



China Rising in Historical Perspective

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Abstract: We are standing at a pivotal moment in human history. Over the course of the past few thousand years, countless kings and countries have gained ascendancy over their neighbors for a while, only to be replaced at the pinnacle of influence by an upstart rival. Only rarely, however, do entire civilizations either gain or lose a position of dominance. That sort of transition – which really deserves to be called a revolution – is taking place before our very eyes. Such colossal shifts in power and prestige are fraught with danger, but also filled with exciting possibilities. In this article we shall ponder the rise of China in the context of history, in order to reflect upon our possible responses and roles in this tectonic geo-political shift. Moving quickly over continents and centuries, I shall make five observations about rising China, and conclude with some suggestions for both Western and Chinese Christians.

关键词：崛起 中国 基督教 西方 历史 摘要：我们正站在一个人类历史上关键

时刻。在过去的几千年中，无数的强国已经获得了超越他们的邻国有一段时间，有一些小国则被取代。但是，对于整个人类文明进程来说，牺牲是必要的。这种转型也可以说是一次革命，而且就发生在我们眼前。在权力和威望如此巨大的转变是充满危险的，但也充满了令人兴奋的可能性。在本文中我们将在思考的历史背景下，和中国的崛起，也为了反思我们自己，通过这种从里向外的政治转变的作用已经快速蔓延到各大洲在这个世纪里，我将对日益增长的中国五的观测，并得出结论与西方和中国基督徒的一些建议。

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1. China's rise to superpower status has been sudden and dramatic

Rising

China's rise can be gauged in comparison with its recent past. Look back over the poverty, disorder, and disunion of the first half of the 20th century, then recall the devastation of World War II; the isolation of the Mao years; and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, and contrast that with the peace, unity, engagement with the wider world, and material prosperity we observe today.

China's rise can also be measured in relation to the rest of the world, especially the decline of the West, and particularly the rapid decrease of American power and prestige. Japan, which once occupied much of China, now seeks peace with its powerful neighbor. The colonial presence of Britain is only a distant and despised memory.

In what follows we shall place this dramatic development against the background of China's own long history as well as that of the world and of Christianity, but first let us examine some aspects of the rise of China

Aspects

Most obvious, of course, is the almost incredible advance into economic and financial dominance over the past three decades. China has become factory to the world; it increasingly commands vital resources, shouldering its rivals, including the United States, out of the way. The Chinese have penetrated and even captured markets once considered the domain of others, starting with toys, textiles, and furniture; then including computers. Publishing and automobile

manufacturing are not far behind. And of course China's vast currency reserves have dramatically changed the balance of economic power, as Europe and the United States sink beneath a flood of debt.

After years of self-imposed isolation, strong and deepening diplomatic ties have been formed with dozens of countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

Imposing scientific progress has been made in space and even biotechnology.

Huge and ongoing investments in infrastructure have produced a vast network of roads, railroads, and telecommunications that exceed those of Europe and even the United States.

China's military continues to grow at a rate which evokes voices of worry from other countries, as its naval power and projection move beyond the coastline into blue waters. China claims the entire South China Sea as its own, builds a presence on the Spratly Islands, sends a flotilla to join the campaign against pirates in the Indian Ocean, and announces its intention to build a modern navy.

"Soft power" complements military hardware, as Chinese movies gain awards and large audiences around the world; Chinese food becomes a major cuisine; Chinese fashions become popular; tourists flock in droves to visit China's historic sites, and Confucius Institutes spring up in major cities around the globe.

Both admiration for its ancient culture and dominance in sports were achieved last summer at the Beijing Olympics, as more than a billion people watched the opening ceremonies in stunned wonder and saw dozens of Chinese athletes take the winner's stand as their national anthem became almost an Olympic theme song.

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Han Chinese have resumed their centuries-old geographical expansion by immigration, tourism, business forays, and the presence of hundreds of thousands of students at the world's premier universities. Internally, they have begun to outnumber the previous inhabitants in sparsely-populated areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang

At the same time, China's own horrific pollution has spread not only to its near neighbors but even to other continents.

