Persecution in China: An Economic Analysis[1]

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Section 1: Introduction

Despite decades of repression of Christianity in China, China has grown to house tens of millions of Christians. The Chinese Communist Party's original goal to eradicate religion in China failed. China now attempts to exercise control of Protestantism through the Three Self Patriotic Movement. Any other form of Protestantism is illegal in China.

Still, most scholars agree that the Protestant underground house church movement grew faster than the Three Self Patriotic Movement. I ask the question: why did underground Protestant house churches in China grow relatively faster than their legal counterpart?

I argue that because underground house churches underwent persecution, they were stronger, leading to growth, whereas the Three Self Patriotic Movement churches lacked the necessary strictness to achieve the same growth as the house churches.

Chinese Christianity is a rich area for study. Kindopp (2004) writes on the church-state tensions in China and its policy implications. Bays (2012) provides a comprehensive history of Chinese Christianity dating back to the early 600s AD. Chan (2019) provides multiple angles on Chinese Christianity: Chronologically, Socio-politically, Denominationally, Geographically, Biographically, and Theologically.

Much has also been written on the meteoric rise of Chinese Christianity. Yang (2006) distinguishes between three religious markets in China: the red market, which is state controlled, the gray market, which operates in an ambiguous legal area, and the black market, which is explicitly illegal. Yang (2011) expands on his model and provides a supply-side theory of religion in China. Koesel (2013) documents the rise of the house church and notes its similarities to how the Chinese Communist Party survived underground. Stark and Wang (2015) argue that persecution strengthened individuals' faith which bolstered their ability to proselytize through

interpersonal relationships. Yang and Wang (2023) theorize that legitimacy and organizational capacity help to explain the differences in growth between individual churches within the same geographic area.

The topic of religious persecution also has much written about it. Grim and Finke (2011) wrote a seminal book on religious persecution arguing that restrictions on religion promote violence. Yang (2018) examines religious persecution in the context of Chinese Christianity.

The economics of religion began with Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations,* where he argued religious clergy respond to incentives like everyone else. The economics of religion stayed silent until Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975) applied Becker's household production theory to religion.

Theories on church strictness' contribution to growth began with Kelley (1972) who argued conservative churches grew while liberal churches stagnated because conservative churches were stricter. Iannaccone (1994) recast Kelley through an economics lens, arguing that strictness screens for freeriding. Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark (1995) tie strictness indirectly to growth through strength. McBride (2015) argues that churches need some free riders in order to grow.

I contribute to these literatures by synthesizing information about Christianity in China and by adapting Iannaccone's theory of strictness to explain the different growth rates between the underground Protestant church and the legal Protestant church within China.

Section 2 starts with a brief history of Christianity within China. It then explains the differences between the legal and underground Protestant church in China. Section 3 explains Iannaccone's theory of strictness and how it may be augmented with persecution. Section 4

applies the theory to explain the different growth rates of Protestant churches in China and teases out some implications. Section 5 concludes.

Section 2: Churches in China

2.1 A History of Christianity in China

It is crucial to look at the history of protestant Christianity in China to understand its nuances. When Christianity first entered China is disputed. Legends exist of the Apostle Thomas' visit to China at around 60 AD (Bays 2012, p. 5); but the first confirmed instance of Christian missionaries in China is in 635 AD, when a band of Persian Nestorian Christians first set foot in China (p. 7). Protestantism first appeared in China in the early decades of the 1800s, when the London Missionary Society sent Robert Morrison to Guangzhou (p. 43). Missionaries at the time were restricted to Guangzhou during trading season and to a tiny enclave of Macau the rest of the time (p. 45). Then in 1844, Western countries forced China to sign a treaty that gave the Western countries access to the "'five treaty ports,' Canton, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai" (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 15). China was required to allow missionaries to operate within these port cities.

Western countries continued to force China to open. In 1859 and 1860, European forces attacked and occupied Beijing and forced China to open the entire country for foreign trade, foreign travel, and foreign missionaries (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 15). Protestant missionaries flooded into China, with the number of Protestant missionaries increasing six-fold to three-hundred and eight in twelve years (p. 15). By 1893, there were one-thousand two-hundred and forty-three Western Protestant missionaries in China (p. 18). By the year 1900, there were about one-hundred-thousand Protestants in China (Bays 2012, p. 77).

