

Relational Dynamics in China

By Ken Sande

The China Bubble

I flew into Beijing on October 12, 2011, on behalf of [Peacemaker Ministries](#) to personally observe developments in this energetic country. Home to nearly 10 million people, Beijing is bustling with traffic and energy. Signs reading “Gucci,” “Rolls Royce” and “BMW” line the streets, along with “McDonalds,” “Starbucks” and “KFC.”

The skyline is crowded with *dozens* of modern high-rise buildings. In some areas over 20 giant construction cranes stand shoulder to shoulder in a single massive construction project. Just a few blocks away, another 20 cranes are pulling more buildings to the sky.

All of this is part of what some are calling the “China Bubble,” a massive \$6 trillion GDP economy that is growing at 9% per year, compared to less than 2% in most of the West. According to the lead article in the October 31st issue of *Time*, the Chinese economy contributed 19% to combined global economic growth this year, and that is expected to increase to 24% next year. Its economic strength is considered to be essential to the recoveries of both the U.S. and Europe ... as illustrated by the fact that the Gap jeans company is closing 20% of its U.S. stores and tripling its stores in China.



Yet with all this growth, financial challenges loom. Although China has the second largest economy in the world (after the U.S.), it ranks 90th in GDP/person (millions still work in fields by hand). Inflation is growing, as is the gap between rich and poor. Real estate prices have tripled in many cities, and apartment flipping has been the rage. At the same time, in some areas entire apartment buildings stand vacant, too expensive for most Chinese citizens to rent.

According to *Time*, the government is seeking to stabilize the economy by reducing reliance on factory production and exports and increasing domestic consumer demand for goods and services. This will be a delicate transition, and should the bubble burst and growth drop below 7%, some experts believe it could be difficult to maintain social stability. So the whole world is watching this Asian tiger.

As fascinating as China’s financial growth is, ***the purpose of my China trip was to immerse myself in another sector of exciting growth—the church.*** Christianity was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but since 1979 church life has resumed with a passion. There is no way to accurately measure the number of Chinese citizens who follow Jesus, but estimates range from 3 to 8% (40 to 100 million people). Some regions of the country may be 25% Christian, while others are largely unreached.

I traveled to China as part of a group associated with Overseas Council, a ministry dedicated to supporting exceptional seminaries around the world. Our party was led by Peacemaker Board

member Manfred Kohl and his wife, Barbara, who have formed deep friendships with many Chinese Christian leaders. Our group included eight other people from Canada, South Africa, and the U.S.

During our time in Beijing we were privileged to climb the Great Wall of China and walk through Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. We visited the Olympic Stadium, Beijing University, and countless bustling business complexes, awed by the size and modern beauty of these structures.

But best of all, ***we spent many hours with people who love Jesus***. We learned about their joys and struggles, their victories and setbacks, their opportunities and limitations. I was invited to teach a class at a seminary in Beijing and gave them a set of resources for their library. You can imagine my delight the next day when a prominent pastor told me that the Mandarin translation of my book, *The Peacemaker*, was used to teach Sunday school in their church.



More importantly, I heard consistent reports that churches are growing steadily and saw with my own eyes how enthusiastically their members are worshipping and talking about Jesus. Such growth presents many challenges, one of which is that seminaries are struggling to train enough pastors to care for new converts. And without good pastors, new believers may lack adequate teaching and shepherding.

Based on my brief experience, however, I was encouraged by the quality of the pastors with whom I talked. They had a clear understanding of the essential doctrines of our faith and a passion for the gospel. All of my conversations aligned with the following observation in the July/August 2011 issue of *Books and Culture*:

“The quality of biblical preaching and teaching in the patriotic (registered) churches and in the study groups and house churches typically seems much higher than in evangelical churches in America.... One may expect to find much higher levels of biblical literacy and theological clarity by three to five years post-conversion than amongst American counterparts after two or three decades in the church.... Their teaching is learned, yet marked by an evangelical urgency and commitment to obedient practice rather than simply intellectual assent.”