China's rise includes an unexpected flourishing of religion, including Buddhism, popular religions, revived Confucianism, and as we all know, Christianity, such that some people claim that there are more active Christians in China than in the United States.

Factors

What are some of the factors in this rapid rise?

Internal conditions fostering China's ascent to super-power status include thirty years of peace after a century of warfare, and the openness and reform policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Foreign capital, foreign technology, foreign experts teaching in China, and foreigners doing business in China have all played an indispensable role.

Chinese studying abroad have not only excelled in their academics, but enriched their homeland with their newly-gained knowledge and skills, as well as an awareness of fresh ways of doing things.

Less state intervention in the economy, low taxes,

low wages, and plentiful labor have combined with the inborn entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese people to create unprecedented prosperity.

Overseas Chinese links have brought vast resources into the country and formed networks for expansion into new markets. A favorable balance of trade and dramatic improvements in living standards for millions of Chinese have resulted from these and other factors.

If the history of the first part of the twentieth century, which has been so effectively portrayed in the book *Salt & Light*, edited by my colleagues Carol Hamrin and StaceBieler, gives us any clue, might we also speculate that Christians, both from the mainland and from overseas, have been at the center of much of this progress?

A number of external factors also deserve attention, such as the collapse of the U.S.S.R, followed by vastly warmer relations between these two huge neighbors, the latter being signified just this past week by a multi-billion oil delivery deal.

Perhaps most unexpectedly to some, but not a surprise to those who have been watching carefully, the decline of the United States forms a stark contrast, and perhaps an essential foil, to China's rise. After its decisive victory in World War II, the U.S. was fought to a stalemate on the Korean peninsula; defeated in Vietnam; expelled from influence in Iran; humiliated in Somalia; and devastated by the terrorist attacks in 2001.

The wings of America's Pacific Fleet were clipped with the loss of Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, then the harbors and airfields of Taiwan in 1979, the closure of the vast naval installation at Subic Bay in the Philippines and the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. Denial of these facilities to the U.S. Navy

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represents a serious lessening of America's ability to project power in the Far East.

American support for Israel has led to the alienation of Muslims, aggravated by the War on Terror, the invasion of Iraq, the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, and the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Off the coast of Africa, pirates seize American ships and take American hostages almost with impunity.

At home, a failing economy has caught almost everyone off guard. The debacle on Wall Street has stripped New York of what little glamour it still possessed after 9/11, while the bursting of the housing bubble has erased trillions of dollars from ledger sheets and portfolios all over the world.

In a desperate attempt to set things right, the government has sent the Federal deficit and national debt to new and dizzying heights, bringing warnings that the hyper-inflation of pre-war Germany and post-war China may ravage what was once the world's strongest economy. The loss of the dollar's credibility as the world's reserve currency has prompted calls by China, Russia and several Muslim nations for an alternative to the current monetary system.

With dwindling financial resources, America has already started downsizing its military, further eroding its potential as a barrier to a rising China. In recent years, we have also seen the alienation of European allies and a dramatic rise in anti-American sentiment around the world, further weakening the nation that is increasingly seldom being called "the world's only superpower."

Historical perspective

2. China's rise reverses recent history and

restores past glory

As we were reminded during the Beijing Olympics, China's rise has ended what the Beijing government likes to call the "century of humiliation," which began with the Opium Wars and featured unequal treaties with European powers, the burning of Summer Palace; the sack of Beijing after the Boxer Rebellion; the loss of Hong Kong; and foreign occupation of parts of China. The stunning defeat by Japan led to removal of Korea from China's sphere of influence, not to mention separation of Taiwan from control by Beijing, a condition that persists to this day. Meanwhile, Vietnam, traditionally at least nominally within China's sphere of influence, was pried away from China by the French, and remains outside of China's control.

China's sufferings and humiliation continued in the twentieth century, with the Japanese invasion and then occupation of much of China, a long and bloody civil war, dependence upon the U.S.S.R. for advice and aid; and U.S. military dominance in East Asia.

All that is now dead and buried in the annals of foreign imperialism and domestic disunity.