As Protestant Christianity continued to grow steadily in China, so did anti-Western sentiment. From 1898-99, a movement called the Boxer Rebellion began where followers of the movement, called “boxers”, committed violent acts against foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians (Bays 2012, p. 85). This escalated to its culmination in 1900 when the Boxers besieged the Legation Quarter in Beijing. Many missionaries sought refuge in the Legation Quarter (Stark and Wang, p. 22). Eventually a large army of Europeans broke the siege. However, during the rebellion at least thirty-thousand Chinese Christians were murdered along with one-hundred and thirty-six Protestant missionaries (p. 22).

Protestant missionaries remained undeterred. Ten years after the Boxer Rebellion, the number of Chinese Protestants had risen from about one-hundred thousand to close to five-hundred thousand (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 23). Western missionaries and Chinese Christians retained steady growth until the start of China’s civil war in 1927. The fight was between the *Guomindang* (Nationalists) and the Chinese Communist Party (Bays 2012, p. 124). Then for a decade, missionaries returned until the start of World War 2, when missionaries could no longer travel to China (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 38). After Japanese occupation during World War 2 ended, civil war continued in China until the Chinese Communist Party won in 1949.

Chinese communism contains within anti-imperialist sentiment as foreign powers are seen as oppressors (Evans 2021). Marx also famously called religion the opium of the people. Hence, by 1953, all foreign missionaries had been expelled from China (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 39). In 1950, estimates place the number of Protestant Chinese Christians to be around one million (Bays 2012, p. 147; Stark and Wang 2015, p. 39).

Progressively minded Chinese Protestants suggested they could work with the Chinese Communist Party. These Protestants issued a manifesto and began the Three-Self Movement.

This movement supported self-support, self-propagation, and self-governance by Chinese Christians (Chan 2019, p. 25). In 1953, the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) was formally created (Bays 2012, p. 164). The TSPM was placed under direct supervision by the Religious Affairs Bureau, a state agency responsible for overseeing the five officially sanctioned religions in China, which are Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam (p. 164). All Protestant churches were forced to join the TSPM or hide in underground churches known as *jiātíng jiàohuì*, which directly translates to house church (Chan 2019, p. 26). Many Chinese Protestant leaders saw joining the TSPM as unacceptable (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 46). The TSPM "imposed restrictions against preaching from the book of Revelation or concerning the Second Coming of Christ" (p. 46). Leaders of churches who did not join were subject to harsh punishment such as being sent to labor camps (Chan 2019, p. 26).

There were three distinctly Christian Chinese movements that threatened to undermine TSPM hegemony. They were known as the Jesus Family, the True Jesus Church, and the Little Flock (Bays 2012, p.165). During the 1950s, the Chinese state slowly decapitated each of these organizations by sending their leaders to labor camps after being framed as disloyal to China (p. 165).

Then Protestant Christianity in China underwent more persecution. During the Great Leap Forward, which happened from 1958-1961, many churches that were registered with the TSPM were forced to close as pastors were sent to factories or farms to increase production (Chan 2019, p. 27). After the Great Leap Forward, there was a brief period of respite for Chinese Christians until the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution lasted ten years from 1966 to 1976. Chairman Mao attempted to impose Communism on all of China by removing any trace of the "Four Olds", which were old

customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 47). Millions of young Chinese joined the Red Guard, which violently enforced Chairman Mao's vision (Bays 2012, p.185). Chairman Mao intended to wipe out all religion from China. Thus, the TSPM and for that matter the Religious Affairs Bureau were disbanded (p. 185). Estimates vary on the number of Protestants in China before and after the Cultural Revolution. Yang estimates an increase from one-million to three-million (2018, p. 349). Bays estimates an increase from one-million to five-million or six-million (2012, p. 186). In 1982, a Communist Chinese Party internal policy report estimated there were three-million Protestants in the nation (Chan 2019, 31). Regardless of the exact figures, all sources agree Protestantism somehow managed to grow during the Cultural Revolution.

