type of relationship seems to be absent in the Asian context.

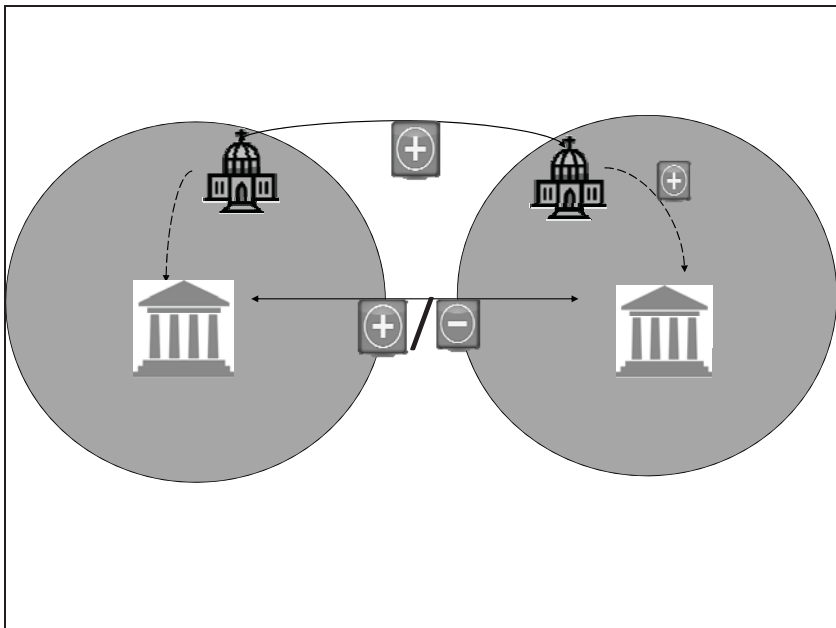
Figure 4: Oppositional Relations



Source: Author's own compilation.

3. Complementary relations see churches, which are politically relatively neutral, contribute to friendship and mutual understanding within an overriding context of strained international relations between their states. In this kind of situation, the two sides may have different purposes and different agendas as to what they hope to achieve by engaging in bilateral church relationships. As an ex-ample, we may look at the overall improving relations between churches in China and the United States in the overriding context

Figure 5: Complementary Relations



Source: Author's own compilation.

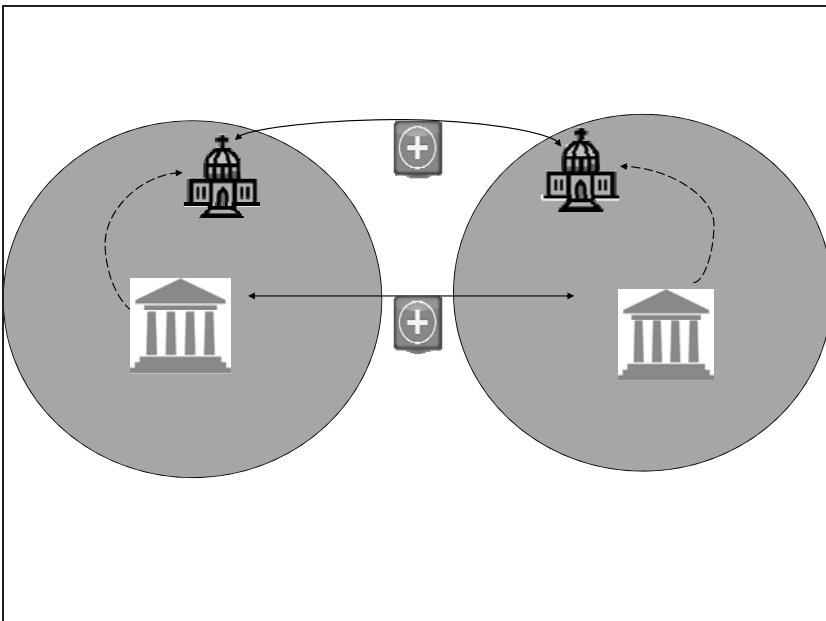
of troubled political relations between these nations. While US Christians hope to contribute to China's extension of the basic civil rights that they regard as fundamental for religious life, churches in China hope that their contacts with the United States will reduce the still-common US misperception of religious persecution in China. In the Asian context, an example of such relations may be seen between Chinese and South Korean Christians. Another example can



