

Christianity in Rural China: A Case Study of Haikou Town

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Preface

China is a large agricultural country, and as the rural economy continues to develop and the living standards of the farmers are enhanced day by day, a growth in religious belief (Christianity in particular) has also been noteworthy. Religion in rural China is a complex matter. Religious belief has been deeply rooted in traditional Chinese society and its important role in rural China has not been overlooked. To verify the historical or modern social viewpoint, the Chinese peasant represents traditional Chinese culture and folk belief. Christianity, which is the root of Western culture, has become a serious issue in recent years because it is spreading rapidly among the peasants. Traditional Chinese folk beliefs such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have not grown as fast as Christianity. According to the statistics of the Chinese government, China has a population of Christian believers of approximately 25 million^[1], of which about 80% are peasants in rural areas. Christian ideology has already brought about a major influence and a stunning impact on the traditional folk beliefs, moral precepts, and lifestyle of the original cultural structure of rural areas. As everyone knows, Chinese civilization has encountered Christianity many times over a long period of years, and many significant concepts and influences from Christianity have appeared in Chinese history. However, despite many efforts over several centuries, Christianity has received strong resistance from Chinese culture. So Christianity has been unable to take root in China until today^[2]. Considering such a historic and social background, why has Christianity, which is called a “western religion”, been able to grow tremendously in rural China since the “reform and opening up” policy that began at the end of 1970s? What is the reason? What is the present faith situation in rural China? In this paper, I will try to find comprehensive answers to the above questions and investigate the course of religious policy for the future of rural China. I think this paper will be important in understanding the growth of religion (especially Christianity) in modern rural China.

Many foreign scholars have drawn attention to religious studies about rural China. A Japanese scholar, Prof. Kenji Hidemura, considered the revival of religion in modern rural China following the “reform and opening up” policy in 1978 from the viewpoint of religion in his thesis (1993). In addition, Prof. Atsutoshi Hamashima has discussed the development of local beliefs and society in rural Jiangnan from a sociological viewpoint (2001). However, due to the strict religious survey restrictions of the Chinese government, foreign scholars find it difficult to secure current information about developments and changes among rural Chinese. Also because of a lack of data and research materials, their most comprehensive studies about religion in rural China are still not sufficient.

Recently, mainland Chinese scholars also have begun to actively research religion in rural areas. Many research books and theses have been published. However, these Chinese researchers only focus on philosophical and sociological aspects of traditional Chinese folk beliefs in rural areas. They have not paid much attention to reasons why Christianity has grown rapidly among the peasants or what reasons have brought about this belief in Christian faith. However, without consideration of these factors, it is difficult to accurately assess the current religious situation in rural China.

When we try to verify the existence of Christianity in rural China, the biggest problem is the deficiency in data and other research materials. The main causes are as follows. First, the state administration for religious affairs makes a statistical investigation into the fluctuations in numbers of the “three-self” church and clergymen every year, but because of the concealment of the characteristics of the home churches, the data are inaccurate. Second, the “three-self” church has some basic information about church members (including age, gender, occupation, address), but because the churches have only a limited number of persons who have special knowledge about data management and data processing technology, this information cannot be easily acquired. Furthermore, because of the secrecy involved in the release of religious information, both the state administration for religious affairs and local churches do not want to release full data. In this paper, I hope to overcome the above-mentioned difficulties by utilizing the results of field work carried out in G village, which belongs to Haikou Town in March, 2012^①. Through group sharing links of the local government, I have tried to build up the reliable relationship of village cadres and local residents. Also through the

traditional research methods of observation, interviews, and active participation, I have minutely recorded information about the daily lives and worship activities of local Christian believers. In the study below, I make full use of these data and research materials to theoretically analyze, and thus construct a clear picture of, the recent religious situation in rural China^[4].