China's rise recalls times in previous Chinese history when the Middle Kingdom was really the center of its world, enjoying pre-eminence and even dominance in large regions of East Asia. With the recovery of Hong Kong and Macao, territorial integrity has been restored. Control over Tibet, Xinjiang, and much of the old "Silk route" regions, recalls the vast domains of the Han, Yuan, and Qing dynasties.

Growing regional influence also harks back to the days when China expected its neighbors to act like vassals. Its presence in ASEAN, growing influence over the Korean Peninsula, close ties with Singapore,

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vital support for the military junta in Burma, and rapidly-tightening ties with Taiwan take us back to the heyday of the Ming period, when China's navy ruled the waves, and to other periods when its army could launch expeditions far beyond its borders.

China's economy was for centuries the largest in the world, and its current economic penetration and influence, based on a potent combination of the People's Republic, overseas Chinese, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, has almost recovered that distinction.

In short, we are witnessing the restoration of China's past prominence, even dominance, in its "world," with an economic, cultural, diplomatic, and military presence that cannot be ignored. Some analysts believe that China's rulers are seeking a return to a status of virtual "hegemony," rather than the multi-polar world order envisioned by Samuel Huntington a few years ago. At the very least, what we are seeing now is the fulfillment of a long-held dream. Those who worked for the Nationalist revolution one hundred years ago would be thrilled.

Expansionist?

Will this rising China be expansionist? If by that we mean extending its power beyond its borders, Yes. For one thing, China is already pursuing an expansionist policy on a number of fronts, as we have seen. For another, we need only to look at China's long history to see instances of expansion beyond the "core" state – the Qin, Han, Yuan, early Ming, and early Qing did not widen their territories as a result of popular votes by peoples eager to come under the rule of the emperor of China.

If "expansionist" means militarily aggressive, the answer is only, Maybe. Chinese prefer indirect

means to gain their ends, and they delight in winning a war without actually engaging in combat. But if there is no other way to protect their interests, of if China's leaders feel threatened at home or abroad, a potent array of weapons will be ready for action, backed by millennia of brilliant military strategy, which places an emphasis upon deception and surprise, as shown in the book, *Unrestricted Warfare*. Indeed, since 1950, surprise attacks have been launched in Korea, India, the offshore islands between Taiwan and the mainland, and Vietnam. We should not rule out this possibility, though it is only that.

3. China's rise is both typical and unique

Let us now compare China's rise to that of other nations in the past. To pick only a few instances, we can cite the victories of the Greek city states, which stopped the Persian advance; ascendancy of Athens over other Greek states, only to be replaced by Sparta. The lightning-fast creation of a Hellenistic empire by Alexander the Great furnishes a kind of parallel to China's rapid emergence, for Greek power and civilization replaced that of Persia in the Middle East within two decades. The fractured Hellenistic kingdoms were then gradually overcome by the might of Rome, as were the Celtic tribes of Europe.

After several hundred years, Germanic hordes overwhelmed the effete, corrupt, and over-extended Roman Empire in the West; a few centuries later, the Eastern Roman Empire fell to the Arab onslaught, fueled as it was by a militant Islam.

In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch navies created colonies and empires in Africa, South America, and Asia. While retaining some influence in the Western Hemisphere, they were expelled by the British in

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North America, Africa, and Asia. After defeating the French, Britannia ruled the waves for almost a century, while the United States was slowly gathering strength, Russia was building its empire in Central Asia and the Far East, and a modernized Japan cast its ambitious eyes on China's traditional sphere of influence.

Indeed, the Japanese, though finally defeated by the Allies, effectively put a halt to European colonial advance in Asia. Meanwhile, in Europe, the united German states permanently humbled France and eventually fought England to exhaustion in two bloody wars. The Germans were then brought to their knees by the Russians and the Americans, the two winners of that awful conflict. During the Cold War, the development of nuclear ICBMs radically altered the balance of power, so that now several different countries can unleash terrible destructive power on an enemy.

Common features

Are there any common features to this story? Yes. For a nation to rise, it generally has required economic strength, based upon agricultural sufficiency, or a sure supply of food; a strong central government or organization; either rapid ground forces or naval power, or both, with naval power being more important. There must be mastery of new military technology, and a sense of "National Destiny." Hardiness, both physical and mental, must characterize the citizens.