Although I still have a lot to learn when I return to China later this year, I am greatly encouraged by what I’ve seen God doing in the Chinese church. Unlike the financial bubble described in *Time*, the Chinese church seems to be going from strength to strength. May God help us in America to learn from their example and pray for their success in sharing the gospel in the most populous nation in the world.

City of Ice in a Warm Society

After three days in Beijing we flew to Harbin, a major provincial city in northeast China. On the way, God gave me a touching lesson in Asian hospitality.

The seats in a China Air jet are a bit close together for someone of my height, so when I noticed a vacant bulkhead seat, I unbuckled my belt and moved to claim it. As I stepped into the aisle, a man in uniform—an artillery major in the Chinese Army, to be precise—made a similar move. I stopped and motioned for him to take the seat, but he beamed a mile-wide smile and insisted that I take the prize instead.

As I sat down and stretched my legs, I was moved by this man's thoughtfulness. The fact that it was made by a military officer of a country that has had historical tensions with mine made the gesture all the more significant.



This was but one of many acts of kindness. When I went through security in Beijing, I left a small flash drive, worth maybe \$10, in the plastic bin. A security agent spent several minutes tracking me through the maze of shops to return it to me. In another setting, a deaf seminary student came up to me during a teaching break and gave me the best shoulder massage of my life. The warmth of the Chinese people won my heart.

When we landed in Harbin, our party was met by a group of smiling pastors and seminary leaders who handed each of us an enormous bouquet of flowers. We were then bundled into a waiting bus and driven into the city.

Harbin is home to nearly 5 million people. Located 200 miles north of North Korea and an equal distance from the Russian border, it's known as the "Ice City," both for its climate and for the beautiful ice sculptures that adorn its parks during winter months. Its bustling streets and modern high-rises gave evidence of its growing prosperity

At our hotel I picked up three English language newspapers and was surprised to see how openly they reported controversial issues and conflicts in Chinese society. Controversies in the judicial system, declining trade surpluses, outdated university books, unethical behavior by a Chinese relief agency, deficient conditions of school buildings, and the ethical pitfalls of *Guanxi* (a Chinese tradition of reciprocal social exchanges and favors) were all fair game for discussion.

I imagine that there are still many limitations in Chinese society that I did not see or experience, but I was pleased to see how openly the newspapers could report and comment on these types of issues.

Church and seminary leaders showed a similar openness during our many wonderful meals together. One man explained how financial limitations are delaying pastors' pursuit of higher degrees. A professor admitted that her tendency to use her "teacher voice" offends her husband, who often reminds her, "I am not one of your students!"



A businessman talked about everyday ethical and reporting challenges. One of our interpreters described the tensions she has with her aging mother. After Barbara Kohl spoke about teen sexuality, a pastor admitted that it is extremely difficult within the church to discuss this topic. And an orphanage leader shared her pain at being sued by a former employee.

As I and my fellow travelers listened and got to know these people, it became increasingly evident that biblical peacemaking could become a powerful means for the church to provide a compelling witness for Christ, while playing a beneficial role in Chinese society. All of these tensions, whether in the church or in society at large, provide opportunities for believers to display God's grace and wisdom as they promote understanding and agreement.

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I emphasized this opportunity when I preached about gospel-driven peacemaking to a congregation of enthusiastic Chinese believers in Harbin, many of whom are recent converts and speak excellent English. I pressed the same principles during many individual conversations throughout my time in the city, always receiving a warm response. As one pastor put it, "I have a lot of work to do to live these things out in my marriage, but if I can start there, I can then teach this to my congregation."

Please join me in praying that the books and CDs I placed in many hands during my visit will be like seeds received by fertile soil, and that God will raise up a growing number of Chinese believers who will embrace the ministry of peacemaking and use it to demonstrate the love and reconciliation of Christ.

