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Counting Christians in China: A critical
reading of *A star in the East: The rise of
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Deciphering the number of Christians in China has been a particular fascination for Western scholars, church leaders, politicians, and journalists. Rodney Stark and Xiuhua Wang's recent volume, *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China*, is the latest attempt to do just that. In addition, this slim volume (under 130 pages of text) attempts to provide a more precise demographic profile of Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, than population numbers alone reveal. The book begins with an overview of the state of religious belief in China in which Stark and Wang hope to avoid the "nonsense" offered by other authors by basing their discussion on "reliable statistics, properly interpreted" (pg. 2). The data from this initial chapter, which is actually based (over half of it verbatim) on a journal article by Stark and Eric Liu, discusses two recent surveys conducted in China in which the authors attempt to reconcile the fact that while many Chinese claim to have no religion, their actions may not support this assertion.¹ After looking at religion in China in general, Stark and Wang focus on the state of Christianity. While a 2007 survey reports 2.5% of the population as Christian (about 30 million), the authors massage this number to suggest that there were "slightly more than 60 million" (pg. 11) Christians in China at that time.

Chapters two and three provide a bit of historical background on the situation of Christianity in China both before and after the founding of the PRC in 1949 and set the stage for Chapters four and five, which as the heart of the book look at factors such as education and urban or rural environments on the number of Chinese Christians. There are nuggets of novel statistical and analytical information found in these chapters. For example, survey results show that the religious revival in China is not predominantly rural, but that Christianity overall is growing among both rural and urban populations. As the authors summarize, "if there is an outbreak of religious fever in China, it is everywhere" (pg. 95). Stark and Wang also provide statistics that reflect the role of family networks in rural conversions. As they aptly remark, "[i]n the most literal sense, in rural China, Christianity is a family affair" (pg. 107). The authors further contend that higher education is positively correlated to being a Christian in today's China. The sociological analysis of Chinese Christians is inter-

1 The article by Stark and Liu (2011) was published in *Review of Religious Research* in 2011, but is neither referenced in the preface or in the bibliography. Similarly, portions of another article by Stark, Byron Johnson, and Carson Mencken (2011) are also found verbatim throughout the book, though this article is likewise not referenced. In the Preface, the authors do state that the book grew out of a paper they co-authored, but this article (Stark and Wang, 2014), the basis for chapter 4, is also not listed in the Bibliography.

esting, such as the assertion that conversion, as an act of conformity, usually follows social networks and family ties, or the refutation of the deprivation theory of conversion. However, these are the exact parts of the volume found in Stark's other publications.² It would be of interest for future scholars to apply such sociological analysis to *local studies* and actually *show* how conversion works along such lines in modern China.

The final chapter offers projections of Chinese Christianity in the future and what this could mean for China. Stark and Wang predict just under 300 million Chinese Christians by 2030 and nearly double that number in 2040. The authors are more cautious in their prediction of what this growth may mean for China, but suggest it could encourage greater economic liberalization and democracy, as well as influence within the Communist Party, especially stemming from Christian Party members, a phenomenon that seems to amaze the authors.

Overall, much of the tone in this volume tends to mirror most popular media accounts by focusing on "Repression and Christian Resistance" (the title for Chapter three). For example, in their historical vignettes of Chinese church leaders, the authors focus on those church leaders who were most opposed to religious policies, and thus tended to suffer persecution. Likewise, Stark and Wang mention how twenty-one pastors of "house churches" were arrested and sentenced to labor camps in 2008 in Shandong. However, the reference for this statistic is a Wikipedia page on the "Chinese house church." Like the other Wikipedia references found in the volume (a total of six), there is no date given for when this information was accessed, and as of July 2015, this information was not included on the Wikipedia page referenced (nor on the page of "persecution of Christians" which the "Chinese house church" links to). Not to deny that the arrests and sentencing occurred, but for such a controversial and divisive topic, readers would have been better served with more reliable referencing. Another example is the authors introduce the True Jesus Church (TJC), an "indigenous" Chinese charismatic denomination, stating that the church grew throughout the repression of the early years of the People's Republic, and after 1979 continued "as a group of unregistered house churches." It is true that many TJC congregations are not registered, but it is also true that many *are* registered and belong to the TSPM (Three-Self Patriotic Movement). The authors chose to only mention the "house church" faction.