1. Chinese folk beliefs and the present situation after the “reform and opening up” policy

Traditional rural society in China is a provincial society that has been formed on the basis of agricultural life^[5]. Because peasants regard land as the most important thing in their lives, a phenomenon of social illiquidity came about in provincial society. Therefore, in rural areas the peasants attach great importance to blood relationships. Customs based on ancestor worship provided a firm foundation for the stability and consistency of the structure of rural society. At the same time, ancestor worship as a belief form became a strong spiritual support to the peasants. However, there are various non-definite risks existing in Chinese rural society, so the peasants felt that they had to depend on the gods to find peace of heart. We can say that Chinese folk beliefs such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism fulfilled an important function for society by providing spiritual support and helping to maintain social stability. Ancestral temples which focus on the worship of ancestors, Taoist temples, and Buddhist temples exist in all the villages in rural China. In addition, Buddhist priests, Taoist priests, and geomancers have played a role both in the rituals of the religious customs of individual families and in the group religious customs (in ancestral temples, Taoist temples, Buddhist temples) that were a means for gathering the believers together^[6]. In such traditional rural areas, the system of these folk religious customs has been maintained for several thousand years.

In addition, the peasants recited the published collection of Chairman Mao's sayings and worshiped him as a god during the Cultural Revolution. Chinese scholars have pointed out that the peasants show blind faith in worshipping their political leaders, and see this as a characteristic of folk beliefs.

After the “reform and opening up” policy that began in 1978, Chinese rural society has been changed by rapid developments in the economy.

Because the people's commune system was abolished, each rural family began to take responsibility for land production assignments. Agriculture has long been the very heart of rural life in China but this is changing now. Agricultural land is diminishing rapidly. If the situation continues, then China will no longer be able to feed itself, and the minimal security that the peasants depend on will be irrevocably destroyed. However, the young people have been giving up their agricultural lives and leaving their hometowns to go to urban areas to find work. Therefore, either individuals or individual family units have gained independence from the village and thus became vulnerable to a variety of risks. Furthermore, various social problems have appeared. These include the expansion of the tremendous gap between the rich and the poor, social unfairness, various disorders, social and moral decadence, and the greedy pursuit of riches. While the rich people from the urban areas are eating luxury foods in hotels, the poor people from the rural areas are unable to pay for their children's tuition even though they work with extreme diligence. Under these conditions, the peasants have become hungry for protection and security in the face of these rapid social changes.

As a result of these problems, religion has gained more space to exist and thrive ^[7]. Formerly, too, when the peasants faced uncertainty and difficulty in their circumstances, they relied on religion for the answers. They thought that the gods were symbols of justice who brought them happiness, and thus gave them a role in removing uncertainty and risks from their lives ^[8]. Religion had been regulated during the Cultural Revolution but it began to revive gradually because of the "reform and opening up" policy in the late 1970's ^[9]. As a result of this historic background, rural residents began again to seek some forms of religious belief. Of course, they looked back to the folk form of religion with which they had been familiar prior to the Cultural Revolution, since it had fulfilled important functions in their society in providing spiritual support and maintaining social stability. Thus during the Chinese social reformation, some peasants wanted to rely on their well-known religious forms to resist the new surging waves from society. In Fujian or Guangdong Province, some rural areas tried to reestablish the folk religious beliefs and rituals, and restore temples and ancestral graves. However, because of the damage arising from the Cultural Revolution and local government influence, and also an outflow of the male population, it is apparent that rebuilding the folk religious system had become very difficult.

Furthermore, because of the reevaluation of Chairman Mao, the recitation of his collected sayings was prohibited by the Chinese government. Finally, traditional gods and Buddha gradually began to disappear from the peasants' hearts. Moreover, in modern China many local religious practices have been deemed "superstitious" and have been attacked and destroyed.

Under such social conditions, the rural residents began to seek a new form of spiritual gratification to satisfy their impoverished spirituality. Thus as a result of the diminishing strength of the folk religious systems, there was an opening for Christianity to spread among the rural areas. Christianity became a means for renewed social stability instead of the folk religious belief. With their focus on honesty, love, and helpfulness the doctrines of the Christian faith upheld values consistent with the social morality in rural areas. Rural Chinese began to participate in home worship services. Many became Christian believers and found solace in Christian faith. An analysis of the social phenomenon from 13,000 three-self churches and countless home churches strongly suggests that Christianity has grown rapidly now in rural China. Because of inadequacies in the old folk forms of religion, the peasants had fallen into uneasiness of heart and mind. Thus they turned their eyes to Christianity. This is the important background that enabled Christianity to spread rapidly in rural areas.