One Child, New Family

After two days in Harbin, we were driven to a seminary and retreat center 80 miles away to give a series of lectures. We were at exactly the same latitude as my home in Montana, so I was not surprised to wake the first morning to a dusting of snow on the surrounding mountains.

During our time there, I had some fascinating discussions about some of the implications of China's "one-child" policy. This policy, which was implemented in 1978, restricts married, urban couples to having only one child, while it allows various exemptions, including rural couples, ethnic minorities, and parents who have no siblings. It applies to approximately 36% of China's population.



Controversial both inside and outside China, the policy has triggered many studies and debates, which I will not get into. Instead I'll focus on three issues that could have direct implications for the church in China, some with peacemaking considerations.

First, children born under this policy have no brothers and sisters, and hence no nephews or nieces. If both of their parents are only children, this child will also have no uncles, aunts, or cousins. One pastor pointed out that this hugely diminishes the extended family, especially in an Asian culture that has historically fostered large extended families.

As another member of our group pointed out, this limitation can deprive people of much of the love, advice, support, and security that is normally available through family networks. (The older I get, the more I treasure my own brother and sister, their spouses, and my nephews and nieces!) One can only imagine how this loss could impact individuals' daily lives, especially at times of celebration, illness, crisis, or death.

But we all agreed that this loss also presents an opportunity—the opportunity for the church to live up to its calling to be **family**. To provide the love, the counsel, the support, the sharing of tears, joys, and comfort we all need to get through life's challenges and tragedies. I'm praying that the Lord will use the fallout from this policy to draw many people into the family of God.

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A second issue stemming from the one-child policy was described to me by the phrase "**little-emperor syndrome**." This describes a concern that only children will be over-indulged by their parents, deprived of normal give-and-take engagement with siblings, and therefore ill-equipped to deal with the competition and tensions of the workplace and other adult settings.

As I discussed this issue with some of the pastors, it became evident that it too presents an opportunity for the church to fill an important need. In addition to drawing single children into healthy group interaction, churches can teach them peacemaking skills that would prepare them to deal constructively with the conflicts they will experience as they move outside their family into adult life and marriage. (I married a single child, and Corlette would agree that not having a brother left her a bit unprepared to deal with her sometimes exasperating husband!)

A third issue is looming on the horizon: caring for the elderly. As a result of the one-child policy (and the tendency to favor male babies over female), China will soon have 30 million more men than women. That translates into 30 million bachelors who will eventually be expected to care for their two parents, and sometimes their four grandparents. This challenge is commonly referred to as the “**4-2-1 Problem**.” Having seen how taxing it was for Corlette and me to care for our parents in their later years, even though we had support from each other and from my siblings, I can only imagine the pressure these millions of Chinese bachelors are going to feel in the years ahead.



But here again our group saw an opportunity for the church to step in and be family ... and, in some cases, to do peacemaking. As parental needs increase and hard decisions are being made, the church can come alongside these men and their parents and provide the encouragement, support, and counsel to help them resolve conflicts and maintain healthy relationships through this difficult time of life. This adds fuel to our desire to move forward as quickly as possible on translations of our resources.

As you can see, there are vital ways that God can use the growing church in China to address societal conflict and needs. When the church lives up to its calling to be salt and light, and a true family of brothers and sisters, countless people can be drawn in to experience the love of Christ.

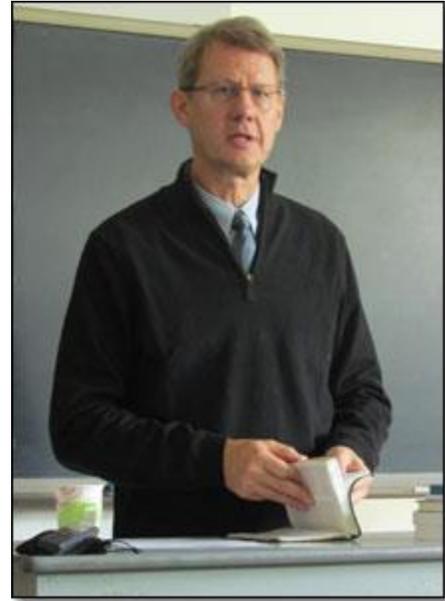
As I and my fellow travelers listened and got to know these people, it became increasingly evident that biblical peacemaking could become a powerful means for the church to provide a compelling witness for Christ, while playing a beneficial role in Chinese society. All of these tensions, whether in the church or in society at large, provide opportunities for believers to display God’s grace and wisdom as they promote understanding and agreement.

