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Title: The Making of an Ideal Chinese Adventist Church: The Chen Family and the Rise of Wilderness Adventists in Reform China

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Abstract

This paper uses the story of a Chinese Adventist family to illustrate the changing church-state relations in Communist China. Pastor Chen Dengyong (born in 1925), his wife Huang Meide (1925-2010), and their mother Wu Guiying (1906-1976), were like what Ecclesiastes 4.12 describes as the “three cords twisted together,” supporting one another in sustaining the Adventist ministry during the Maoist era (1949-1976). Seeking to spread Adventism after the U.S. missionaries were expelled from China in the early 1950s, Pastor Chen perceived his ministry as an instrument in defending the Adventist missionary legacy. For him, one core component of this legacy was that the church autonomy ought to be defended by opposing the state's intervention into its spiritual affairs. More than a decade of imprisonment at labor camp did not deter the Chens from upholding their idealized vision of Adventism. This paper describes how the “Wilderness” Adventist group (*kuangye pai*) under the leadership of Chen and Huang emerged during the Christian revival in the 1980s. The Adventist couple sought to actualize their ecclesiastical vision challenging the socialist state's cooptation of Protestantism and upholding their ecclesiastical distinctiveness beyond a “post-denominational church” under the official control.

Introduction

Beginning in the 1980s, the term “Wilderness group,” *kuangye pai* 曠野派 in Chinese, emerged within the Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church. The term was thought to be synonymous to the label “church divider,” *fenlie jiaohui de* 分裂教會的 that described those Adventists who followed Pastor Chen Dengyong. The most severe attack of this group first came from the late Pastor David Lin. In an open letter, Lin wrote:

After the Shanghai co-workers take charge of the Sabbath worship at Muen Church, Chen Dengyong declares that Xu (Pastor Xu Hua), Lin (Pastor David Lin), and their followers have apostatized. He further accuses them of uniting with “Babylon.” He regards himself as the genuine leader of the “wilderness church” (*kuangye jiaohui*)...In recent years, Chen Dengyong worked actively in different parts of the country, ordaining pastors,

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elders, and deacons, receiving tithing offerings from local congregations. In expanding his own power base, he divides the Church.¹

Who was Chen Dengyong? Why and how did he raise a movement that many Chinese Adventists had accused as divisive? This paper approaches these questions by looking at the history of the Chen family in the context of the local Adventist movement and its interactions with the Communist state. The paper argues that despite its controversial development, the Wilderness movement integrated independent Adventist congregations into a network that contributed to the revival of Seventh-day Adventism in post-Maoist China. Under the leadership of Chen and his wife Huang Meide, the movement gave shape to an idealized version of Seventh-day Adventism that sought to protect the spiritual purity and denominational character of the church. Hence, through their efforts, Chinese Adventism became an ideal type, providing a frame of reference for ordinary Adventists to rethink and reorient their mission on earth by setting boundaries against non-Adventist Protestants and the communist regime. As much as a sectarian movement, the Wilderness phenomenon interestingly offers a window for understanding how evangelistic freedom in China was sought for by way of rejecting the state's top-down mechanisms of religious control. The story of the Chen family depicts how Chinese Adventists struggled to adapt to the changing religious landscape and managed to maintain their ecclesiastical distinctiveness beyond a "post-denominational church" which the state claimed to control.

Methodologically, this paper is based on fieldwork investigation, interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. I conducted fieldwork in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province in east China in the summer of 2009, and from late summer of 2012 to spring 2013. I worshipped at

¹ Lin Yaoxi and Liu Yongzhang, "Public statement of revoking Chen Dengyong's ordination 撤銷陳登庸牧師聖職的聲明 *chexiao Chen Dengyong mushi shengzhi de shengming*," August 13, 1993. Andrews archive.

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Pastor Chen's congregation, listening to his sermons and spoke with the congregants. I did an oral history with him and other Wilderness leaders. I also analyzed Chen's published sermons, his work diaries, his wife Huan Meide's personal journals, and other Wilderness books. Personal letters, local church reports, and archival materials are other sets of data used in this paper.

