KEYWORDS: book review, Chinese Seventh-day Adventism, schism, denominationalism, the "three red banners'

Insights from China that Illuminate Global Adventism

BY GILBERT M. VALENTINE

Christie Chui-Shan Chow's recent book, *Schism: Seventh-day Adventism in Post-Denominational China*, provides a rewarding study rich with insights and provocative analysis that will undoubtedly set new benchmarks and a fresh new paradigm for the study of the denomination. It sets out a new pathway for understanding church dynamics that other students of the movement will want to follow for other geographic regions of the Church and for the Church as a whole.

Chow is an Adventist scholar. She was baptized at the Kowloon Church in Hong Kong during her high school years. She earned a Bachelor of Social Sciences from the Hong Kong Baptist University, majoring in journalism, and then secured a position as a journalist with a Hong Kong newspaper for almost a decade before joining the Hong Kong-Macau Conference as an editor. She then transitioned to executive editor of the Seventh-day Adventist Chinese Church paper, *The Last Day Shepherd's Call*, published in Hong Kong by the China Union Mission, the entity which is entrusted with oversight of the Church in China but has no formal links with it. Chow moved to Scotland to attend the University of St. Andrews for theological studies and completed her PhD in religion and society at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2019. The fieldwork for her doctoral study necessitated repeated visits to mainland China between 2012 and 2019.

Although Chow may be unfamiliar to western Adventist readers, she already has an established scholarly record in her field, with articles published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Social Sciences and Missions*, the *Journal of World Christianity*, and the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, along with book chapters in volumes published by Brill and by Routledge. She has also jointly authored reports on research on Christianity in China with her historian husband, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, for various books and a paper in *Frontiers of History in China* (310, 316).

In *Schism*, Chow sets out to try and understand how the Chinese Adventist Church has adjusted to the forceful attempts by the Chinese Government during the post-Mao era to dismantle the structures of protestant "denominationalism" in China. State authorities implemented this policy by replacing denominations with a monolithic generic form of Christianity under the umbrella of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Protestants in China were to be self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing, with no ties at all to religious organizations outside the country. Chow focuses on the Adventist experience and observes that a non-formal *de facto* pattern of denominationalism, in fact, continues in China, with Adventist members perceiving themselves as "a unique ecclesial entity," in spite of state efforts to eliminate such thinking and in spite of numerous distinct Adventist factions that have emerged in recent decades. The book claims to be "the first monograph that documents the life of the Chinese Adventist denomination from the mid-1970s to the 2010s." Insights about the distinctive Adventist experience, Chow suggests, could be informative for understanding the wider phenomenon of Chinese Christianity. Cover blurbs indicate that non-Adventist scholars agree.

Chow focuses on the Adventist experience and observes that a non-formal *de facto* pattern of denominationalism, in fact, continues in China, with Adventist members perceiving themselves as "a unique ecclesial entity," in spite of state efforts to eliminate such thinking and in spite of numerous distinct Adventist factions that have emerged in recent decades.

Schism looks in detail at the factions that have emerged in Chinese Adventism. It is a fascinating sociological study of the complex phenomenon of schism and how it led to the factionalism. Schism in this context is seen as "sacred schism" and yet it needs to be understood as much more than just theological development. It involves recognition of cultural, social, and political dynamics as well. Chow constructs a careful, rigorous ethnographic study of four factions that have emerged in Adventism in the city of Wenzhou and its surrounding districts and counties in southeastern Zhejiang Province in East China. She seeks to understand the "lived experience" of the faction members.[1] As a respected and respectful participant-observer, Chow assembles her data from direct interviews with faction leaders and representative faction members and from other church officials. She participates in the various worship services and social meetings, making personal observations informed by her discipline, and she collects, analyzes, and evaluates historical documents, liturgical materials, correspondence, government submissions, agreements, and much else besides. The study is interdisciplinary but solidly grounded in its sociological analysis.

According to Chow, four major factions have emerged in Adventism in this region of China since 1978, when the first division occurred over differences in worship patterns. Clear identity markers involving distinctive liturgy, hymnbooks, kinship networks among faction leaders, property ownership, and sources of pastoral and ecclesial authority serve to create distinct boundaries between the groups. Chow identifies the factions as:

- The "Conservative Faction" or the "Old Faction," which believes its task to be safeguarding the Adventist tradition in the form it was introduced to China by American missionaries at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- The "New Faction" or "Reformist" faction, which sees itself as revitalizing Adventism during the 1970s, even as it borrows from other religious traditions.
- The "Wilderness Faction," which is a breakaway group from the conservatives and looks further back to the past, refusing to link itself with the TSPM. This is an unregistered group who sees itself as the only "authentic" Adventism.
- The "Wheatfield Faction," which is a splinter group from the reformists—"a neo-new" faction critical of traditional Adventist legalism and of its un-Protestant authority of Ellen White over scripture.