Teaching in a Shame/Honor Society

During our three days at the retreat center near Harbin, the weather stayed brisk, but the relationships were warm and memorable. Members of our tour group had the privilege of teaching and engaging 200 pastors, church workers, and seminary students.

Manfred enlightened the group about stewardship and leadership issues. His wife, Barbara, taught on teen sexuality (a topic rarely discussed in Asian societies). Reuben, the engaging president of a 3,000-student seminary in South Africa, taught about ministry to children. And I taught—yes, you guessed it—about peacemaking.

It's hard enough to keep students' attention when you speak their language. When half of what they hear (while waiting for the interpreter) is gibberish, their minds are even more prone to wander. But like students I've met all over the world, they're suddenly alert if the teacher says, "Let me tell you about a conflict I had with my wife a few days ago." We all love stories. We especially love stories that we can relate to.



I was told that teachers and pastors in China rarely tell stories about their own weaknesses and failures (which is typical in a shame/honor society). Therefore I was careful about the stories I used. For instance, most churches in China are led by a senior pastor whose word is law, so I realized that stories about church cliques and splits would be irrelevant.

But oh, did they relate to the stories I told about marriage, children, extended family, and the workplace! At first they looked shocked that I was sharing behavior in my life that is shameful (like backing my wife into the corner with my lawyering skills, or arguing with my father, or apologizing to a coworker for a problem I've caused). But the shocked looks soon gave way to smiles, then laughter, and in some cases tears.

The biggest smiles and strongest nodding of heads took place as I described how the gospel is the key to resolving all of these conflicts. I taught them that when we remember what God has done for us in Christ, how he has paid for and washed away our sins, how he wants to fill us with his Spirit and open our minds to understand and obey his Word, there is no limit to how he can use us to rebuild broken relationships and be channels of his peace.

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Between teaching sessions, I had many opportunities to discuss the application of these principles. One pastor told me how older Chinese people find it difficult to confront others, since doing so is viewed as disrupting harmony (which is contrary to Confucian teaching). But

younger people are more willing to engage in frank conversations ... which of course offends their elders, adding to generational tensions.

Other conversations focused on marriage. Chinese women are traditionally submissive to their husbands, who sometimes rule their homes with a heavy hand (one of the reasons that spousal violence is a problem in some parts of the country). But as more women are gaining higher education and earning power, some of them are defying these norms, resisting their husband's control, and sometimes leaving their marriages through divorce.

Some people talked to me about conflict in the workplace. As Christians find opportunities to start their own businesses, they often run into major conflicts. Lawsuits by disgruntled employees, ethical pressures related to regulations and *Guanxi* (favoritism and debts of honor), and the tensions of a highly competitive business environment drain many entrepreneurs of their enthusiasm.

Although I was able to point people to many relevant biblical principles, I was constantly mindful that these principles will often be practiced differently in a shame/honor society than they will in a guilt/innocence culture like the U.S. (For more information on these cultural distinctions, see Roland Muller's excellent book, *The Messenger, the Message and the Community*, 2nd Ed. 2010.)

I learned that Chinese people are inclined to avoid shame and protect honor ... both for themselves and others in their families or communities. This inclination has many benefits; in fact, I couldn't help but wish that Americans had a stronger sense of shame for ungodly conduct (such as sexual promiscuity or self-absorption), had more respect for our elders and leaders, and were slower to confront others.