be found in the overall healthy relations with the National Christian Council in Japan (NCCJ), which stands in contrast to otherwise fraught Sino-Japanese political relations. An important reason for the positive relationship between Chinese churches and the NCCJ is that the latter has repeatedly criticised its own government for failing to apologise for Japanese aggression in the Second World War. However, this example also shows that complementary relations may not be equally balanced and that the direct repercussions of inter-church relations on church-state relations may be felt more on one side.

4. Auxiliary relations occur where friendly political relations are extended to inter-church relations. A typical example can be found in the positive relations of the CCC/TSPM leadership in China to the leaders of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong (the relations to church groups in Hong Kong essentially follow the pattern of international relations rather than domestic ones), which is – at least through its leadership – close to the political establishment in Hong Kong.

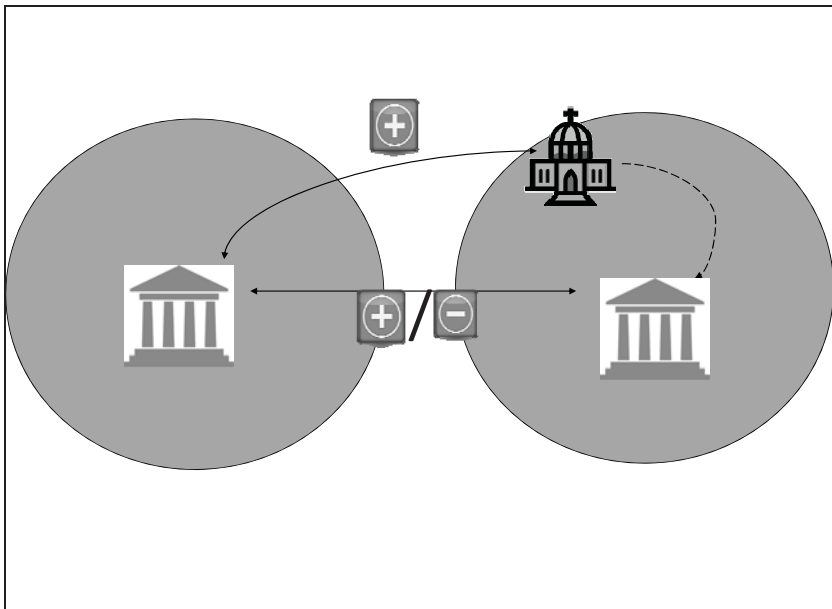
Figure 6: Auxiliary Relations



Source: Author's own compilation.

5. Strategic relations exist where state A's government bypasses the religious bodies of state A in order to establish direct relations with state B's churches or religious groups with the hope of positively affecting bilateral political relations. The initiative may, of course, also come from the religious groups. A well-known example of such a relationship can be found in Israel's use of Jewish groups in the United States – or Palestine's use of Muslim groups, also in the United States – to lobby for their causes (Fox and Sandler 2004: 168f). In the Asian context, this is illustrated by the invitation of and dialogue with religious groups from abroad by Chinese government departments.