Chow's book, which is an adaptation of her Princeton doctoral dissertation, is published by the University of Notre Dame Press and is part of a series sponsored by the Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies located at Notre Dame. The volume is organized as seven chapters, bookended by an introduction and conclusion, with a helpful appendix providing mini biographies of the faction leaders and other significant personnel involved in the developments. The introduction sets out the historical context of the Adventist Church in China and briefly reviews the existing literature on the topic, before proceeding to a very helpful framing discussion of the terminology used in the study. The sensitivity of the topic, both

socially and politically, has necessitated the author's careful, nuanced use of language. This discussion reveals the depth and rigor of Chow's scholarship, her familiarity with the discipline, and for this reviewer it was exceptionally helpful. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the establishment of Seventh-day Adventism in China and its difficult experience during the communist revolution and the subsequent Maoist era. The chapter focuses on the Adventist experience in and around Wenzhou. Chapters 2 through 4 discuss the complexities of the three schisms that led to the formation of the four groups. These discussions consider the historical context of each rival group and include a highly illuminating, empathetic analysis of the social and political dynamics involved and the underlying theological perspectives. The remaining three chapters take up specific case studies of how the factionalism occurred and how it shaped Adventism in three village and urban settings: Horizontal Dyke Village, Stone Ground Village, and South Pond in Wenzhou City.

Chow argues that schism, while it has its downside in terms of fractured human relationships, can be viewed as positive from a wider perspective. Reports and interpretations of Chow's field work interviews, for example, are replete with descriptors such as "enemies," "chaos," "antagonism," "rivals," "accusations," "denunciation," and more. Yet, on the upside, she asserts, the impetus for schism demonstrates vitality and adaption to environmental pressures, changing contexts, and human need. Her assessment of schism is therefore quite creatively counter-intuitive. Schism provided a tool for both "permitting and blocking change" for Adventists. It "allowed Adventists to respond creatively and innovatively when internal and external pressures threatened their denominational existence." (2) This analysis of the factions and the processes that formed them, using the lens of history, social psychology, and anthropology, performs a valuable service to the rest of Adventism as a way of understanding the rich and clearly identifiable diversity within the denomination, which she argues contributes to its vitality and strong sense of identity. What Christie Chow has done in the study of Adventism in Wenzhou, China, sets out an example and a methodology that will be extremely helpful in the study of global Adventism. As I read of the four factions in Wenzhou, I could not refrain from thinking of the numerous distinct strains of Adventism that coexist and characterize the Church in North America and in the rest of the Western world.

Chow's inclusion of photographs enhances the book. The photograph of two independent factional churches right next door to each other, cheek by jowl in Horizontal Dyke village (164), is rather startling. Another photograph of two factional church buildings in close proximity in Stone Ground Village, another rural community, is also intriguing (162). But then, as Chow describes the three factions of Adventism in this latter village, each located in their impressive, independently owned, multi-storied church buildings, with their separate liturgies, pastoral staffing, kinship connections and outreach programs, all within five minutes walking

Gospel Chapel, the oldest Seventh-day Adventist church building in Stone Ground Township.
Credit: Christie Chui-Shan Chow, courtesy of University of Notre Dame Press

distance of each other, I kept thinking of a place like Loma Linda, California, and realized things were not much different. At the university church, an expansive facility serves the needs of a strand of Adventism that is professional, rather wealthy, media savvy, and middle of the road, if not progressive, in theological conviction. The Advent Hope congregation meets in the Damazio Theatre in the Centennial building in another part of the same university campus—a group following a very traditional style of worship, and which emphasizes eschatology and traditional evangelism. Right next to the university church, a congregation meets in a state-of-the-art meeting venue with a contemporary worship style, with music and visual effects that some think would turn James White in his grave. But at least these are all under one cohesive pastoral team. Across the street, prominently situated on "Campus Hill," a more conservative congregation with its own pastoral team finds a home. North America is really not that different from China.

And Adventists are not the only ones with clustered competing buildings and congregations. I could not help thinking also of the Anglicans. In Binfield village, for example, just across the road from Newbold College in England, sits St. Marks Church, with All Saints Church down at the far end of the same little village, each with their impressive architecture. St. Marks was built as a "chapel of ease," explained my good friend Helen Pearson, because as the village grew it became a bit too far for the older folk to walk to All Saints, which is now less than a four-minute drive away. She reported that whether the congregations observe high or low church liturgy really depends on the minister. When I was pastoring the Newbold College Church, conveniently located between the two Anglican congregations, I marveled at how Owen Blatchley, then the kindly rector and a good friend of Adventists, expertly served as pastor to the two distinct congregations and quite openly claimed himself to be the pastoral host to Newbold's lately arrived Adventists as well. Adventists were sure glad for the use of his church graveyard.