2. The general situation of G village in Haikou Town

Haikou Town is located in the northeastern area of Fuqing City. The total area of Haikou Town is up to 52.64 sq. km. The totally cultivated lands of Haikou Town are 14,511 mu. It currently has 19 administrative villages. According to the Census in 2010, there was a total population of 73,000. Haikou Town is an ancient town that boasts about its centuries-old civilization. It is well known because it has a high proportion of emigrants. Almost every rural family here has a close connection to a foreign country. Through one of my fellow church members in Japan I had the opportunity to do fieldwork in G village, which belongs to Haikou Town. Agriculture is a major source of livelihood in G village. The transportation system is quite convenient. It only takes thirty minutes by bus from the village to the downtown area of Fuqing City. However, the economy is not so good there. According to the village cadres, because many young people left the village to go to the big cities or foreign countries to find jobs, only middle-aged people and children remain in the village. The situation in regard to

depopulation and age population has worsened, and the large number of unoccupied houses are particularly noticeable.

According to my survey, there were several Buddhist, Taoist, and ancestral temples in the village. These religions were very popular in G village before. There were permanent priests in the temples and most peasants followed the traditional rituals on formal occasions. During the period of the Cultural Revolution, all the temples were destroyed and the permanent priests were sent to prison. Finally the folk system and rituals fell into decline. Since the “reform and opening up” policy, religion has ceased to be strictly controlled by the local government. Because of the poor economy in rural areas, only some permanent priests returned to the local temples. But at times like the New Year festival and the harvest moon festival according to the lunar calendar, some temple fairs have become important events for G village and the surrounding regions. The original purpose of these mass celebrations was to entertain all kinds of gods that were considered to be in charge of G village and provide its inhabitants with protection and blessings. During those days, people did business and communicated with each other at the same time. Though some traditional temple fairs are still maintained, the religious function has disappeared entirely. Few young people can recognize the religious meaning of these fairs. According to my survey, most of the young people do not even know the origin of temple fairs or the particular meaning of those ancient celebrations. It may be said that formal activities related to Chinese folk religions, Buddhism and Taoism have almost disappeared in G village because of the destruction of their actual buildings. Nevertheless the behavior, values and thoughts of some of the people are still influenced by these religions.

The local history of Christianity is as follows. It was first introduced to G village by western missionaries in the middle of the eighteenth century. There were only a few followers in the early days, but the number had increased to more than 150 by 1945. After liberation in 1949, further development was retarded. During the period of the Cultural Revolution, most of the Christians were persecuted, but they still maintained their faith secretly. The policy of religious freedom was regained after the close of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Christianity developed steadily thereafter. In 2011, there were 400 Christians, one church, 5 presbyters and 10 deacons in G village. Unfortunately, there were no ministers in G village. When new believers wanted to receive baptism, they needed to invite the

minister from the big church in Haikou Town to assist them. But it can be said that due to the simple form and structure of Christianity, even if there are no clergy or church buildings it is still possible to engage in religious life.

During the late 1970s and the early part of the 1980s, Christians in G village held worship services in the home of an elderly female Christian. After 1990, more and more people converted to the Christian faith. If we analyze the proportion of the Christian population according to gender, age and education, the following characteristics can be seen. First, the proportion of female Christians is high. In fact, women compose the majority of Christians in G village. The number of male believers is small. Some researchers said that women are more sensitive and emotional than men when they meet with misfortune or trouble. Furthermore, men have gone to the big cities or to foreign countries to work to increase the family income, while women have stayed in the hometowns to take care of parents and children. This means that more time to participate in worship activities was guaranteed to women^[10]. Another factor is that women are considered of less value than men in folk Confucian philosophy. Many families in rural areas also draw a distinction between public roles (men) and private roles (women). Essentially women are given responsibility for domestic affairs, and this is often to the detriment of having a public voice. But the Christian church offers a place where they do have a voice, a sense of community, a new family. For many women, therefore, membership offers them a social standing higher than they can find outside the Christian community.

