

A Literature Review on China's House Churches Since the 21st Century

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Abstract: By reviewing research literature from 2001 to 2023, this paper synthesizes the definitions and key characteristics of China's house churches. The findings reveal that house churches are characterized by their large scale, informality, diversity, and complexity, while simultaneously exhibiting both closed and open dynamics. Further studies explore their social functions, privatization aspects, issues of identity and localization, as well as their tensions with religious policies. Since the beginning of the 21st century, house churches have shown new trends, including greater diversity among believers, a broader range of activities, and increased dissemination through the internet. This suggests that the development of house churches is closely tied to societal changes in China. The review of prior research helps identify existing gaps and provides theoretical and practical insights for future studies on house churches.

Keywords: House churches; China; 21st century; Development trends

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1 Introduction

House churches, a form of religious practice independent of the Three-Self Churches and the China Christian Council, consist of groups of Christian believers gathering for worship in homes. The growth of house churches involves not only issues of religious freedom but is also closely tied to various social, political, and cultural factors. Since the start of the 21st century, house churches have undergone significant transformations driven by China's social development and changes in religious policies. This paper aims to review and analyze the body of domestic and international literature on house churches in China from 2001 to 2023, outlining their definitions and key characteristics. Additionally, it provides an overview of the current state of research and explores the development trends of house churches in contemporary Chinese society, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for future studies.

2 The Discussion on the Definition and Key Characteristics of House Churches

Through an analysis of domestic and international literature on China's house churches published between 2001 and 2023, the definitions and key characteristics of house churches can be summarized as follows.

2.1 The Definition of House Churches

In China, most domestic scholars agree that house churches are venues where religious activities—such as Bible reading, prayer, baptism, and hymn singing—take place in private homes or non-public spaces. These locations operate outside the registration or control of government religious affairs authorities, with the majority of house churches refusing to join the officially recognized Three-Self Churches or the China Christian Council (Yu 2008).

On the other hand, foreign scholars generally regard house churches as a bottom-up, de-institutionalized form of religious expression, often distinct from public religion or mainstream denominations. Barrett views house churches as a de-institutionalized religious model, where believers choose this mode of worship to seek a more direct and private spiritual experience (Barrett 2001). Additionally, Vala highlights that the development of house churches in contemporary China is frequently shaped by external pressures, such as government restrictions and intolerance from the Three-Self Churches or the China Christian Council, making house churches, in some cases, symbols of religious resistance (Vala 2012). These churches have not only adapted to political constraints but have also expanded in size, showcasing the diversity and flexibility of the house church model.

2.2 The Discussion on the Key Characteristics of House Churches

According to literature on China's house churches published between 2001 and 2023, house churches exhibit characteristics of both large scale and informality. The White Paper on China's Policy and Practice of Guaranteeing Freedom of Religious Belief states that China has approximately 38 million Christian believers. However, some domestic and international researchers question the accuracy of these official statistics, doubting whether they accurately capture the number of Christians in China, especially those belonging to unregistered house churches. Researchers estimate that the number of unregistered house church believers could range from 45 to 60 million, far exceeding the officially registered number.

House churches are widely distributed across both major cities and rural areas, particularly in regions experiencing rapid urbanization. They are not confined to specific locations but often maintain cross-regional connections, forming informal networks. Unlike traditional churches, house churches are typically small, spontaneous organizations with relatively simple church structures, lacking professional clergy and complex management systems. Despite differences in location and membership composition, house churches in China share common characteristics. First, they conduct religious activities such as prayer, Bible reading, hymn singing, and baptism in non-public spaces or private homes. Second, they are spontaneously organized, with sizes ranging from a few individuals to several thousand people. Third, their meeting places are highly mobile, and most are not registered with the Three-Self Churches or the China Christian Council. Based on their

time of establishment, regional distribution, membership, and denominational affiliations, house churches can be categorized into three main types: Rural House Churches, Traditional Urban House Churches, and Emerging Urban House Churches.

House churches are also characterized by a wide range of denominations and organizational complexity. Each denomination operates independently, without hierarchical structures. Studies show that within house churches, major denominations include Lutheranism, Reformed churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Baptist churches, Methodist churches, the True Jesus Church, the Anglican Church, Pentecostalism and Pietism. House churches exhibit both closed and open dynamics. Most are not registered with the Three-Self Churches or the China Christian Council, and they typically hold religious activities in private homes or rented informal venues. This model reduces interference from public religion, enhancing the closed nature of house churches.