Chairman Mao died in 1976 and with him died the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping assumed power in 1978, and China became more open to Christianity. From 1978 till 2018, Chinese Christianity has grown at a staggering rate. Deng reinstated the TSPM and Religious Affairs Bureau and allowed public worship. Deng cared less what Christians believed and more about maintaining the state's hegemony. If churches did not challenge the state, then they would be left alone (Bays 2012, p. 188).

Growth rates of Chinese Protestantism are difficult to find as estimates vary and house churches do not register with the government. Official estimates of the number of members in the TSPM do exist. The official counts are three million in 1982, ten million in the 1990s, twenty-three million in 2010, and thirty-eight million in 2018 (Chan 2019, p. 32). Hackett et al. estimate fifty-eight million Protestants in China, twenty-three million of which are registered with the TSPM and thirty-five million independent Protestants (2011, p. 98). Stark and Wang estimate that around twice as many Protestant Christians attend house churches rather than

registered TSPM churches (2015, p. 70). Regardless of the particular numbers, Koesel points out, "there is consensus among scholars that more Chinese are worshipping in house churches than in government-approved ones" (2013, 574).

In 2013, Xi Jinping became president of the Republic of China. In 2018, President Xi adopted a policy of Sinicization, which is an attempt to force all members of China to become more culturally Chinese. This includes a major crackdown on Protestant churches as Sinicization "imagines the growth of Christianity as inherently threatening to China" (Lee and Huang 2023, p. 4). As a result, Hackett and Tong suggest that "China's Christian population seems to be plateauing" (2025, p. 15).

2.2 How repressed was Protestantism?

Yang developed a classification system of religion in China. He demarcates three buckets a given religious organization may fall under: the Red Market, the Black Market, and the Gray Market (Yang 2006).

The Red Market is explicitly legal. TSPM falls under this category. In China, there is officially one Protestant Church headed by the TSPM. It is the "only state approved national religious organizations for Protestant Christians" (Homer 2010, p. 51). Though technically a non-governmental organization, the TSPM functions as an extension of the Religious Affairs Bureau (Yang 2011, p. 81). The TSPM has the goal of mutual adaptation of religion and Chinese socialism (Song 2016, p. 40). As Jiang Zemin, former president of the People's Republic of China stated, adaptation means "'requiring them [the religious people] to love country politically, support socialism and support the leadership of the CPC, and to reform religious systems and teachings which are not adaptable to socialism, and to serve socialism by using certain positive factors in religious doctrine, rule and ethics'" (Song 2016, p. 40). TSPM activity

attempts to reconstruct Protestant theology so that "theological thought will be better adapted to socialist society" (pp. 41-42). The result is that the TSPM "has built a better relationship with the State, but only by sacrificing some of its theology" (p. 47).

Article 32 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China protects "normal religious activities" (Yang 2006, p. 102). The key word is normal. Chinese officials dictate what is normal activity for a church. For example, Americans consider it normal for a Christian to bring their child to church. Chinese officials do not think that is normal (p. 102). Thus, adherence to the TSPM changes Protestant theology and restrain their actions.

Yang refers to the black market as religious activity that is explicitly illegal (Yang 2006, p. 104). On the other hand, the gray market is characterized as "illegal activities of legal religious organizations and individuals" and as "religions expressed as culture and as health science" (p. 106). Underground Protestant Christianity does not cleanly fit into either categorization. Though underground house churches are technically illegal, they often operate in the open. As Yang states, "house churches…are not approved by or registered with the government…Their religious worship services are not really underground. They operate in the gray area of the regulations" (Yang 2011, p. 108). The director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs acknowledged the existence of house churches and claims that "Government officials are well aware of many of the unregistered churches, and they allow them a measure of freedom so long as they pose no threat to the government" (Strother 2008).

House churches have refused to join the TSPM because they see the TSPM as compromised. They see the TSPM's theology as too liberal and they believe TSPM political submission contradicts what the Bible teaches (Yang 2011, p. 102). In particular, the prohibition on proselytizing is problematic for house churches. Therefore, house churches "'are vulnerable

to much more coercive and punitive state action, including physical harassment, detention, fines, and labor re-education or criminal proceedings and prison sentences'" (p. 102).