This paper begins with an explanation of the nature of a "post-denominational church," a general category through which the Communist government uses to describe the present state of Chinese Protestant church. The meaning and historical evolution of this label help to contextualize the Wilderness movement in the Reform era (post-1978). The second part of the paper illustrates the life histories of Pastor Chen and his wife Meide. In the final part, I describe the Wilderness controversy and its theological justification of opposing the state's religious policies. The crux of the Wilderness theology is to idealize Chinese Seventh-day Adventism as a "coming-out" and a "name-defending" movement in order to protect the church from losing its identity in a socialist state.

Chinese Protestant Denominationalism

Denominationalism has long been criticized as an obstacle for unifying the Chinese churches. In the 1919 World Christian Council at Edinburgh, the Chinese representative Chen Jingyi (C. Y. Chen) addressed the council,

Speaking plainly, we hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian church without any denominational distinctions. This may seem somewhat peculiar to you, but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always as a mysterious people to you.²

² Quoted from Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Black Well, 2012), 99.

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Against the backdrop of ecumenism in the 20th century, such remarks expressed a strong desire to promote and strengthen cross-denominational cooperation in ministry³ rather than weakening the distinctiveness in Protestant denominational beliefs and practices.⁴ In the early 1950s, some Chinese churches did criticize those denominations that had spiritual, material, and institutional ties with the West. One goal of the state-initiated Three-Self Reform Movement (later renamed as Three-Self Patriotic Movement, TSPM hereafter) was to purge these churches' Western "imperialist" and "colonial" elements. During the Korean War, churches with American and European connections like the Adventists, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans were instructed to disassociate themselves from their parent churches, cutting all financial and institutional ties. And yet, they maintained their unique denominational characteristics in their church title, church government, worship style, and theological claims. The denominational life of Chinese Protestants was also evident in some indigenous churches like the Christian Assembly, True Jesus Church, and Jesus's Family, all being founded and managed by Chinese themselves. Until the late 1950s, Chinese Protestantism remained denominational in character.

The onslaught on the denominational life of the churches took place under the state's forceful unification of all Christian worship services in the late summer of 1958.⁵ The Great Leap Forward Campaign which was launched to modernize China comparable to the Euro-American societies threw the whole country into frenzy. Mobilizing the Protestant population to participate in this socialist construction project, local TSPM leaders limited the location of

³ Tiedemann, "Comity."

⁴ See Chan Chi-hang 陳智衡: *Unity without Uniformity: History of Church of Christ in China* 合一非一律 (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2013).

⁵ Numerous articles in *Tianfeng* no. 559 (August 25, 1958) and no. 567 (September 22, 1958) reported the process to which church unification took place in Shanghai, Taiyuan, Wenzhou, Tianjin, Yingkou, and Yangzhou. Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 177.

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worship service in a few church premises across the nation. They surrendered the remaining church properties to the local government authorities for economic use. Because the state propaganda had long attacked Chinese Protestantism as “imperialist” and “colonialist,” denominationalism was charged as a product of Western Christianity and a culprit of fragmentizing the Chinese Church. Through the unification of worship, the TSPM set out to create a unifying Protestant body under its control. It was assumed that a united China should have a unified Chinese Church managed by the TSPM, and all denominational Protestants should abandon their denominational differences and worship under the same roof. The unification of worship was only implemented from 1958 to the mid-1960s. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the entire nation fell into chaos. The TSPM and its mechanism of religious control ceased to function for a decade.

When the TSPM resurfaced in the 1980s, it revived the previous policy of unification of worship but the implementation took a new form. Under the so-called “one church for two usages, *yitang liangyong* 一堂兩用,” two Protestant denominational groups were told to co-share the same religious premises. By restricting the physical space for worship, the TSPM continued to contain denominationalism. Other practices of undermining denominational aspects were also in place. The government forbade Protestants to display their denominational church titles in public and register with the local authorities under their original denominational name.