2 For example, these points are examined in the *The Rise of Christianity* (Stark, 1996), for which Stark was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

This approach seems to follow the Western evangelical bias of emphasizing the “house church” faction at the expense of legal, registered congregations. Daniel Bays, one of the foremost scholars of Chinese Christianity, argues that much of the media or popular coverage of Chinese Christianity, especially coming from the US, “continue[s] the established pattern of considerable romanticization of the unregistered church protagonists and basic demonization of the TSPM and the Chinese government” (2009: 11).

Furthermore, for authors who claim to be concerned with gathering reliable statistics and properly interpreting them, some of the numbers given in this volume seem to be used haphazardly. In the final chapter, the authors assert that by 2007 there were “as many Christians in China as there were members of the Communist party” (pg. 113). However, the volume’s calculation of about 60 million Christians in 2007 is substantially less than the over 73 million Party members at that time. More significantly, though, when survey results did not support the authors’ assertions, the figures were seemingly explained away. For instance, based on supposed annual growth rate of 7% per year from 1980-2007, the authors calculated that the 61 million Christians in 2007 would be nearly 100 million by 2014. They checked their assumption against a 2014 survey. However, the results of the 2014 survey suggest there were the same number of Christians as in 2007. According to the authors, this meant the 2014 survey was “implausible” because it is “surely incorrect that no growth occurred” (pg. 115). Could it not be possible that the 2007 survey was “implausible” or incorrect? The 2014 survey did report over 14% of respondents “believed in Jesus Christ,” which the authors understand as suggesting 200 million Christians. Stark and Wang also dismissed this as “nonsense” (pg. 115). It is unclear why some survey results are “plausible” and others “nonsense,” but this reader, at least, was left with the impression that the statistics that were most convenient were used and those that did not corroborate with a narrative the authors hoped to present were discarded or explained away.

Some readers may be easily confused by the author’s dual usage of “adjusted” numbers and figures taken directly from survey results. For instance, Stark and Wang contend that “about 5 percent” (pg. 90) of the population is Christian, but on the following page note that in the rural and urban regions 3 percent and 2.5 percent are Christian respectively, suggesting less than 3 percent Christian in the country overall. These second numbers, and presumably the other figures in this chapter (five) are “pure” results, not adjusted for “underreporting.”

More serious statistical problems are found in the predictions of future numbers given by Stark and Wang. They note that Christian belief, overall, is becoming less “intense” (because of less religious suppression) and that greater intensity leads to greater growth, however, they still project that the growth rate will continue at 7% a year. The 7% yearly growth rate is based on the increase from about 10 million Christians in 1980 to over 60 million in 2007, but is highly problematic for forecasting future growth. While the growth rate from 1980 to 2007 may have *averaged* 7% a year, as the authors note, it most likely fluctuated a great deal, depending on many external and internal factors. The authors simplify their calculations, not accounting for things such as overall population growth, but even using such approximations, their predictions are dubious because they only use 1980 and 2007 as reference points to predict nearly 580 million Christians in 2040. One could just as well use the same figures of 10 million Christians in 1980 and about 60 million in 2007 and suggest that the growth rate, because of decreasing restrictions, is slowing. If the growth rate was 8.4% in 1980 and decreased 0.1% per year, it would still result in just over 60 million in 2007. However, if that trend continued, the population of Christians in China in 2040 would be 226 million, less than half of Stark’s and Wang’s figure. I give this number not as a prediction, but to highlight the randomness in the simple method used by Stark and Wang.³