Second, the proportion of aged Christians is very high. About 70% of all the Christians in G village are over 50 years old. Young people, especially the unmarried ones are extremely few. Probably, in the light of changes in the production structure, even those of middle age have seen their strength slowly ebbing away, and many have had to ease up on their work. As a result, they can spend more time participating in worship activities. By contrast, the young people have to take up the heavy burden of support for the family, so they do not have enough time to attend worship activities.

Third, the proportion of illiteracy is high in most rural areas. Most of the rural residents in G village have not received an education. Only a very few people have gained an elementary education. Because the peasants have not been able to get an education, it is difficult for them to respond to

social change. But it is very natural for them to depend on a religion such as Christianity.

The relatively low living standards, educational and cultural level of many peasants in rural China has also made it very easy for evangelists to communicate the Christian Gospel and to engage in evangelistic activities.

3. Christianity as a substitute for the folk religious system

The social function of the rural belief system is now providing mental support and peace of mind to the peasants, giving them social identity, emphasizing morality, and maintaining social stability. We can verify several points to clarify how Christianity has provided this social function and succeeded in replacing the former folk belief system.

1) Adjusting and integration functions of social order

Religion has the potential capacity for social integration. For society in general, feelings of empathy and a sense of justice are the foundation for maintaining social order. When rapid economic growth occurs, morality alone is not able to maintain a stable society and social order. However, it is possible to maintain a proper social order by relying on religion or law as well. Religion can keep adjusting and integrating functions for society as a whole, and for individual behavior, more successfully than law. For example, Christianity is a religion of salvation with laws for guidance. With the assurance of salvation in the future, Christianity teaches the believers to obey the doctrines of the faith. Social stability can be maintained in such a situation. When people are guided by faith or conscience in their actions or when they try to avoid a sense of guilt and take care to behave in specific ways, their adjustments are guided by the system of Christian doctrine. People feel guilty if they break away from the rules they have learnt.

Christianity thus played an important role in rebuilding morality and adjusting social order in rural areas. After the peasants came to believe in the Christian faith, they came to obey the Christian doctrines. They did not quarrel with others, fight with others, or resist society. Previously they had complained about the reality of social problems. But after becoming Christian, they participated in church activities. Through the believers' mutual exchange of opinions, they were given more opportunities to express their disapproval of social issues. Finally, complaints about society

disappeared. Chinese religious scholar Shangyang Sun has said that religion is a special help for social adjustment. Christianity contributed much to rebuild morality and adjust social order in rural areas. Some places where there has been a mass growth of Christianity have shown a very low criminal rate, which is a remarkable phenomenon^[11].

The peasants who had not been able to gain mutual understanding from government policy were now able to store a powerful undercurrent in their hearts. Peasants who sought to find a place to give vent to their anger came to believe in Christianity and found mental solace. Christianity became a social safety valve.

2) The function of mental adjustment

The mental stability of the peasants supported the achievement of healthy social functioning in rural life. The rural social structure experienced abrupt changes, and a series of new phenomena appeared as a result of social modernization. Because of the one child policy and changes in the peasants' lifestyle, the large family structure was broken. The family scale grew smaller, and clan power gradually deteriorated. So the social function of clans and individual families became weaker. In addition, the influence of local government also declined. Some older people who did not live together with their children gradually began to feel lonely. At the same time, because of changes in the industrial structure and the acceleration of urbanization, many young people left their homes to seek a new life in the big cities or in foreign countries. Thus only aged people, women and children remained in the hometowns to watch over the family property. Those who remained in the hometowns were impatient for their husbands or children to return as early as possible. In order to ease their anxiety and loneliness, they began to seek and to find solace and mental support. Through their Christian faith and their participation in church activities, many believers recognized that their faith was strengthened and their loneliness disappeared. They could pray for their family members who worked in far away places, and escape from their own stress and anxiety. It is no wonder that some rural residents turned to informal organizations such as churches to seek support and a sense of teamwork. We can say that Christianity played an important role in the mental adjustment for peasants who had fallen into a spiritual vacuum.