Denominational churches had no right to reclaim their confiscated church properties. Any claim had to be made in the name of the TSPM church. In theological education, any request from denominational churches to open their own seminaries was rejected. Outside the state-supported seminaries, denominational churches decided to organize small independent bible training classes to train their own leaders. The only drawback was that these denominationally-trained

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students could not gain any ordination from the state and seek employment in the TSPM churches.

Given these constraints, the story of the Wilderness Adventists is extraordinary because the movement reveals that some Chinese Protestants rejected the state-imposed notion of “non-denominationalism” and adhered to their denominational tradition. We now turn to Pastor Chen and his wife Huang Meide who led the Chinese Adventists to counter the post-denominational religious policies. The movement proclaimed that authentic Adventism should hold onto the name “Seventh-day Adventist Church” *jidufulin anxirihui* as the genuine expression of their identity in public.

Life Histories of Chen Dengyong and Huang Meide

A third-generation Adventist, Chen Dengyong received training as an accountant at the Adventist-run China Training Institute in the wartime capital of Chongqing. He married Huang Meide, a nurse and midwife trained in an Adventist sanitarium. After working briefly as a high school teacher, Chen served as a secretary-treasurer, the second highest administrative position in the Adventist mission field in southwest China. During the Accusation Campaign in the early 1950s, Chen was accused of embezzling church funds.⁶ Losing his church career, Chen soon found an accounting job at a trading company in Kunming, then the capital of Yunnan Province, and his wife became a head nurse in a local government clinic. The couple was financially well-off but was tormented because their two daughters suffered from chronic illnesses. When the couple were struggling to make sense of the family trial, Chen's mother Wu Guiying (1906? – 1976) interpreted to them that the girls' suffering was God's act of calling up their “guilty

⁶ The accusation was probably false as accusations were commonly used against church leaders in the Maoist antireligious movement

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conscience” to make them return to ministry. The matriarch made an important decision to call her son and daughter to full-time ministry at the peak of Mao's anti-religious campaigns.

Under the encouragement of Chen's mother who had retired in suburban Wenzhou, the couple left Kunming for Rui'an County in 1955, and went into full-time ministry. By this time, Adventists in southern Zhejiang had been absorbed into the TSPM.

Chen's return to ministry coincided with some of the darkest time of the Maoist state. Because of the failure of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), tens of millions of people died of starvation and many survivors turned to religion for solace.⁷ As his ministry grew, so did the suspicion of the state toward him. In March 1961, he was sentenced to labor camp for fifteen years, being accused of an anti-revolutionary, he was guilty of spreading “rumors of the end of the world and the coming of the judgment day, refusing to participate in production but instead living on the tithes from believers, and protesting against the party by refusing to eat (fasting).”⁸ The local authorities justified these charges against Chen's ministry in Rui'an according to the 1959 prohibitions of preaching any “pessimistic doctrines such as the Last Days and the vanity of this world,” collecting the financial support from the laity, and observing the Saturday Sabbath.⁹

As Chen was sent to labor camps for punishment for their refusal to denounce the faith in the 1960s, Chen's mother Wu Guiying strove to hold the family together and prevent it from falling apart. Her spiritual impacts on Huang Meide was significantly important as Huang strove

⁷ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker, 2010), 227-228.

⁸ Chen Dengyong, “God Said, ‘You Are My Witnesses.’ We Should Certify That God Is Truthful. [Shangdi shuo: “Nimen shi wo de jianzheng.” Women yingdang zhengming shangdi shi zhen de 上帝說: ‘你們是我的見證。’ 我們‘應當證明上帝是真的’], n.d., personal acquisition.

⁹ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 219-220.