But our hosts acknowledged that their culture makes people reluctant to admit their own wrongs or talk candidly about personal offenses. As a result, conflicts are often driven underground, triggering gossip and slander. In other cases personal shame is avoided by blaming others. And some conflicts fester for years before exploding in outright violence.

Such dynamics are certainly not confined to China! They occur in any culture. But all of the believers I talked with agreed that the Chinese church has a God-given calling to play a much greater role in teaching biblical ways to deal with conflict.

As God opens more doors for us to serve in China, we have a lot to learn about these dynamics. Even so, I am greatly encouraged that just as sin and conflict are trans-cultural, so is the gospel of Christ and the Word of God. I am excited to return to China soon and grow in my understanding of how God calls us all to be channels of his peace.

The Glory of God in Peacemaking

It was hard for me to leave our new friends in Harbin. They had bent over backwards to make our stay as comfortable as possible, and they had opened their hearts and lives to us so we could learn more about the challenges and opportunities they face. We parted with many kind gifts and an invitation to return as soon as possible.

Our little group boarded an overnight train to Shenyang. To my immense relief, the sleeping bunks were just long enough for my 6'4" frame. The clickity-clack of the wheels soon put me to sleep, and six hours later I woke in the railway station in Shenyang, China's fifth largest city, 6.5 million people. Here again we were greeted warmly by a delegation from a regional seminary and whisked off to a busy day of friendly meals and fascinating meetings.

The existing seminary in Shenyang is in the middle of the city and can house only 200 students. Thanks to the gifts of 15 Chinese businessmen, a brand new campus is being built on a hill overlooking the city.



The new dormitory will house up to 1,000 students, and some classrooms will seat up to 350. (Finding sufficient well-trained faculty will be a challenge, however.) The leadership's affection and respect for Manfred was manifested in their urging him to select his own office in their new faculty building. He declined the spacious corner office they offered, but in the room next door, he wrote his name on the unpainted wall, much to the delight of our hosts.

After touring the campus, we were invited to visit a building that houses a 24/7 prayer ministry. Each day a different church in Shenyang sends a busload of members to the center. Those believers spend the next 24 hours lifting up prayer needs of the seminary, local and regional churches, and the church around the world. Flags of every nation adorn the walls of the prayer room. I was moved to see the American flag among them, and was deeply moved to learn that the church in the U.S. is often the object of their prayers.

After singing and praying with the prayer warriors for a season, we were escorted to another building where we had the opportunity to share our testimonies with a group of 100 Christian businessmen, pastors, and students who came to the campus especially to meet us. Over lunch I had the opportunity to talk with several of the businessmen and learn of their strong interest in applying Christian ethics and biblical peacemaking in their businesses.



One man who owns a new information technology firm was especially excited about our ministry's new resources for the workplace, and told me that he wants to work with us to promote peacemaking in China. He later approached me as we were leaving campus and earnestly said, "I'm really serious about wanting to work with you. Christian businessmen truly need what you can teach us."

After lunch we drove back into Shenyang to the existing seminary, where Manfred, Barbara, Reuben, and I had the opportunity to speak to the entire faculty and student body. When my time to speak came, I asked the quiet and respectful students to break into teams of two or three and quickly write down five examples of conflict in the Bible. These young people knew Scripture and were every bit as competitive as Americans, so when I said "Go," the room erupted with discussion. Within minutes the scribes of each team were leaping to their feet to show they had compiled their list. We then went around the room sharing some of the examples each group had identified.

Having made the point that conflict has been part of the human experience since the Garden of Eden, the students were engaged during my brief overview of some basic principles of peacemaking. Referring to Exodus 34:6-7, 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, and 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6, I stressed that when God allows his people to be involved in conflict, he is giving us the opportunity to shine with his peacemaking glory.