3) The function of building interpersonal relationships

Analysis of the peasants' culture and social resources reveals that these rural people are at the lower levels of society. Because of the monotonous cultural entertainment activities and the lack of leisure spots, the life of peasants is really lonely and many have hearts that feel empty. In addition, the local government or village cadres cannot give them enthusiastic help when they have various needs. But when people have found themselves in such a condition, the Christian church has become attractive to more and more rural residents. It is regarded as a friendly place, with an informal organization similar to that of a large family. Most peasants regard Christians as the most likely people to give them warm and resourceful help in times of need. When rural residents become Christian believers, therefore, they have found many opportunities to participate in church activities and also in the mutual exchange of opinions with other people. Rural believers become very interested in home worship, and attend worship services every night on their own initiative in believer's homes. Before the worship service, the believers share their worries and joy together. Through this sharing, almost all the believers feel free and relaxed. One group of believers said that Christianity is much better than Buddhism, or Taoism. The believers are like siblings, and if someone has problems, others will help. Furthermore, because there is a regular Christian worship service, mutual exchanges of opinions are also possible. So they have discovered that they no longer have those feelings of loneliness. Christianity acts as a very important role in the life of the local community.

When I surveyed G village, I found that the home worship was held in the Christian leaders' houses. They opened their houses and organized the worship. Almost all the local people participated in the home worship, and sometimes the rural believers from a neighboring village also came to visit to witness God's mercy. Home worship begins at about 7PM, but streams of believers usually come to the worship place at 6PM. They take approximately one hour to exchange greetings, chat and pray together. All the women Christians put a hat on their heads, which signifies to them that their sins are covered before the Lord during the prayer time. Most of their time in worship was spent in praising and praying. The preaching message was very short and delivered by a minister or priest who had not received regular theological education. After home worship, most of the participants told me that they felt fulfilled by God's mercy and that their

loneliness had disappeared. Under their common economic conditions and living circumstances, the rural residents experienced a unity of mind because of their unity in Christian faith.

4. The problems in rural Christianity

While Christianity as a foreign religion brings a sense of harmony with the local culture, nevertheless some problems have appeared.

1) Pragmatism in rural Christianity

The Chinese folk belief has taken on strong aspects of pragmatism and utilitarianism. Regarding the pragmatism of Chinese folk belief, a Chinese social scholar has said that the folk gods each have specific roles that enabled them to satisfy people's worldly demands at any time. Praying to gods seems realistic for the peasants. In order to earn the consent of the gods in response to their requests, the peasants use all kinds of methods to win their favor. Most rural Chinese do not participate in religious activities out of sincere faith, but instead, through their religious rituals, they seek to gain their own individual happiness and good favor^[12].

In order for Christianity to spread in rural China instead of the folk religions, Christianity tends to lean toward harmonizing the kind of pragmatism which is found in the folk religions. According to the survey, about 60% of the local residents admitted that the existence of "any family member suffering from disease and family trouble" was the main reason behind conversion. Most of them felt that belief in Christian faith would bring about healing of sickness along with medical treatments as a supplementary means. Furthermore, after becoming Christian believers, the peasants said they did not feel loneliness, and they found solace and mental support in Christian faith. Social conflicts decreased and the social order became more stable. From this perspective the type of Christianity that the peasants have adopted in rural China contains strong elements of pragmatism. A Chinese scholar points out that because of their poor economic life, the peasants did not have much time to pay careful attention to religious philosophy and spirituality. At the same time, their attitude towards religion is to seek pragmatically for advantages and benefits^[13]. When the peasants are faced with all kinds of actual social problems and poor economic conditions, they do not have enough time to delve into deeper religious philosophy and spirituality. And if Christianity wants to

spread in rural areas, it should work toward harmonizing pragmatism more effectively.