Figure 7: Strategic Relations

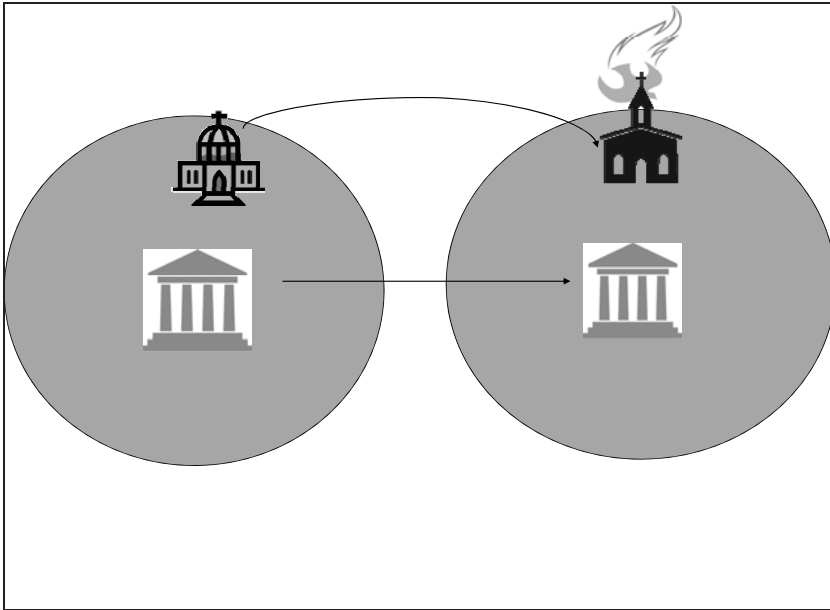


Source: Author's own compilation.

6. Exploratory relations are where church relations have not yet been formally established – traditionally occurring during a period of missionary expansion. As no formal ecclesial structure exists yet, or the

existing one is ignored, such relations cannot properly be called inter-church relations. Nevertheless, they are an equally important part of Christian international relations.

Figure 8: Exploratory Relations



Source: Author's own compilation.

If we take this typology as a reference, we can make several contextual observations:

- The majority of international church relations with China are most likely complementary relations. They are actively contributing to the amelioration of strained international relations by decreasing animosity on the political level. The political establishment is aware of the facilitating and bridging role of religious bodies and appreciates their contribution as a mediator in an ambivalent political environment. Churches thus contribute to the mutual understanding of the people in international relations. This is particularly the case in the competitive relations between the United States and China. The Chinese authorities welcome such ecclesial relations not only for the

benefit of supported projects (as in the case of funding for humanitarian and development projects through Amity), but more so to correct the negative perception amongst US (and to a lesser extent European) Christians of Chinese policies, in particular religious policy.

- Chinese churches' cooperation with diasporic Chinese Christians is an aspect of these complementary relations. Healthy relations with this (in the eyes of the Chinese government) important bridge group can also be strategic relations, allowing the government to directly engage with overseas Chinese Christians as part of its united front policy.
- The "strong state" and the active role of the Chinese government in religious affairs generally cause Chinese churches and their foreign counterparts to refrain from assuming a counter-political or oppositional role in their international relations. This not only applies to relations with TSPM churches, but equally to missionary relations with independent churches (house churches). A potential added value of international church relations (i.e. their potential to correct relations primarily driven by political and economic rationality) is thus forfeited. Churches' lack of bridging and friendship-building functions is particularly evident in the case of Sino-Indian relations. It needs, however, to be said that Indian Protestant churches themselves are almost everywhere a small minority and under heavy pressure from right-wing Hindu nationalist groups. This also reduces the possibility for Indian Christians to assume a corrective role against its own government.
- China's exploratory relations through missionary channels show a remarkable parallelism to the important political and economic relations to Central and Southwest Asia, along the ancient Silk Road. This congruence of political and missionary relations bears the potential to turn the latter into one element within the extension of economic and political relations between China and Central and Southwest Asia.

## Conclusion

This article has examined parts of the complex international relations between Christians in China and those in Asia and beyond. It has distinguished between the different agents, the different origins and the differ-

ent natures of relationships. Furthermore, it has described the political contexts within which international Christian relations may be understood and has introduced a typology of six church-state relations linked to international relations. Our analysis of Christian relationships between China and the rest of Asia as well as our conceptual typology is based on preliminary reflections that help us understand these complicated religious-political dynamics. Both missionary relations and those through official bodies like the TSPM/CCC appear to largely support and parallel rather than counter China's political relations with its neighbours and beyond.

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