Section 3: A Theory of Church Strength

3.1 Iannaccone's Theory

A theory of church growth is necessary to understand why the underground church in China grew faster relative to the TSPM. Kelley (1972) suggests that the level of strictness explains why conservative churches grew faster than liberal churches in the 1960s. Kelley argued that strict churches attract more people because they provide a deeper sense of meaning that results from high commitment and high expectations. Most sociologists at the time rejected Kelley's argument (Thomas and Olson 2010, p. 620). In 1994, Iannaccone recast Kelley's argument through the lens of an economist. Iannaccone argues strict churches are strong because they screen out freeriding.

Kelley gives three traits of a strict church. These are absolutism, conformity, and fanaticism (Iannaccone 1994, p. 1182). Iannaccone narrows strictness to a single attribute, which is "the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the cost of non-group activities, such as socializing with members of other churches or pursuing 'secular pastimes'" (p. 1182). A strict church asks members to give something up. Examples include Mormon abstinence from caffeine and alcohol and Seventh Day Adventist avoidance of meat (p. 1182). Stark and Finke point out that a higher level of strictness inherently leads to more tension with society (2000, p. 143-145).

Strictness results in a stronger church. Strict demands "raise overall levels of commitment, they increase average rates of participation, and they enhance the net benefits of membership" (Iannaccone 1994, p. 1183). Strictness does so by screening out free riders. Because religion is a club good, religious satisfaction depends on the quality of production by

other members (p. 1183). Members of a church receive benefits in proportion to the collective's input into production (p. 1184). This mismatch between individual input and collective output leads to a freeriding problem. Strictness in a church penalizes alternative activities, thereby screening out potential free riders and raising the overall level of participation (p. 1187).

Strictness explains why churches are strong, but a theory of church growth is more complicated than just strength. Iannaccone assumed in his 1994 paper that "that 'strong' churches—churches with high rates of commitment, participation, and contributions—will find it much easier to achieve high rates of growth" (p. 1205). He qualifies this statement by stating that strength is a necessary but not sufficient condition for growth (p. 1205).

In a 1995 article, Iannaccone along with Stark and Olson tackled the mystery of church growth. They suggest that while the complete answer is "exceedingly complex," the "simple partial answer" is that "Growth requires resources" (p. 726). They find that churches with "high average rates of participation tend to grow" and churches with "low average rates of participation tend to decline" (p. 726). Thus, strong churches grow while weak churches stagnate. Furthermore, Thomas and Olson empirically find that strictness "matters" (2010, p. 635). To be more precise, strictness "positively and directly affects strength" (p. 635). Thus, strictness leads to strength and strength is necessary for and may lead to growth.

An implication of this theory of church growth is there is an optimal level of strictness. Strictness is a cost that screens out free riders. At some point, a church will be too strict or too costly to join (Iannaccone 1995, p. 1202). The key for churches is to find the optimal level of strictness to facilitate growth while deterring free riders.

3.2 Persecution as a Substitute for Strictness

Strictness is internally formulated. The church or ruling body of the church determines the level of strictness the church has, through its teaching. Iannaccone's model examines religion largely free from government intervention. In many countries, religion is not free, one such country being China.

Religious persecution is external. It is decided by people outside the church, whether it be the state or other parties. Violent religious persecution is defined by Grim and Finke as "physical abuse or physical displacement due to religion" (2011, p. 2).

Persecution may act as a substitute for strictness. Persecution by the state raises the cost of joining a church as does strictness. People who are fully committed to a religion would choose to suffer through persecution rather than renounce their faith. A member of a persecuted church also must spend more of their resources in the church. The external environment is hostile towards members of the church, raising the relative cost to members of the church to interact with the external environment. Hence, persecution leads to strength and strength leads to growth. As with strictness, there is also an optimal level of persecution. One can imagine persecution so harsh that it deters all potential members of a church.

Section 4: Application to Chinese Protestant Churches

Through this section, I compare Protestantism between the TSPM and underground house churches in China starting when Deng permitted some form of religion to exist in 1978 up until President Xi's Sinicization campaign in 2018. I will first directly examine underground house churches to look for persecution leading to strength. Underground house churches are persecuted. If the theory holds, they should be stronger and grow faster. The TSPM are less strict. Thus, they should grow slower. Examining the historical record confirms this.