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to continue the ministry for five more years after Chen was jailed in 1961, and she was eventually arrested in 1966. Upon their release from the labor camps in 1979,¹⁰ the couple returned to their hometown to rebuild their ministry, and Chen gradually rose to become one of the most active leaders in reviving Adventism inside and outside Wenzhou. Meanwhile, Adventists in downtown and suburban Wenzhou were deeply divided into two groups, which I called them the reformists and conservatives. Chen and Huang were with the conservatives, and the couple quickly established their influence within the Adventist congregations with their many talents.

The Wilderness Controversy

During the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese Adventists denounced the Wilderness as a separatist movement dividing the Adventist Church. Numerous church reports showed that the Wilderness evangelists developed a pattern of splitting a congregation by friendship, bible study, and house gathering. They first went to a church, befriended with the members, invited discontent members to study the bible together, and finally encouraged them to leave the congregation and establish independent gatherings. With the many issues associated with a congregation's internal divisions, the most significant problem involved the way in which the Adventists should engage with non-Adventists and the local government.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese Adventists had mixed views on the re-implementation of the 1958 unification of worship policy and the new church registration law. Some saw these rules as a necessary evil. Rather than rejecting the regulations and antagonizing the state, Adventists should appropriate them for the purpose of self-protection. Having a proper venue for Sabbath

¹⁰ The couple was officially exonerated in January 1980.

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services, even if this must be co-shared with non-Adventists, would make Adventism a legal entity in the local area. The church registration law further affirmed this legal status and gave the congregation public recognition it desired. As a woman Adventist remembered, her pastor husband explained to her why he agreed to register the church with the government: "Pastor Wu told me, 'The church does not have the freedom to proselytize and can only operate in secret if it does not participate in the TSPM. How can we spread the gospel then?'"¹¹ Secret church activities drew unnecessary suspicions and harassments from the authorities, and worse still, they were often singled out as targets of suppression in times of political and social instability.

The government requirements, however, provoked separatism among some Adventist congregations. Under the "one church for two usages" arrangement, the Adventists did not have full control over their own finance and the appointment of their own pastor. Neither did they have the right to teach the writings of Ellen White and to hold independent evangelistic activities. The church registration law prohibited the church members from displaying their denominational names in public, and the government denied any request for registering a denominational title.

How did Adventists hold onto their unique church identity in face of all the official restrictions? What constituted an ideal Adventist church? How far did the denominational title say about the distinctiveness of the Adventist identity? Was it sufficient to uphold Adventism by following the seventh-day Sabbath, clean dietary and the "three angels" message at a personal level? Should it be more important to secure evangelistic freedom to spread Adventism rather than confronting the government? These questions demanded clear answers, and the Wilderness

¹¹ Interview with Jin Lianying, wife of Pastor Wu Huanwen. August 18, 2012.

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movement seemed to offer a concrete and pervasive theological guidance based on traditional Adventist notions.

Wilderness Advocacy and Theology

The first important notion in the Wilderness theology was “Babylon.” The term referred to the TSPM church, which the Wilderness Adventists regarded as a false church in China. The Wilderness called the Adventists to come out of the “Babylonian captivity,” leaving the state-assigned church premises, ending the partnership with non-Adventist Protestants, and liberating themselves from all forms of state regulatory control. This “coming-out” calling appealed to many Adventists who were always suspicious of the government and other Chinese Protestant traditions. In critiquing the unification of worship and the church registration law, the Wilderness's claim found justification in Ellen White's teaching. For instance, in a sermon outline, Pastor Chen quoted Ellen White's famous statement,

“We are Seventh-day Adventists. Are we ashamed of our name? We answer, No, no! We are not. It is the name the Lord has given us. It points out the truth that is to be the test of the churches.”¹²

White's words were quoted by Chen completely out of the context, yet the remarks helped him and his followers to contextualize their experience and justify their resistance against the government's efforts to suppress their denominational identity. In calling those Adventists who sought to obtain a legal status through registration as “Babylon,” the Wilderness Adventists asserted that the church should not abandon the denominational title “Seventh-day Adventist

¹² Chen Dengyong, “Sermon no. 91,” in *Five Hundred Sermon Themes* (internal circulation, 2013), personal acquisition.