2) Conflicts and interactions between Christianity and other religions

The conflict between Christianity and other religious systems is mainly concentrated on idealistic issues. For most of the rural Christians, what makes them feel anxiety is the problem of whether or not to worship their ancestors and how to honor them. It is clear that not all Christians have given up idol worship after conversion. Quite a few Christians declared that they did not enshrine and worship their ancestors any more after their conversion to Christianity. In fact, however, we found out in participant observation and interviews that nearly every Christian preserved their ancestral worship traditions to different degrees though they may do it in alternative formats. In addition, because of the lack of ministers or priests who had a regular theological training, some Bible teachings that have been misunderstood are unfortunately the vogue among rural believers. For example, they stressed too much on the spiritual gifts (the power of healing, to speak in tongues) to forget the essentials of the Gospel. Most rural Christians believed that Christianity is the only correct religion and looked upon not only the Chinese folk religious systems but also on Catholicism as an enemy. There are some Catholic believers in G village, but there are no Catholic churches in the village. Catholic believers have to go to the neighboring village to attend the mass. Because of the worship of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism, local Christians looked down on the Catholic believers. So sometimes there are conflicts between Protestant Christianity and Catholicism.

Conclusion:

Reflection on the findings presented above suggests that the reasons behind the growth of Christianity in rural China are that Christianity filled the spiritual vacuum for the peasants and the serious defects in the faith of peasants was deflected. There are many causes of the negative atmosphere in rural China, including such problems as the moral decline of young people, value conflicts between generations, tension, fear of uncertainty, loneliness, and other mental disturbances caused by swift social changes. How can rural residents solve these kinds of problems? Who can solve these problems? Government and local institutions concern

themselves mostly with economic development and lack the ability to solve problems related to civil culture and demands for a sense of social security. Rural residents have few choices. Should they try to endure these problems, to solve them by themselves, or to turn to religions? Finally, they found that the social and functional vacuum in rural areas could be filled by Christianity. The rites and activities of Christianity are well organized and deeply meaningful in the eyes of rural residents. So Christianity is bound to prosper, especially in the absence of organized Chinese traditional religious activities. Christianity activated the broken civil life of the peasants, offered a public space where Christian believers could cultivate mutual exchanges of opinions, and supported the mental stability and basic life security of the people.

However, the rural residents have been greatly influenced by the effects of polytheism, pragmatism. In many instances Christians are primarily focused on their own personal salvation and security in the afterlife. Many rural Christians are very interested in the rites and activities of Christianity, and have little understanding of Christian doctrines or the essentials of Christian faith. They have an increasing need for correct theological teaching that does not limit their world view but rather challenges and expands it. This means, more and more, that ministers and priests who have a regular theological training are greatly needed in rural China. How Christianity can keep its essential meaning and generate a sound religious role in rural China will be a colossal subject in the future. But I believe that Christian faith is not an abstract thing, it is the wisdom and power to overcome the hardships of life. I am convinced that Christianity will develop steadily and become more and more standardized in rural China. More and more young people and educated people will convert to Christianity. Among those believers, deep spiritual aspirations will become increasingly important in their religious lives.

- [1] Shang Ji: *Chinese Religion*, Fifth Continent Broadcasting Company, 2004, p112.
- [2] Xu Yimeng: *The Indigenous Movement in China's Christianity-Research from the history of China's Christianity*, Koyo Shobo, 2007, p135.
- [3] I engaged in fieldwork in Fenhua City, which was influenced by "Christianity Fever" (the phenomena of exponential growth in Christian believers after the Cultural Revolution), last year. But the spread of Christianity in Haikou Town goes back to influences from missionaries before the Cultural Revolution. I selected Haikou Town for its strong missionary background and diverse religious heritage.
- [4] The results of the case studies suggest that the churches and the members I met

with can be seen as representative of the wider church, but it should be recognized that the sample is still small and therefore it would be unwise to say they are typical.

- [5] Fei Xiaotong: Birth System in Rural China, Beijing University Press, 1998, p6.
- [6] Hidemura Kenj: Religious Revivals in a Chinese Village, Study bulletin, Vol.1, Meisei University, 1993, p64.
- [7] Sun Shangyang: Sociology of religion, Beijing University Press, 2001, pp107-108.
- [8] Ibid.p108.
- [9] Hidemura, op.cit. p70.
- [10] Cheng Linshu, Cheng Xia: The logic behind religious history, Beijing Religious Culture Publishing Company, 2003, p263.
- [11] Sun. op.cit. p87.
- [12] Hou Jie and Pan Lizhu: Religious consciousness in China, Tianjin People Publishing Hous, 2001, p13.
- [13] Ibid. p113.