A major challenge for pollsters and scholars analyzing results of surveys on religion in China is how religious concepts are understood by respondents and those looking at the results. This is especially problematic when polling on Christianity in China with survey questions posed from a Western perspective. The authors acknowledge such challenges, pointing out that belonging, rather than believing, is the hallmark of most Chinese religious interactions, and that this is at variance with the standard Western approach to religion in which one person joins an organized religion at the expense of others. From the perspective of a non-monotheistic tradition, one in which the traditional norm is a belief in many deities, it should therefore not be strange to see some survey respondents “believe in” Jesus, but not identifying as Christian. As sociologist Fan Lizhu (2011: 105) has so aptly remarked, “The

3 A recent Pew Research Center report (2015) based on projected demographic changes, acknowledges over 60 million Christians in China in 2010, quite similar to the numbers from Stark and Wang, but forecasts just over 70 million Christians in China in the year 2050, 5.4% of the population. It should be noted that this report does not, for lack of reliable data, account for religious switching (or converting) to (or from) Christianity.

exclusivist orientation and emphasis on institutional membership so prominent in the West lack cultural significance within Chinese society.”⁴

The problems of using Western methods and terminology to explain religious belief and practice in China is not novel, it is an issue that has been discussed by many scholars, from CK Yang (1961) to, more recently, Fan (2011). However, what I am suggesting we see in much of the analysis of the number of Christians in China is an eagerness for larger and increasing figures. In the early years of the PRC, CK Yang mentioned that Chinese scholars downplayed the amount of religious expression out of a sense of pride, among other reasons. According to Yang (1961: 6), “perhaps an even stronger motivation for the assumption of an ‘unreligious’ or ‘rationalistic’ society for China lies in the Chinese intellectual’s necessity of emphasizing the dignity of Chinese civilization in the face of the political and economic superiority of the nationalistically oriented Western world.” The reverse of this often seems to be the case when Western scholars calculate the number of Christians in China. The numbers tend to be always adjusted “up.” For example, Stark and Wang note that in the 2007 survey, some respondents expressed belief in Jesus, but did not self-identify as Christian. They then increase the number of Christians based on this. The problems with ascertaining accurate numbers and gathering reliable survey responses on such a sensitive issue is understandable and adjusting figures to account for underreporting is acceptable, but only when done fairly and from a position of objectivity. However, in this survey, there were other respondents who self-identified as Christians but also said they did *not* believe in Jesus.⁵ The figures were not adjusted downward to account for these cases. In fairness, this percentage was smaller, but I feel this seems to reflect a bias or a hope that the number of Christians is high and always increasing.

Another issue that gets lost in the macro view of total numbers of Christians in China is the tendency for rural groups to splinter into varying levels of quasi-Christian sects. Stark and Wang talk about the potential for greater denominationalism to be found in the future Chinese church, but they do not address the thorny issue of fringe groups that may claim to be Christian, but would not be recognized by most church bodies as Christian. For example, Eastern Lightning (also known as Church

4 Similarly, the problem of language is also apparent in conducting such surveys and can lead to misunderstandings. For example, in the 2007 and 2014 surveys analyzed by Stark and Wang, many respondents replied they “believed in Jesus Christ,” but a more accurate translation of the Chinese question would be “Do you believe Jesus exists.” For interesting anecdotal evidence of believing “in” Jesus, but not being Christian in China, see Cline (2010: 524) and Lee (2013: 103-5).

