The Sinicization of Christianity: How China Is Responding to Religious Threats

By Dauti Kahura

It is around 4.00 pm on an easy, quiet Sunday. At the Kingdom Hall in the upscale suburb of Kilimani, off Elgeyo Marakwet Road, a church service begins with a song. Kingdom Hall is where the Christian denomination of the Jehovah Witness (JW) meets to praise and worship God. In fact, unlike many other Christian denominations, they call their church service a Christian meeting.

After the song, the congregants will pray and then follow the prayer with a 30-minute Bible lecture. The lecture could be on any of the ethical and moral scriptural teachings, as captured in one of the more famous JW’s teaching tracts, Watch Tower. The other is Awake magazine. While, Watch Tower deals with biblical teaching, Awake tends to concentrate on contemporary issues. These two pocket-size, simple and well-written, and available in many of the world’s languages, including African languages, have been the selling point of JW’s proselytising mission wherever they are stationed.

The Bible lecture is followed by a one-hour discussion on the selected theme of the late afternoon. The discursive session closes with a song and then a prayer, just like it had begun. Unlike many of JW’s meeting across the country, this is a special meeting: the Bible, the prayers, songs, the Awake and Watch Tower tracts are all in Mandarin. And that’s because the worshippers are Chinese expatriates and migrants living in Nairobi.
“The Jehovah Witness believe in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people, in their languages and without discrimination,” says one of the Chinese converts, who didn’t want to be named. Even though they are thousands of kilometres away from mainland China, the Chinese, wherever they are, are wary of the Communist Party of China (CPC)’s surveillance on Chinese citizens abroad. “Especially when they are engaging in activities considered anathema to CPC’s national interests – like participating in religious activities.”

This particular meeting comprises Chinese entrepreneurs and high society Chinese men and women living in Nairobi. The congregation number between 50 and 60 worshippers. They are joined by a smattering of Kenyan JWs who speak and understand Mandarin. “In its mission to spread its creed to all the peoples of this world, Jehovah Witness in Kenya grabbed the chance to evangelise to the discerning Chinese foreigners in the country,” said a Kenyan JW adherent, who speaks fluent Mandarin and attends the church meeting.

The Kenyan, who also sought anonymity, told me that the Jehovah Witness has one of the most robust websites of any religious organisations in the world. “We have Bible teachings, general information, messages and notices, practically in all the major languages of the world.”

The Jehovah Witness is a good place to commune and worship because it offers a convivial experience of oneness, there’s spirit of brotherhood and there isn’t any racial discrimination,” said one of the Chinese Jehovah Witness.

Ge Yuchen, in his article, “Chinese Migrants in Kenya: Why Do They Seek Religion?“ quotes a Chinese dentist who says, “Jehovah Witness is not only a church that forsakes all kinds of racial prejudices, but also an ideal place for interacting with the local people. It is an excellent place for social communication.”

Yet, it has not always been easy for the Jehovah Witness to reach out to some of these Chinese expatriates. “The Chinese living in Kenya are segmented: there are those that come through government agencies such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), a public broadcasting station that used to be China Central Television (CCTV), Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, road construction workers, and those who migrant on their own in search of freedom (subjective as it may sound) and business opportunities,” said the Kenyan JW, who speaks Mandarin and lived in China in the early years of this century.

“Chinese working for the government cannot be seen in or go anywhere near a church sanctuary or a religious gathering – Big Brother CPC is ever alert to Chinese flouting its rules and the punishment can be dire once you’re recalled or when back for home holidays,” said the Kenyan.

He said he learned this when visiting a Chinese friend who works for a huge construction firm and who he got interested in an Awake magazine. “We Jehovah Witnesses are called to spread the ’good news’ to all the people, wherever we meet them, more so, to people who may have not heard about Jesus Christ. That’s why we carry these tracts wherever we go.” But as soon as he was done seeing his friend, the supervisor approached and told him never to discuss religious matters with any of the Chinese workers.

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The Chinese migrants in Kenya not only attend the JW meetings, they also attend other churches, mostly evangelical/Pentecostal churches, while a few are to be found in the mainstream churches such as the Catholic and Protestant churches. However, no Chinese person living in Kenya wants to discuss his or her religious beliefs, especially to a non-Chinese stranger. So, although Wang Wei (not his real name) has lived in Kenya since the turn of the century, and converted to Catholicism, and is today a parish member of a well-known Catholic parish, he pleaded that I should not expose him.

“For some of the tens of thousands of Chinese businessmen and entrepreneurs who are working in Kenya, following religious creeds helps to establish good codes of conduct in their business operations. Those who convert to Christianity are often able to receive positive recognition from the public. The way that they look at their situation and surroundings is also often altered for the better.