At the same time, weakness, disunity, ever-extension of rivals seems to be almost a pre-requisite for a successful change in hegemony.

Uniqueness

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China's current rise meets many of these conditions, but goes beyond in enough categories to make it almost unique: Its population size puts China into a league shared only by India, but China possesses far more cultural and racial coherence. China's economic strength, including its vast currency reserves and manufacturing power, is almost unprecedented. Worldwide "colonization" by millions of energetic and prosperous Chinese exceeds that of England at its height, while the rapidity of its rise is almost without parallel.

China commands an impressive combination of military resources, including cyber-warfare capability, ICBMs, growing capacity to neutralize the space-based technology so vital to America, a modernizing army, navy, and air force, and an unknown but certainly huge number of overseas agents with powerful "5th column" potential.

Well-placed allies form a key component for international influence, and China enjoys more or less good connections with Russia, North Korea, Burma, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Iran, Syria, Sudan, and other states unfriendly to America.

Strategic location plays a key part, too. China possesses a continental base unlike England; with a long coastal exposure, unlike Russia. It controls both ends of the Panama Canal, and is tightening its grip upon the vital sea lanes of the South China Sea.

When you add the growing cultural confidence of many Chinese, with great pride in their long and magnificent record of achievements in art, literature, philosophy, technology, government, ethics, and – yes – military prowess, you have a potent cocktail.

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In short, China possesses the potential for effective direct or indirect dominance of almost the entire globe. That is why some well-informed observers make bold to say that the rise of China may be the most significant development in the history of world.

4. China's rise is fraught with fragility

From the perspective of world history, we can detect some common features not only of a great power's rise, but of its decline. These typically include over-extension; internal division; economic mistakes, such as high taxes and/or heavy government intervention and debasement of the currency. A lack of public "morality" and a breakdown of national cohesiveness sap the will to rule. Natural disasters and strategic blunders, such as the mistakes that both Napoleon and Hitler made in Russia, and perhaps that George Bush committed in Iraq, can lead to disastrous setbacks. Powerful enemies also do their part.

For these and other reasons, all world empires have been temporary, with that of Athens and of America being two of the briefest reigns of glory.

In China's case, there are obstacles to its continued rise, and ominous signs of troubled waters ahead.

Internal

Internal warnings are coming from a variety of directions. Rising rebellions, fueled by rural resentment and urban unrest are being caused by endemic corruption of local officials, as seen in the shoddy school construction in Sichuan. Favored "princelings" also arouse the ire of common people.

Party divisions threaten the unity that is essential for any government to stand. Traditionalists argue for more state control, especially now that capitalism seems discredited, while "reformers" still believe in allowing the market to work. Restless citizens keep pushing the envelope towards more freedom, and individualistic youth join with angry consumers and an aroused middle class to produce a pool of discontent. Civil rights activists and signers of Charter '08" publicly call for political reform, while the more than 120,000 demonstrations in 2008 testify to the depth and breadth of popular resentment. Some are even whispering the sentiment that the Communist Party, like many a corrupt predecessor, has lost the Mandate of Heaven.

The government is very aware of the presence of widening economic divisions that could produce instability. The gaps between rich and poor; urban and rural residents; coastal and hinterland regions; not to mention ethnic tensions between the Han and Tibetans and Muslims, add to Beijing's worries.

Such ingredients have brewed widespread revolts in the past, and I have read somewhere that there are already more than 100 revolutionary movements at present, including some pretty scary semi-"Christian" millenarian sects. With the memory of the quasi-Christian Taiping rebellion, which almost toppled the Manchu dynasty, before them, it is no wonder that government officials fear a highly-organized Christian movement with a rural base, connections in the cities, and foreign support!

Looming in the foreground is the terrible environmental crisis- the shortage of clean water, deadly air, depleted or poisoned soil - all leading to disease, disruption, disillusionment and anger against the government, as well as growing international outrage.

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Incredibly rapid urbanization has brought with it loss of agricultural sufficiency, and an unstable migrant worker population, while demographic trends such as an aging population and huge surplus of males portend trouble ahead.

Rising health dangers include a creeping epidemic of HIV/AIDS; endemic heart disease; respiratory ailments. Another outbreak of SARS or bird flu could create social disorder on a large scale.