5 See Pew Research Center (2011), Appendix C, footnote 71.

of the Almighty God), a fringe group that claims Jesus returned to Northern China as a woman in the 1980s claims to have millions adherents (Dunn, 2009: 97). This group has been accused of kidnapping and seducing pastors, “stealing” members from other churches, and in a high profile case in 2014, even murder.⁶ As Bays (2009: 8) explains, there is a “strong tendency for rural Christian groups to become sectarian in their beliefs and behaviour, and in fact often to merge with persistent elements of folk religion or popular religion. This tendency is frequently accompanied by charismatic authoritarian leadership, by claims that the founder or leader is divine, and sometimes by violence and coercion used against members, competitors, and even government authorities.” Such an issue is obviously not just a challenge for Stark and Wang’s statistics, but for any statistical survey of Chinese Christians (or other religious adherents). The point is, it seems like the broadest possible definition of Christianity is accepted and the resulting numbers are as high as possible. Of course this Western “hope” for more Christians in China is countered by a downplaying of the number of Christians by most Chinese official organizations. A large number of Christians does not bode well politically for the state or fit the narrative they hope to portray in which the Party is the vanguard of the people and attentive to their needs. Most scholars, both within and outside of China, put little stock in the official numbers of Christians reported by government agencies in China, or even by those given by the TSPM, seeing this group as only part of the total number.

In addition to the above criticisms of this book, there are numerous misspellings and factual errors. Many Chinese names and geographical places in particular are incorrect. Stark and Wang at times follow the *pinyin* convention of spelling, and at other times use an older system. For instance, Fujian is spelled in *pinyin*, as well as “Fukien” and also misspelled as “Fugian.” (pgs. 22 and 66). Watchman Nee’s name is not given in the *pinyin* version, but the names of his contemporaries (such as Wang Mingdao and Song Shangjie) are. Besides these inconsistencies, I have counted at least seven misspellings of names/places. For example, Jianrong Yu, “the distinguished Chinese researcher,” is twice referred to as Jainrong Yu.⁷ Similarly, in refer-

6 The Wikipedia page for “Eastern Lightning” provides information and references for some such accusations: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Lightning [accessed August 18, 2015]

7 Misspellings include: Heilongjiang (Heilonjiang, pg. 25), Wang Mingdao (Wang Mindao, pg. 65 and 66), possibly Zhaoji (Zhaoj, pg. 108), Jianrong Yu (Jainrong Yu, pgs. 75 and 100).

encing Yang Huilin, the footnote and bibliography mistake Huilin as the scholar's surname.⁸

Other factual mistakes plague the volume as well. Readers are led to believe that Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, "two American missionaries," attended the 1892 missionary convention in Shanghai and proposed the three-self model (pg. 45). Venn was not American but British and neither attended the conference in Shanghai. In fact, both Venn and Anderson were dead by the time of the Shanghai conference, which was in 1890, not 1892. They were, however, as leaders of mission agencies (not missionaries), instrumental in developing the three-self concepts (see Shenk, 1990).

In terms of historical dates, the authors also often seem to miss the mark. Chapter two mentions treaties in 1859 and 1860 that "enabled Christian missionaries, Protestants as well as Catholics, to enter China and openly spread the gospel" (pgs. 13-14). The Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and the subsequent Convention of Peking (1860) did allow for greater missionary expansion into the interior of China, but the initial treaties following the First Opium War, most notably the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), provided a "legal" basis for missionary activity in five port cities. This treaty seems to be referenced (pg. 15), but the date given is 1844. Catholic Bishop Pin-Mei Kung is also introduced and his death and birth dates are given as 1900 and 2000 respectively, but on the same page he is said to have passed away "at the age of ninety-eight." Actually, Bishop Kung was born in 1901. Of course such inconsistencies or mistakes with historical dates are not central to the main points of the book, but they likewise do not instill confidence in readers, especially in terms of correctly understanding numbers.

The recent growth of Christianity in China is remarkable and in need of quality sociological inquiry, but estimating the number of Christians is wrought with many challenges. In a major report in 2011, the Pew Research Center acknowledged these issues in its analysis by relying on multiple sources and statistics.⁹ Stark and Wang do offer survey results that, when read carefully, may be helpful in understanding the demographics of Chinese Christianity. However, overall the volume, marred by poor editing and a prejudicial selection of material, reveals some of the dangers encountered in trying to count China's Christians.

8 Pg. 129, chapter 4, footnote 21.

9 Especially see Appendix C of this report. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/ChristianityAppendixC.pdf>

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