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Church” because the prophetess had recognized the title as an ideal description of the mission and vision of the Church.

Another Adventist notion was the “Waldensians” in Ellen White’s *Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*. Pastor Chen elaborated this point in his biography:

People label us the ‘Wilderness faction’ because we do not participate in the TSPM. We adopt this name, but we have no intention to form a separate faction within the larger Adventist body. All we hope is that our faith can be in line with the Waldensians. “The faith which for centuries was held and taught by the Waldensian Christians was in marked contrast to the false doctrines put forth from Rome. Their religious belief was founded upon the written word of God, the true system of Christianity... Theirs was not a faith newly received. Their religious belief was their inheritance from their fathers. They contended for the faith of the apostolic church,—“the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). The church in the wilderness,... was the true church of Christ (Chapter four, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*).¹³

Chen reinterpreted the term “wilderness” in a Chinese context. The master narrative guiding his reinterpretation is the spiritual warfare unfolding in human history as captured by Ellen White.¹⁴ In historicizing this spiritual warfare, Chen compared the twelfth-century Waldensians’ resistance against Roman Catholicism with the Wilderness’s objection to the Chinese state’s co-optation of all Chinese Protestants into the TSPM. Writing in late 19th-century America, Ellen White drew on the story of the Waldensians to illustrate the US Adventist objection to the papal fallacy and she predicted the impending threat of religious persecution facing Adventists in the West.¹⁵ Accordingly, Protestant churches in the US allegedly betrayed the Bible’s Ten Commandments when they supported the papacy in changing the day of worship

¹³ Chen Dengyong, *God said, “You Are My Witnesses.” We Ought to Bear Witness that God Is True.* [Shangdi shuo: “Nimen shi wo de jianzheng.” Women “yingdang zhengming shangdi shi zhen de 上帝說：“你們是我的見證。“我們應當證明上帝是真的”]. Personal acquisition.

¹⁴ For an interpretation of this master narrative, see Joseph Battistone, *The Great Controversy Theme in E. G. White Writings* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1978).

¹⁵ For the historical developments in Adventist anti-Catholicism, see Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism: 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994).

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from Saturday to Sunday. In rejecting Sabbatarianism, American Protestants continued to sustain the Sunday-Sabbath through their support of the Sunday legislation. White warned Adventists to stay alert and maintain their spiritual purity by rejecting any union with a Sunday church backed by the earthly power.¹⁶ Chen simply adopted White's metaphor of the Waldensians to portray the Wilderness Adventists as a persecuted religious minority who adhered strictly to the scriptural teachings in full, including Saturday observance, and who encountered severe opposition in their refusal to join the state-controlled, Sunday-observing TSPM.

A Wilderness Way of Life, a Political Attitude, a Vision of True Church

The biblical metaphor of "wilderness" and the apocalyptic metaphor of "remnant" form another basis of the theological explanation of "the church in the wilderness" and the characterization of Chinese Adventist experience under the Chinese communist regime. The term "wilderness" describes the immense pains and sufferings of God's people journeying in the world, especially Chinese Adventists. The biblical stories about the ancient Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert and their experience of being a stateless people in the Babylonian captivity give the necessary language for describing the experience of Adventists facing the government's top-down approach of church unity.

Wilderness Adventists imagine the world as a violent and hostile place where people are compelled to choose between conformity to the world and faithfulness to God. Asserting that the "Seventh-day Adventist Church" is "the church in the wilderness,"¹⁷ Wilderness Adventist image of an ideal church cannot be separated from the group's denominational self-identity. It is

¹⁶ "A Warning Rejected," in Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*, chapter 21, <http://egw.sdacn.org/> (accessed: January 15, 2014).

¹⁷ "Sermon no. 419," in Chen Dengyong, *Five Hundred Sermon Outlines* (internal circulation, 2013). Personal acquisition.