Unexpected shocks, as devastating as they are sudden, can upset carefully-laid plans and introduce fearsome volatility. Natural disasters, such as last year's winter storms and the terrible earthquake, are always possible, as are internal events, such as the Tibetan riots in 2008.

The current economic slowdown caught many off guard, and has spawned unemployment and internal conflict over role of the state in the economy. As the rest of the world sinks into recession or even depression, China's own slower growth, plus anger over entrance into WTO and close ties to the world economy, could erode support for the current regime.

External

External threats to the stability of China are not lacking, either. The existence of an autonomous, democratic Taiwan presents a constant reminder of another way of governing China, one in which basic human rights are guaranteed, including that of the unrestricted practice of religion. The rise of a nuclear-armed India poses no immediate threat, preoccupied as the Indians are with Pakistan, but one must not underestimate the potential of a clash of fundamental interests coupled with radical Hinduism to lead to real conflict, especially as India feels pres-

sured by China's moves in the Indian Ocean.

Nor should we forget Islamic influence, in China's far West, in South East Asia, where Chinese settlers have been seen as a threat for decades, and in the neighboring countries of Central Asia. All is currently relatively quiet on the western front, but things could change in a flash.

What shall we say about the Middle East, where an American conflict with Iran could shut down the vital oil supply line running through the Straits of Hormuz before the pipeline to Russia is fully operative? What would happen if Japan decides to go nuclear to protect itself from its former enemy? Does anyone know what is going to happen on the Korean Peninsula?

Would a nervous Russia ever resort to an oil shutoff or even atomic weapons to counter China's rapid de facto colonization of eastern Siberia or some other perceived threat? Can we be sure that a future American president won't do something rash?

If the current economic crisis results in the sudden collapse of American and European economies, how would that affect China's own precarious prosperity?

Scenarios

Based on the past and the present, can we make any guesses – for that is all they can be – about the future? Several possible scenarios have been put forward. One is that the status quo will continue, with the Communist Party somehow successfully muddling through. Another, less likely, option, is that China would break up into regions, as it did after the Revolution of 1911. A third, equally unlikely as it seems to me, would be a peaceful transition to democracy, which was attempted by the Republic of China in the pre-war period and finally achieved on

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Taiwan.

If we look both at China's very recent history and at the ways in which previous dynasties have followed each other, it seems very possible to me that the People's Liberation Army would step in to save the nation from descending into chaos in an emergency caused by any of the threats I have just mentioned, or an explosive mix of them. The army was called in to quell the Red Guards when they got out of control in the 1960s, and once again to put down the popular demonstrations in 1989. Each time the troops returned to their barracks, though they gained more influence in the government after the Tiananmen incident. What if, like the Manchu troops who were asked to help save a dying Ming dynasty, they do their job and then stay around?

Though it was nominally a constitutional republic, China was in fact governed by generals from 1911 to 1949. Why could we not see another nationalist and basically socialist regime in the future? Such a state would feature strict control, a strong appeal to China's past glory, a passion for its future honor, and a high potential for war, especially if that was considered the only way to re-unite the nation.

Christian history

China's rise presents both opportunities and challenges to the Christian church

In the light of all this, we can see that China's rise presents both opportunities and challenges to the Christian church.

If we scan the pages of church history, we shall observe several ways in which Christians have related to a powerful state.

There have been cases of Christian expansion under an imperial "peace," such as the Pax Romana, Pax Britannica, and Pax Americana. Christianity has expanded also with the support of a rising power, such as Charlemagne's "Holy Roman Empire," the alliance of crown and church in the colonial territories of Catholic Spain and Portugal and of Protestant Holland and Britain. In the first half of the twentieth century, the United States of America identified itself as a "Christian" nation, and sought, at least in theory, to promote the interests of Christianity wherever its power advanced.

We can find cases, also, of the church beings sponsored, approved, or even conjoined to the state by an established imperial government, as in Rome after Constantine; the Byzantine Empire; Roman Catholicism in Europe and Latin America, and the established Protestant churches of western Europe. There was some of this also in the case of the "Church of the East" in Tang and Yuan China, though mixed with state support of other religions.