I had their full attention as I illustrated this point by telling how God brought my own father to faith, in part through the many stories I told my dad about reconciliations he had deemed impossible, based on his 25 years as a trial judge. Since many of these teachers and students have loved ones and friends who do not yet know Jesus, the possibility of the reconciling power of Christ being a witness for the gospel seemed to hit a nerve with them. The group applauded when I promised to send a supply of Mandarin translations of *The Peacemaker* for their library.

The next morning I was on a plane for the U.S., thanking God for such a productive trip, reflecting on all I had learned, and planning next steps. One conversation after another had made it clear that peacemaking could play a major role in strengthening and advancing the church in China. It is equally clear that an effective way for Peacemaker Ministries to serve our brothers and sisters there is to help Christian leaders develop a fully and uniquely Chinese method of doing the ministry of peacemaking. Just before boarding my plane I received an invitation to return in December to Shanghai, where I can pursue that goal.

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Please pray that God will show us exactly how he wants us to serve the growing church in a country that has the potential to impact the entire world, not only through its economic power but also and more importantly through its ability to spread the gospel of Christ.

Back Again to China

Just before I left Beijing in October, I received an invitation to return to China six weeks later to attend a special conference on theological education. Eager to build on the relationships I'd made on my first trip, I flew into Shanghai on the December 5, 2011.

The conference was attended by forty leaders from China's twenty-one officially-recognized seminaries. I was included as a special guest of Overseas Council Ambassador Manfred Kohl, who has a personal relationship with nearly all of these seminaries.

We were invited to attend a special dinner with four top leaders in the China Christian Council (CCC), which oversees all ministry and training activities for the official church. In addition to enjoying a feast of exotic dishes, we had a candid discussion about the challenges and opportunities faced by churches in both China and the U.S.

Most of China's official seminaries have been in existence for less than twenty years, so they are on a steep learning curve. They have no standardized curricula, and the quality of faculty, programs, and graduates varies from school to school, many of which are equivalent to an American Bible college. Speakers covered a variety of topics, including biblical foundations, spiritual formation, faculty development, theological research, Christian ethics, advanced degree programs, opposing heresy, impacting society's conscience, and mentoring future church leaders.

Each talk triggered spirited yet respectful comments and questions. I was told that because of their shame-honor culture, Chinese educators enjoy rigorous discussion but shy away from open debate, which might seem to be disrespectful—in contrast to many American seminaries! There was broad agreement among these leaders that they have a great deal of work ahead of them to meet the educational needs of the rapidly growing church in China, but I sensed both the commitment and energy needed for such advances.

When I was invited to address the group, I described how equipping pastors to teach and model biblical peacemaking can strengthen an entire congregation's ability to live out the gospel and lead others to Christ. At the end of my talk I mentioned that I'd brought each seminary a set of resources that included Mandarin translations of *The Peacemaker* and our Bachelor of Arts curriculum, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, which we developed specifically for seminaries. Interest in the material was vividly illustrated at the end of our session by the rush to the resource table at the back of the room—every set was gone within thirty seconds.



Afterwards I had several inquiries on how to use the materials, as well as discussions about possible future training arrangements. On December 10th, just two days after I left Shanghai, I learned how genuine this interest was. The seminary vice president who served as our interpreter throughout the conference wrote me the following:

When I returned to my office I immediately talked with our principal about your material and ministry. The result is we are going to use it in our Conflict Management course and in church leadership trainings as well.

I will use it in our afternoon lecture time next semester. I just read the materials you gave me, and see I need to understand it better, so that I will know how to use it and teach it. My first impression is that it will bring great help for our churches and future church leaders in our school.

I could not have asked for a swifter or more affirming response to my brief presentation.

Please pray for open minds among seminary and church leaders, for wisdom on how we can best serve them, and for the staff and financial resources we will need to respond to these opportunities (in addition to other invitations we are considering for 2012).

In the meantime, may God grant you and your loved ones a Christ-centered and peace-filled Christmas, and a new year that is filled with a passion to live only and entirely for Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