3 Application of Domestic and International Literature and Expansion of Research Perspectives

By analyzing research published between 2001 and 2023, we can summarize the current state of domestic and international studies on house churches in China.

3.1 Social Functions of House Churches

House churches not only serve as religious platforms but also play a significant role in the social lives of believers. Liu observed that house churches in China function as unofficial grassroots organizations with distinct social roles, especially in rural areas where social resources are limited (Liu 2009). In rural regions, where formal church infrastructure, clergy, and educational opportunities are often lacking, house churches provide a space for individuals from diverse backgrounds to gather, learn, and access social support. The religious activities within these churches not only strengthen believers' sense of belonging and well-being but also contribute to constructing personal meaning in life and promoting social equality.

In addition, house churches play a vital role in social services and charitable activities. The China Religion Report, compiled by Jin and Qiu, highlighted the critical role house churches play in philanthropy (Jin and Qiu 2013). Xu emphasized the positive impact of Korean Christian communities in Shanghai, noting that house churches contribute to social harmony without causing instability (Xu 2016). Huang, based on fieldwork, analyzed how grassroots house churches have integrated into local communities through voluntary services and charity (Huang 2016).

3.2 House Churches and Privatization

The meeting format of house churches makes the privatization of religious practice while enhancing collective cohesion within the congregation. Small gatherings in private places create opportunities for closer interaction and the exchange of religious beliefs, thereby strengthening trust and emotional bonds among believers (Dunn 2010). Liu, in a case study of the "Lingliang Church", a house church in Nanjing, analyzed how interpersonal networks and opinion leaders within house churches promote Christianity in urban areas. Ritual participation helps reinforce group identity and integrate new believers into the church's system of meaning (Liu 2012). Building on this, Yu and Tao studied a youth church called the "MT House Group" in Guangzhou. They found that the privatized spatial practices of house churches constructed emotional and social networks for members, strengthening their local identity (Yu and Tao 2017).

House churches also emphasize personal spiritual growth and the believer's relationship with God, encouraging worship both within the church and at home. For example, personalized spiritual guidance, such as Bible study and personal devotion, deepens believers' connection with God. Additionally, house churches often advocate for private prayer times, creating a spiritual support network that sustains believers, especially in the context of busy urban life.

3.3 Identity and Localization of House Churches

Identity and localization have become important themes in recent studies of house churches. Zhou explored how believers integrate local culture into Christian practices through religious rituals, emphasizing that identity formation is crucial for building church communities, while localization is key to the survival and development of house churches in Chinese society (Zhou 2015). Liu, through a case study of Beijing's BG house church, noted the tension between secular and religious identities, which is often reconciled through church life and spiritual activities (Liu 2015).

Meanwhile, scholars have analyzed how China's house churches integrate Christian doctrine with traditional Chinese culture to promote the processes of "localization", "indigenization", and "sinicization" of Christianity (Zhuo 2019). For example, by incorporating Christian beliefs into local customs—such as traditional festivals, weddings, and funerals—house churches create a harmonious balance between faith and local culture (Qiao 2014). This fusion enables believers to maintain their cultural identity while deepening their religious faith. These practices illustrate the process of cultural adaptation within China's house churches.

3.4 House Churches and Religious Policies

The relationship between house churches and religious policies has long been a focal point of academic interest. According to the regulations of the Chinese government, religious activities must be conducted under government supervision and within officially recognized religious venues. However, since house churches are not registered with the Three-Self Churches or the China Christian Council, they are considered "illegal gatherings" or "unregulated religious activities" by the government.

While some house churches face restrictions, local governments often apply policies inconsistently, allowing smaller churches more flexibility. For instance, between 2017 and 2019, the government of City D dismantled several influential house churches but showed leniency toward smaller, less prominent ones. This disparity in enforcement provides space for house churches to persist despite legal challenges. As expressions of private faith, house churches adapt to China's religious policies in different ways. Some engage in covert

meetings to avoid government attention, while others seek registration with the Three-Self Churches and the China Christian Council to operate legally. Kang highlighted the challenges house churches face in managing religious activities professionally while interacting with China's religious policies in the context of modernization (Kang 2016).