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because for them the “remnant church” described in the book of Revelation represents “the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus” (Revelation 14: 12). In the Chinese political context, Wilderness Adventists see themselves as the guardians of the Ten Commandments in general and the fourth one (keeping the Saturday Sabbath) in particular. As Wilderness Adventists argue, registration with the government without the denominational title strips the Adventist formal church identity, lump them with the TSPM Protestants who do not keep the seventh-day Sabbath, and given the TSPM as a state-supported church system, joining it means taking the Adventists to unite with the government.

Wilderness Adventists are convinced that living in the “wilderness” is a “way of life,” a practice in which they engage with the world as individuals and as a church.”¹⁸ Rugged and difficult, the journey in this troublesome world where Chinese Adventists find themselves is also a way through which God refines and tests His true followers. The “remnant people” is central to Chen’s ideal of Chinese Adventism as a persecuted religious minority,¹⁹ in which a handful of God’s faithful followers being called out to live in purity and sanctity. Wilderness Adventists are expected to be a part of the remnant people displaying a unique identity most explicitly in their agonies and woes, in their struggle to witness to God’s truly loving character, and in their bravery to unmask Satan’s deceptions. These actions reflect their determination to restore God’s glory and the integrity of God’s divine law. Persecution is thus unavoidable, as Wilderness Adventists argue, but pains and sufferings are God’s way of purging the church of its impurities. “The more level the way they walk, the easier they become secular.” Just as the Israelites lost Jerusalem, wilderness people do not have their own worship space. Nevertheless, in confronting

¹⁸ *The Chosen People in the Wilderness: 2002 Sabbath School Lesson* (internal circulation), 1.

¹⁹ Interview with Chen Dengyong, August 6, 2012. “Sermon theme no. 454,” in Chen Dengyong, *Five Hundred Sermon Outlines* (internal circulation, 2013). Personal acquisition.

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these challenges they do not remain passive, for they are a modern version of Elijah, who rebuked the apostasy of Israel.²⁰

Conclusion

Within the Chinese state's policy of unifying all Protestants into the TSPM system, the Wilderness movement under the leadership of Pastor Chen Dengyong played a unique role in diversifying the landscape of Chinese Protestantism. The movement kept alive the culture of Chinese denominationalism and rejected the dominance of political power over Christian believers. In the Communist rhetoric, the grand narrative for good governance was to maintain the unity, harmony, and stability of the Chinese society. Under this grand narrative, the policy direction for managing the Chinese churches was to reduce the threat of "imperialism" by discouraging the denominational Protestant faith which was deemed to be a product of the West. And yet, for many Chinese Adventists, their faith was very much informed by the Bible, the Adventist teachings from Ellen White, and above all, their historical experiences with the Communist regime.

For some Chinese Adventists, the religious policies that targeted denominational status must be resisted, lest they would compromise their ideal Adventism. The Wilderness phenomenon reflected this thinking. Pastor Chen's idealization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church offers a critique to the claim that churches in China was without denominational characters. The Wilderness movement he raised is indicative for understanding how Chinese Adventists struggled to maintain their unique church identity.

²⁰ "The Chosen People in the Wilderness: 2002 Sabbath School Lesson," (internal circulation), 3, 33-34, 59.

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To a large extent, the Wilderness movement bore many similarities with the Chinese house church movement, in which both refused to join the TSPM because they saw it not as a spiritual body but an administrative organization that was founded by the state, not Christ.²¹ What made the Wilderness movement unique was that by advocating the Adventist denominational name publicly, Chinese Protestantism was nowhere monolithic, fixated in the politicized notion of “post-denominational” TSPM. In practice, denominational impulse is an integral part of Chinese Christianity and has continued to shape, inspire, and guide the everyday life of the Chinese churches.

²¹ See a confessional document written by some Chinese house church network in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (One Massachusetts Avenue: NW Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, INC, 2003), 303-307.