4.1 House Church Persecution and Strictness

House churches are under persecution by Grim and Finke's definition. They are "'vulnerable to much more coercive and punitive state action, including physical harassment, detention, fines, and labor re-education or criminal proceedings and prison sentences'" (Yang 2011, p. 102). This should lead to a stronger church.

The evidence strongly supports that house churches have a stronger church because of persecution. Data on persecution is not readily available, but there are many first-hand accounts of the ongoing persecution of underground churches within China. Yang describes religious leaders in 1979 being sent to labor camps, being imprisoned, or being executed (2018, p. 342). An underground house church pastor was placed under "de facto house arrest" in 2011 (p. 343). Furthermore, underground Protestants may "be fined, have their property confiscated, lose their jobs, or experience demotion" (p. 344). According to Yang, "This actually happens frequently, although rarely reported by the news media or human rights monitors" (p. 344). Yang further documents that since the 1980s, "many house church leaders have been detained or sent to labor camps for various periods" (p. 344).

The result of this persecution has been a stronger underground Protestant church. House churches in China meet multiple times a week and are characterized by "highly participatory services and rituals" (Kindopp 2004, p. 133). Members of house churches have a "strong sense of belonging" and many "give all but subsistence-level income to the church" (p. 134). Strong churches have high participation and commitment, which is exactly what house churches in China show. Accordingly, the "most extreme groups" grew out of areas with the "harshest repression" (p. 141). The most extreme groups are churches that are the strongest, as they have the most committed members.

The causal link becomes clearer when rural house churches are examined. A natural experiment arises because of the unique funding circumstances within rural China. Rural Chinese police stations are underfunded compared to urban police stations (Peng et al. 2023, p. 1). Local officials also are required police stations to meet certain revenue quotas. Local officials were required to remit a certain amount of tax revenue to the higher level of government, but they were allowed to keep the surplus. Thus, local officials charged rural police stations with finding enough money to make local officials well off (Jin et al. 2012). House churches became cash cows. According to Yang, church leaders sent to labor camps could be bailed out for a fine. This became a method for "local officials to extract money from those Christians" (2018, p. 344). Hence, higher persecution rates dominated rural areas of China.

Rural areas of China also have the strongest underground churches, often straying into cultish territory. House churches have been able to harness the most amount of zeal in the countryside (Kindopp 2004, p. 134). Lian documents the rise of these more sectarian groups in rural China (2010, pp. 215-229). Some highlights include the Weepers, who slapped their own faces and beat their own chests, and the Three Grades of Servants, who demanded a minimum of forty lashes for spiritual lapses like drowsiness and homesickness (p. 219, 225). Rural churches in China also experienced the most amount of growth, something that would be expected of a stronger church. According to Yang, "house churches flourished in rural areas" (2018, p. 352). Kindopp states, "the most rapid church growth has occurred in impoverished rural areas" (2004, p. 135). It is the increased level of persecution in rural underground churches which caused their heightened strength and led to their increased growth.

Overall, the underground church in China has seen massive growth. This is due to their strength which was caused by persecution. Stark and Wang summarize the position:

> Protestants…are almost uniformly members of extremely conservative and intense congregations…persecution has served as a potent selection mechanism. Lukewarm liberalism simply could not generate the level of commitment needed to hold onto one's faith in the face of considerable personal risk…a high level of member intensity is always what it takes to achieve rapid growth (Stark and Wang 2015, p. 72).

4.2 The Lack of Strictness in the Three Self Patriotic Movement

The TSPM is legally sanctioned and does not experience the same persecution as the underground church in China. Based upon the theory, they already should experience relatively lower growth compared to underground house churches. The TSPM is limited further in strength by government imposition onto their teaching and activities.

The goal of the TSPM is to bring Protestant Christianity under control of the Chinese Communist Party. At the very least, their leaders wish to create a more palatable Christianity. In the fall of 1998, bishop Ding Guangxun and other leaders in the TSPM started the Theological Construction Campaign (Kindopp 2004, p. 132). Included within the campaign was an attempt to paint communist party cadres as "paragons of Christian virtue" while also "denouncing the core Protestant doctrine of righteousness by faith" (p. 132). The house church resistance to the TSPM is because of "enduring demands for control and conformity that compromise the church's integrity" (p. 133). One disillusioned TSPM pastor noted,

> Three-Self churches have become a place for old ladies and newcomers. The reason is that they have nothing to say to educated people and active seekers. The message they preach amounts to this: be a good citizen. Lianghui (TSPM) leaders are always saying that the church needs to be able to communicate with intellectuals, but intellectuals who come to church say, 'What do I need Christianity for? I can get this by reading the

> newspaper.' That is why intellectuals and believers who are really searching are all leaving the official church. They either find a house church for real spiritual nourishment, or they leave the church altogether (p. 134).