4 Trends in the Development of House Churches in China in the 21st Century

The development trajectory of house churches in China throughout the 21st century can be divided into two distinct phases: 2001–2012 and 2012–2023. By analyzing these periods, we can observe the evolution of house churches in terms of organizational structure, activities, demographics, and their interactions with the government.

4.1 Development Trends from 2001 to 2012

During this period, house churches, particularly in urban areas, experienced rapid growth. Their organizational structures became more established while still maintaining the relatively informal nature of their gatherings. A notable diversification occurred within congregations, which expanded from being primarily composed of elderly individuals and marginalized groups to include more young intellectuals and migrant workers. Leadership roles within these churches increasingly shifted to younger, well-educated individuals, signaling a transition in church dynamics and influence.

House church activities also became more varied, expanding beyond traditional religious practices such as prayer and Bible study to include outdoor activities and community services. In addition to conventional gatherings, churches began organizing outdoor fellowship activities like hiking and participating in charitable efforts. This shift marked a broadening of the church's focus from spiritual rituals to a more holistic approach to pastoral care and community life.

The relationship between house churches and the government during this period was complex and inconsistent. Some house churches sought to engage in dialogue with local Three-Self Churches or the China Christian Council to gain legal recognition and policy support. Others, however, faced tensions with authorities, particularly concerning the size of congregations and the locations of gatherings.

4.2 Development Trends from 2012 to 2023

Since the 2010s, particularly after the 2018 revision of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, the Chinese government has intensified its regulation of house churches. In response to these stricter measures, many house churches, especially in urban areas, shifted to smaller gatherings. This shift from "Medium & Large Meetings" to "Small-Group Meetings" enabled house churches to maintain flexibility and operate more discreetly within the constraints of government oversight. Meanwhile, some house churches opted to register with local Three-Self Churches and the China Christian Council, participating in religious activities and social services through legal channels.

The demographic composition of house church congregations also shifted during this phase, with an increasing number of middle-class members, university students, and white-collar workers joining the house churches. House church activities became even more diverse, incorporating social welfare projects such as providing care for elderly individuals living alone and offering free tutoring services. These projects helped house churches engage more actively with broader social issues, further embedding them in local communities. Despite this growth, house churches faced more complex challenges, including navigating their relationship with the government, adapting to social changes while upholding core religious values, and balancing the dual pressures of Christian localization and globalization. To meet these challenges, some house churches sought to register with the Three-Self Churches and the China Christian Council or established more formal governance structures to ensure their long-term survival. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further reshaped the practices of house churches, with many moving their services, fellowship activities, and theological education online. This forced innovation allowed house churches to continue functioning despite restrictions on physical gatherings, accelerating their adoption of digital platforms.

5 Conclusion

Upon reviewing the literature on house churches in China, it is clear that while significant progress has been made in understanding their development, several important issues warrant further exploration. First, while many studies highlight their contributions to believers' lives, social services, and charitable activities, the full extent of their social impact remains under-examined. A pressing question is whether there are other, yet-to-be-identified social functions of house churches, and how these functions might evolve as social dynamics shift in China. Second, house churches exhibit strong tendencies toward privatized religious practices, positioning them as a unique model that blends institutionalized religion with personal faith. However, this raises the question of whether house churches also possess characteristics of collectivization, particularly in how they foster group identities and networks. How do they balance individual spirituality with collective participation in religious life? Third, house churches have maintained a sacred dimension despite navigating complex religious policies, but there is room to examine whether they also exhibit secular traits. In an era of accelerated secularization, it becomes essential to investigate how house churches reconcile their sacred identities with secular influences. Can they maintain their religious authenticity while adapting to secular societal norms? Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the impact of globalization, Christian localization, and changing social environments on house churches in the 21st century remains under-explored. How have house churches evolved structurally and organizationally in response to these forces? Have their religious activities, practices, and innovations shifted significantly during this period? Addressing these unanswered questions is crucial, as they carry profound theoretical significance. They not only deepen our understanding of house churches in China but also help to reveal the broader reciprocal interaction between society and religion. Unpacking these issues will offer valuable insights into the future trajectory of house churches and their role within the modern social fabric.

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