Highlights

There are a number of highlights in Christie Chow's study that for me really enhanced the value of her work and the reading experience. First, her evident literary skill provides delightful reading pleasure. The skill is evident in the creative, engaging way in which she introduces each of her chapters. Anecdotes or reported conversations immediately entice the reader and subtly convey the essence of the discussion to follow. Furthermore, her narrative sections, which trace the history and development of the four factions, are empathetic, eloquently capturing the emotion and conviction of her interlocutors. She enriches her accounts with intriguing and illuminating detail and insightful personal observation, yet she carefully and sensitively maintains scholarly distance. One has the sense of sitting in a Chinese church, observing worship in process, and catching glimpses of what it really means to be a Chinese Adventist. In addition, in numerous places, Chow's prose glistens with delightful alliterative phraseology. Speaking of the "Wheatfield" faction, for example, she sees a group of Chinese Adventists who have found "freedom and confidence to choose, challenge, and change." (162)

Second, Chow has also developed the skill of articulating Adventist theology, its history, and the lived experience of believers, in explanatory language for non-Adventist scholars that avoids patronizing oversimplification. She is the master of the language and theoretical concepts of her discipline, and this allows subtle insightful observation and insight. In a way, she has helped provide an additional rich vocabulary with which to discuss Adventist ideas and which communicates readily across both faith and discipline barriers. In seeking to explain the developments that led to the formation of the four factions and the role

Chow notes that each of the factional leaders self-consciously cite Ellen White's words "to create a repertoire of references and strategies to pursue their independent agendas."

they now play in Chinese Adventism, for example, Chow identifies numerous factors in terms that all can understand. She speaks of the way in which ties to missionary roots are understood and reframed as "narratives of identity" by each of the rival groups. She speaks of "identity markers," such as the kind of hymn books used, and forms of prayer and food laws. For one faction, borrowing a slogan from the Maoist era, food laws, tithing, and sabbath keeping were the "three red banners" of authentic Chinese Adventism. These and other such behaviors serve as powerful boundary markers between the factions.

A third highlight glowed for this reader as Chow explained her study and as allusions and comparisons began to resonate strongly with the Adventist worlds with which I am familiar. At times it seemed that Chow was describing West Coast American Adventism when she sketched the background and the contours of the Wheatfield faction, for example. The reality is that differences in liturgy, music styles, theological emphases, views of the nature of ministry, and of the role and authority of Ellen White are a feature of contemporary Adventism both in North America and across Global Adventism. There are clearly identifiable strands in the community, each with their own identity markers that define their boundaries. Despite their differences, they all consider themselves integrally part of Seventh-day Adventism and, at least at present, they cohere somewhat harmoniously together. Financial cohesion and long-established structural ties in global Adventism currently keep the groups united solidly as one Adventism, but in reality the strands are different Adventisms—as different as the Chinese factions.

A fourth notable observation by Chow suggested a question that I am still pondering. In a remarkable and very helpful analysis of the place of Ellen White in the factional Adventism of Wenzhou, Chow notes that each of the factional leaders self-consciously cite Ellen White's words "to create a repertoire of references and strategies to pursue their independent agendas" (219). In this way, the agency of Ellen White clearly serves as a divisive factor in the denomination in China, quite contrary to the way in which her role has traditionally been portrayed—that of a strongly unifying influence. Adventism would not have survived as a movement if Ellen White had not been at its center to keep it unified is how the story line runs in the traditional Adventist narrative of identity. This was most clearly evident during her lifetime. But have other factors been operative since her death? The phenomenon of the Adventist experience in China might suggest the question—has it really been Ellen White in her own right whose influence has continued to unify the Adventist Church in the post-1915 era? Or has it been the Church leadership's ability to commandeer her influence to drive their agenda—through publications, manuscript releases, and selective appropriation of materials judged by the leadership to be relevant? Has it been the utilization of her authority by leadership that has been perhaps more effective as an agency of unity in the long term than the original Ellen White herself? But then, on the other hand, perhaps one of the strengths of Ellen White's ministry, and a distinctive quality of her charisma, has been that in spite of pressures toward uniformity, she has been able to be a voice for the many different strands of thought in the Church.

Christie Chow's pathbreaking study prompts many other questions about how we might understand the Adventism of the past. Its greater value may be the way it helps us envisage an Adventism of the future. As well as providing helpful insights into Christianity in China for the wider world of scholarship, this is an exceedingly valuable study for Adventists and a contribution to the emerging discipline of Adventist Studies.

Endnote

1. The city of Wenzhou embraces three districts, two county-level cities, and six rural counties.

GILBERT M. VALENTINE, PhD, has served internationally in teaching and senior administrative roles in Adventist higher education in Europe, Asia, the South Pacific, and North America. He has written extensively in Adventist studies and has authored several books including biographies of W. W. Prescott (2005) and J. N. Andrews (2019). His book *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) explored the political influence of Ellen White. He has also written for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013). In 2022 he received a Weniger Society for Excellence Award. Gil is married to Kendra Haloviak Valentine and lives in Riverside, CA.