“By deliberately guiding us the exploration of life pursuit, the Bible is just like a beacon which gives us light and illuminates the dark roads forward,’ said Mr. F, a middle-aged merchant who trades in shoes in coastal Mombasa,” writes Yuchen. He continues:

“Perhaps most significantly, believing in a religion seems to allow foreign residents in Kenya to integrate into the local community more easily. In particular, believing in Christianity helps Chinese residents understand the local culture and lifestyle. In contrast, according to Mr. D., as a result of a reluctance of learning and understanding the local people’s lifestyles, many Chinese residents have failed to assimilate into the local social environment of Kenya. When I spoke with a few Chinese employees at a company on Nairobi’s Mombasa Road, they described how they seldom have any opportunities to interact with locals.”

Conversion as a means of assimilation

In his article “How Africa is Converting China”, Christopher Rhodes, a Boston University don who has been studying Chinese migrants in Eastern Africa and their affinity to Christianity, observes, “Many Chinese who have gone abroad, especially Africa, have met alien cultures and traditions - leaving them feeling alone and foreign.”

For many of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese who live and work in Africa, life is often not easy. Low pay, long hours and extended assignments in unfamiliar cultures often lead to feelings of isolation and disillusionment, says journalist Eric Olander. “Connections with friends and family back home, largely using WeChat, are often difficult to maintain over extended periods of time, which prompts some to look for comfort closer to home. And in places like East Africa, some of these disaffected workers are finding their way into the evangelical Christian community that is so pervasive in that part of the continent. Seeing the opportunity to grow their parishes, church leaders are readily embracing this new population with services in Mandarin and other Chinese dialects.”

But after they return to China, notes Olander, they become a potential problem for the Chinese Communist Party, which imposes strict regulations on religion and bans any unapproved religious activity.

Therefore, in an interesting twist of fate, these Chinese have found religious solace in the evangelical Christianity of the Pentecostal persuasion that has been spreading so fast in sub-Saharan Africa, like the devastating bush fires wreaking havoc in New South Wales, Australia. Spurred on by an expansionist ambition and appetite to attract new converts to swell their numbers, these churches have stumbled upon a ready fishing ground of a people in search of fellowship and meaning.

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For these churches, winning the souls of the Chinese is a big project, especially seen in the wider context of the fact that many of the evangelical churches in Kenya and Africa are proxies of mother churches in the US. Hence, bankrolled by those organisations to carry their global agenda, part of which is to spread the American version of Christianity through evangelical Christianity. Similarly, for the migrant Chinese, attending a church service freely and openly, unhinged and uninhibited, is a liberating experience of religious expression and belief in a supra-natural deity other than the CPC. In mainland China, this is practically impossible.

**Christianity in China**

“Religious freedom in China has really reached to the worst level that has not been seen since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution by Chairman Mao (Zedong) in the 1960s,” writes Samuel Smith, a journalist with the Christian Post. He points out that the Chinese government is supervising a five-year plan to make Christianity more compatible with socialism. There will be a “rewrite” of the Bible. According to a prominent religious freedom activist, the Rev. Bob Fu, the revision of religious regulations will actively guide religion to “adapt to socialist society.”

Religious control in China today is even more severe than it was even just a few years ago, observes Rhodes. “The CPC has always been anti-religion, but after (Premier) Xi Jinping assumed Party control in 2012, China enacted a level of religious persecution not seen since Mao attempted to eliminate religion and other sources of dissent during the bloody Cultural Revolution.”

The plan proposes “cultivating and implementing the socialist core values.” One way in which they plan to “Sinicize” Christianity, Fu is quoted saying, is by “re-translating” the Old Testament and providing new commentary to the New Testament to make socialist ideals and Chinese culture seem more divine. Fu said that in order to comply with the new religious regulations, the Three Self-Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Christian Council (China’s state-sanctioned Protestant bodies), have developed a five-year plan on “promoting the Sinicization of Christianity.”

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Thence, posits Rhodes, Catholics in mainland China can legally practise their faith only through the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, a government body that regulates them into a tightly managed and Communist-friendly version of Catholicism. “Under President Xi, Chinese officials have literally exploded churches, arrested entire Christian congregations, forcibly removed images of the Dalai Lama from Tibetan Buddhists’ homes, and detained up to one million Muslims from the minority Uighur ethnic group in ‘re-education’ camps.”

This notwithstanding, it has not stopped Msgr Agostino Cui Taim 69, the “controversial” Catholic bishop of Xuanhua, of being seen as a threat and treated as a rebel by CPC. Sanctioned by the Vatican, he is derided by CPC and viewed as an enemy of the state. Since 2007, he has been constantly harassed and placed under surveillance by the CPC. He was recently released temporarily to spend some time with his ageing sister on the eve of China’s Lunar New Year celebrations, which
began on January 24. The celebrations were supposed to end on January 30, but they have been extended for another three days because of the sudden explosion of the coronavirus disease, which has hit the populous Wuhan province.