An article of union with the TSPM reveals the actionable changes Protestant churches must make to conform. It states, "All books used in the interpretation of the Bible shall be examined and judged,…Only teachings favoring union and socialism shall be used…There shall be no more teaching about the Last Day, or about the vanity of this world…Belief and unbelief shall not be made an issue in determining marriage questions" (Song 2016, p. 34).

Each restriction on what the TSPM church can do or say reduces the strictness of the church. Changing interpretations of the Bible to favor socialism fits Protestantism in with secular society in China. Removing teaching about the Last Day or the 'vanity of this world' removes the motivation for why many rural house churches are so committed to their belief. Forcing the church to allow both believers and unbelievers reduces the cost of joining the church. The TSPM impositions reduce the amount of tension that can be created between the church and secular society.

TSPM pastors often do not agree with the impositions forced upon them. Yang argues that many of the pastors in the TSPM are attempting to accommodate the Chinese Communist Party to reach more people (2018, p. 350). However, the effect is still the same. Much strictness is prohibited by the TSPM. Thus, their churches are not as strong. Though "CCC/TSPM leaders have lessened or changed some parts of Christian doctrine, willingly or reluctantly…the development of religious or theological thought is thus inevitably being constrained by the secular forces" (Song 2016, p. 46). Due to this constraint, the TSPM has not grown as fast as the underground Protestant church in China.

This is clearly shown by two sects that were underground which joined the TSPM. The two largest sects, the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock, were removed from the list of illegal organizations soon after Deng liberalized China (Lian 2010, p. 211). They were co-opted into the TSPM and some of their leaders became leaders in the TSPM. The result was the drainage of the "apocalyptic fervor that had fueled their earlier growth" (p. 211). Recall the TSPM bans discussion of the Last Day. There can be no apocalyptic fervor if there is belief in the apocalypse.

4.3 Reverse Causality

I now turn to the issue of reverse causality. It could be true that fast growth and strength caused persecution because the Communist Party felt threatened by a force that it could not control. However, this is not borne out in the historical record.

1954 is the official founding date of the TSPM. The Cultural Revolution occurs from 1966-1976. During this time, the TSPM and all other government run religions were shut down. As shown earlier, the TSPM is not strict. They are not allowed to be. But during this time any belief system that was not atheist was persecuted. This suggests that persecution of the Chinese church is not because they grew so massive that they became a large threat to Communist power.

Instead, the persecution brought about during the Cultural Revolution was ideological in nature. Chairman Mao enforced militant atheism because he believed it was the opium of the people and should be destroyed (Yang 2011, p. 48). Persecution of Christianity was not caused by the growth of Christianity, and it ought to be viewed as an exogenous shock to the religious market in China.

Examining the specific time period which I discuss, rural underground churches experience heightened persecution compared to their urban counterparts. The reason was not

because they grew faster, but because rural police stations needed to generate revenue and extorting house churches was an easy method to do so.

Even supposing that strength and growth does lead to some amount of increased persecution, it does not disprove that there is a causal connection from persecution to strength. There is room for both to be at play. Persecution could cause strength which causes growth, and growth could cause persecution, which still causes strength and thus more growth.

4.4 Adaptation of Strictness Theory

I have argued that persecution substitutes for strictness. Iannaccone has argued that there is an optimal amount of strictness. Too much strictness is too high a cost for new church members. If persecution imposes a similar cost as strictness, then based upon optimal strictness, there should be less strictness in persecuted churches. Strictness is not needed to screen out free riders; persecution accomplishes that goal. Strictness would be an additional unnecessary cost.