Advantages & disadvantages

We can not deny that certain advantages accrue to such state support, including prestige, financial resources, and political protection. On the other hand, numerous disadvantages also come with state patronage, including connection with unwelcome dominance, as in the case of the Dutch Reformed Church in Indonesia and the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in 19th-20th century China. Even worse, however, are the pride, arrogance, assumption of cultural superiority, and reliance on man that tend to accompany sponsorship by a mighty government or country. Christian spirituality under these conditions tends to be crippled by forgetting the Cross, love of this world, advanced and moribund ecclesiastical organization, and even "dead orthodoxy." All too often, church leaders with state pa-

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tronage have been guilty of abusing power to suppress “heresy” and have been co-opted by the rulers for their own political ends. One thinks of Czarist Russia, the German Church, and even some periods of the Church of England, and the way that “civil religion” has silenced the American church.

Perhaps the most harm has come when Christians have allowed the cultural values of their culture to penetrate the church, rather than allowing the truth of the Bible to transform our cultural values. One particularly dangerous error is to confuse love of country with complete agreement with whatever our country does. Sometimes patriotism involves speaking out with a prophetic voice – something we in the West have not done enough.

To me, the worst case scenario for China would be for some Chinese “Constantine” to decide he could not destroy the church and that he needed to favor Christianity in order to strengthen his hand and run the country. We must pray that this will never happen to Christians in China!

There is another model of church growth, however: Expansion under pressure and even persecution. Early Christianity provides one of the best examples, but so does the history of the Anabaptists in Europe, the Pilgrims in the first period of American colonization, Christians in India today, and of course Chinese Christians at various times and in various places.

We must not minimize the disadvantages of such an existence. Suffering can be terribly painful; the necessity of clandestine operations creates tension and stress and may foster loss of trust, lack of coordination, and the growth of heresies and sects. Under constant pressure, it’s easy to encourage an unhealthy “martyr” mentality, and hard to build a healthy church life.

On the other hand there are advantages to state suspicion and even persecution. Such churches tend to stress the primacy of evangelism and love; they preach the centrality of the Cross; they rely upon God’s power and presence; they are nurtured by a heavenly hope. As we have seen in China, government restrictions tend to produce house churches, which multiply rapidly, training new leaders and calling forth the participation of ordinary believers along the way.

If Christians learn from the past, they may avoid some previous mistakes. After all, that is the chief purpose of looking at current events from a historical perspective – that we gain wisdom thereby. The time for Western leadership in the church, as in the world, is coming to an end. The era of American wealth, power, and prestige is over. Westerners will be able to contribute to Chinese Christianity only if they renounce all national and cultural arrogance; seek to be pre-eminent only in service, to be outstanding only in humility, to lead only by example, to prevail only in prayer.

Chinese Christians would also be wise to avoid errors committed by Western Christians, while retaining whatever is good in what Westerners have done among them. They should not forget how God has grown the great Chinese church of today – hard work, suffering, prayer, the message of the Cross and the power of the Resurrection, loving community and the reliance upon God. They need to remember the fatal compromises that Christians in the past have made with the world’s obsession with power, vainly believing that political connections and bulging bank accounts would advance the true kingdom of God. It would be good for them not to follow the common pattern of identifying one’s country or our culture with the kingdom of God, or thinking that China is God’s chosen nation, as some used to call America. Western Christians have all too often con-

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fused their culture with the Gospel, and have mixed culture and Christianity in ways that have not been consistent the Bible's world view. We see some of this sort of thing taking place among "culture Christians" in China today, with potentially debilitating consequences.

Now is a good time for Chinese Christians to apply biblical principles to all aspects of life, seeking to serve as salt and light in a society with many ills, promoting harmony, obedience to the government, and care for the poor and weak in times of increasing insecurity and fear.

Some of the values of traditional Chinese culture have been increasingly called into question by Chinese themselves since the early 20th century, and some of the myths by which the current regime stays in power have lost their persuasive power. With Chinese in command of their own destiny, their problems can no longer be blamed on foreigners. Perhaps more self-criticism will bring significant progress, even as the positive contributions of traditional Chinese culture are re-affirmed.