“In a more disturbing move, last year, the Vatican and the CCP concluded years of negotiations with a deal to merge the government-controlled Catholic organization and the underground Catholic Church in China, while allowing Beijing to maintain a substantial role in approving the appointment of new bishops. Many have viewed this deal as a win for the Chinese government, extending its oversight over all Catholics in the country,” wrote Rhodes.

He adds: “From the days of Confucius until now, Chinese governments have been consistently focused on social order, and the Chinese Communist Party is downright obsessed with maintaining stability. Between a quarter and half of the Chinese population now believes in one religious tradition or another, and the CPC fears any large group of organized and ideologically motivated citizens could challenge the Party.”

“Religion is seen as a weakening influence and an existential threat to the very existence of a new emerging Chinese order that is bent on ruling the world in the coming years,” said a Chinese national living Kenya. “China is in constant fight and struggle with the West, which it believes wants to undermine its stranglehold on world power through the influence of Christianity. On this one, China cannot and will not relent.”

He alluded to the six-month Hong Kong city demonstrations by the unrelenting Hong Kongians and the CPC’s backlash. CPC views these demonstrations, not as a demand for more democratic freedom and space, but as one of the West’s strategies of sneaking in religion into Chinese culture, hence weakening its power. Because of the Hong Kong riots, CPC has tightened its already strict controls for Chinese Christians going to Hong Kong for retreats and seminars.

Although it clear the churches are not in control and are not the originators of the unending strikes, CPC believes the churches have surreptitiously been lending support to the strikers. “From criticizing the Chinese Communist Party and supporting underground churches both before and after the handover, to calling upon the population to defy repressive Chinese-proposed laws in the early years of the ‘one country, two systems’ era, the churches of Hong Kong have actively mobilised opposition to Beijing and created an atmosphere of defiance against the CPC,” said Rhodes. “And so, the current round of protests in Hong Kong reflect the larger ongoing battle between the CPC and the church. So far, the protesters have stuck to singing the eponymous chorus of ‘Sing Hallelujah to the Lord.’”

Currently celebrating their Lunar New Year, whose celebrations commenced last weekend (many of the road construction workers in Kenya are back in China for the fete), CPC is also luxuriating in the fact that it is living in the “New Era”, an epoch of the emergence of Chinese global power. In this New Era, China is definitely reclaiming its past glory and influence from centuries of exploitation and humiliation from the West and is viewing religious infiltration as a real threat. The one area CPC will not compromise on is religion. From 1839 to 1949, China faced a “century of humiliation,” an epoch that China does not like remembering and has vowed is a thing of the past, never to recur again.

The world’s new superpower

Before Lee Kuna Yew, the indomitable Singaporean Prime Minister, died in 2015, he noted that “China under Xi Jinping is driven by an indomitable determination to reclaim past glory. The size of China’s displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance. It’s not
possible to pretend that this is just another big player. This is the biggest player in the history of the world.”

Today CPC believes that America is no longer a power to be frightened of; it may have a slight edge in military might for now, but CPC forecasts that by 2049, it will bridge the gap and then accelerate with speed to further widen that gap. It is also aware that it has to deal with the “little problem” of 300 million Chinese people living in poverty. Once it has sorted out those two issues, China will be ready to conquer the world. From then on, China will take its place of pride in global power play by cementing its overall dominance – economically and politically.

This year, China is supposed to achieve an urbanisation level of 60 per cent, and to become an Internet power and a moderately well-off-society. This means that its per capita income will have doubled from the 2010 figures. It also hopes it will have established its global image and refashioned its soft power. Next year, China also hopes to showcase its accomplishments at the 100th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the CPC. CPC views these goals as the “Chinese Dream” or the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”.

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Two important milestone years – 2021 and 2049 – mark China’s hegemonic project. 2021 marks the first of China’s “two centenary goals” that are pegged to the 100th anniversaries of CPC and the People’s Republic of China. At the centre of these patriotic goals is a civilizational creed that sees China as the centre of the universe. In the Chinese language, the word for China, zhong guo, means “middle kingdom.” In the lead-up to the centennial celebrations of 2049, CPC has the ambition of galvanising the great China as one unstoppable hegemonic behemoth, devoid of any external influences (read the West) and especially religion. CPC sees religion as a Trojan horse that can never be let into the kingdom.

According to Xinhua, China’s major news agency, by 2049, the centenary year of the People’s Republic of China, the ultimate goal is to build a modern democratic, socialist country that is prosperous, strong, culturally advanced and harmonious. The Chinese powers that be are nostalgic about a world where China was the dominant power and where other states looked upon it in supplication as a superior power. These states came to Beijing as vassals bearing tribute, said Lee Kuan Yew.

As CPC fends off the powerful influence of religion, particularly Christianity from the West, Xi Jinping has promised to make China great again. How? By returning China to the predominance it once enjoyed in Asia before the West interfered, and commanding the respect of other great powers in the council of the world.