The opposite occurred in China. Particularly in rural China where the most persecution occurred, those sects had the strictest restrictions on how a Christian can interact with their surroundings (Yang 2011, p. 102). The Weepers and the Three Grades of Servants come to mind. They were most certainly strict churches.

This observation requires a reformulation of Iannaccone's theory. Iannaccone argued that strictness imposed a cost on members. However, Mises states, that "No man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented" (1998, p. 19). Kelley's original formulation of the theory of strictness relied upon the meaning to be found in restricting oneself (Thomas and Olson 2010, p. 619). If certain church members found strictness to be a benefit and not a cost, then there would be no reason to substitute persecution for strictness. Strictness would serve only as a cost to those who perceive it as a cost. Thomas and Olson thus

find a direct relationship between strictness and growth, even accounting for the indirect effect that strictness leads to strength which leads to growth (p. 635). They give three potential explanations and prefer the third, that their data set did not capture the dimensions of strictness well enough. However, their first explanation is the more compelling of the three, that some people do find strictness as a benefit.

Strictness still would lead to strength. The objection to my reformulation would be that free riders would exist that derive benefit from strictness. However, recall what strictness entails. It is the degree to which a church limits non-group activities. If a church member benefits from limiting non-group activities, they still conserve resources because they are not used on non-church activities. That still leaves additional resources for church activities. Thus, those who would derive benefit from church strictness are also the same people who invest most in the church.

4.5 Persecution Leads to Strictness

I have explained why persecution and strictness do not necessarily substitute for one another. But that still leaves unanswered why rural churches in China are more strict. Recall Iannaccone views church as a club good. More strictness results in more investment in the church, thus more overall benefit to everyone. Persecution is such a high cost that it requires a greater benefit to be willing to go through persecution. It would appear that those who would undergo persecution need a strong benefit to make it beneficial for them.

Based upon that analysis, there ought to be more benefits conferred in the underground church in rural China compared to the underground church in urban areas or the TSPM churches. Examining rural Chinese house churches shows that benefit.

Rural house churches were charismatic. Talk of miraculous healing was commonplace among the rural churches. Lian writes that sectarian underground Protestantism "guaranteed immediate, though often unverifiable, returns for spiritual investment (and monetary contributions) in the form of divine blessings, healing, exorcism, mutual aid, and elevated status in the spiritual hierarchy in addition to exclusive salvation" (2010, p. 232).

Persecution drastically increased the cost of joining an underground Protestant church. Only those committed to the church would join. Persecution also demanded that the benefit of joining an underground church be high. Thus, more strictness developed to provide more strength leading to more benefit.

Section 5: Conclusion

I used a reformulation of Iannaccone's theory of church strictness and growth to explain the difference in growth between the underground Protestant church and the legally sanctioned Protestant church within China. I show how persecution acts as strictness does to screen out free riders, strengthening the church, and leading to more growth for the underground Protestant church.

My research has a few limitations. First, because of the lack of any clear data on persecution rates or growth rates of underground Protestant churches within China, I relied heavily upon first-hand accounts and scholarly opinion. While accurate, such first-hand accounts fall prey to survivorship bias. No churches that were persecuted too heavily or were too strict survived. First-hand accounts of those churches would be lacking.

Second, membership between the TSPM and underground house churches may overlap. Official sources have difficulty drawing a clear line between the two. But it is still noteworthy

that most scholars do believe that underground house churches have grown at a significantly faster pace.

Future research has much to examine. I only examined Protestant Christianity within China though the theory should apply to Catholic Christianity in China as well. Future research could examine the Catholic Church in China.

Future research should also look to further disaggregate between different churches within the Three Self Patriotic Movement. Though I treated them as uniform, there is much variation in how different pastors decide to run their churches under the TSPM. I also grouped together underground house churches in two buckets, rural and urban. There are still major differences between different urban cities in China and different rural provinces. China is a large country and much more can always be found through more disaggregation.

My research has a few implications. First, the government imposition of persecution does not achieve its goal of slowly assimilating Protestantism into broader Chinese culture. If anything, Protestants in Chinese underground house churches have further broken with the intention of the Chinese Communist Party. Second, it is always important to view costs and benefits not as absolute costs and benefits. Taking a subjectivist approach results in new insights. Perhaps even persecution may be seen as a benefit as the Apostle Paul claims.

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