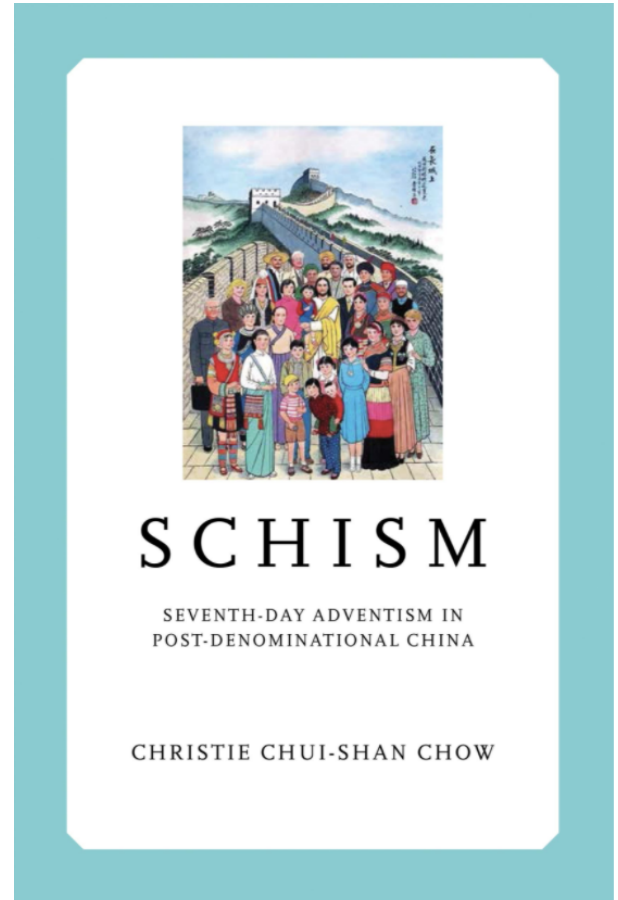


Christie Chui-Shan Chow, [*Schism: Seventh-day Adventism in Post-Denominational China*](#), pp. 105-106

“The arrival of the reform era, which began around the late 1970s, came with the normalization of public religious life. The Chinese government justified its religious control by dictating what it regarded as “normal religious activities.” “This normalization of faith activities was intended to bring clandestine activities out from unregistered premises beyond the government’s control to officially designated venues, for better supervision. The normalization method, more pragmatic in comparison to the complete ban on public religious activities, was in line with the party’s new agenda of rebuilding the trust of a disheartened society, revising a paralyzed economy, and reaching out to the West. Only famous and particularly magnificent temples and shrines were reopened as a sign of the regime’s alleged religious tolerance, to attract foreign visitors and overseas Chinese, and to promote tourism. The scale of public avenues for open religious activities was, however, limited. New churches could be built, and previously occupied church premises could be recovered and enlarged, but the whole process of normalization varied from place to place. The regime made sure that permission to hold religious activities in officially designated venues was not perceived as an official endorsement of religious revival.

“Attaining ‘normal religious activities’ hinged on the recovery of confiscated religious properties. Returning religious properties provided the basic material means for supporting the clergy and fulfilled the government’s slogan that believers should be able to support themselves so that the professional clergymen would not cause an extra financial burden on the government. The ideal arrangement for normalizing Protestant activities was to place them in circumscribed arenas, namely former mission and church premises. Regional practices varied, but on the whole, church premises in metropolitan areas were reopened as legal venue for ‘united worship.’ The reestablishment of the TSPM system came with the re-implementation of the 1958 church management policy, in which all believers without regard to their denominational background had to co-share a church building. The resumption of united worship was meant to co-opt, unify, and regulate secret house gatherings. Merging all Protestants into a limited number of churches in urban areas was a continuation of the 1958 patriotic religious policy to eradicate the roots of



Western denominationalism. Meanwhile, given the reality of house gatherings, local authorities demanded that meetings or gatherings with over fifty participants register.

“The government’s calculation was built on four mistaken assumptions. First, the government did not consider diversities within Protestant circles. Theological and liturgical differences made various Protestant groups unwilling to share the same officially designated church premises. Second, the government presumed that the small number of churches that were open was sufficient for worship services, but liberalization and reform came with rapid church growth, and the government did not quite know how to deal with these. Third, officials underestimated the political and economic complications for Protestants to recover their confiscated mission and church properties. Fourth and finally, the government overestimated the believers’ willingness to limit their activities to state-assigned locations.

“Clergy were also subject to ‘normalization.’ Of all the religious professionals, it was the core members of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) who were first reinstated. Created in 1951, the TSPM was a state-support Protestant organization to absorb all believers in order for the government to better control the churches. At the same time, the government sought to prevent the activity of ‘self-styled evangelists’ who had no official approval nor recognized credentials from the TSPM. From the government’s perspective, an ideal clergy member to lead a denominational church would be a member of the church who was ordained by TSPM endorsed pastors. Such leaders also had to obtain approval from the religious affairs bureau. Disputes arose when the candidates failed to fulfill these requirements. To ensure the succession of patriotic religious leadership, TSPM seminaries were reopened in the early 1980s. Short-term training sessions for volunteer evangelists and Bible instructors were held at many patriotic churches. In the following years, one criterion for being a TSPM-recognized minister was to gain theological training in these state-supported seminaries...From the very beginning, normalization of religious life left little room for the diversity of Protestant denominational heritages.”