

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 98: Christianity in China

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## As for Me and My House

The house-church movement survived persecution and created a surge of Christian growth across China.

Tony Lambert

On the eve of the Communist victory in 1949, there were around one million Protestants (of all denominations) in China. In 2007, even the most conservative official polls reported 40 million, and these do not take into account the millions of secret Christians in the Communist Party and the government. What accounts for this astounding growth? Many observers point to the role of Chinese house churches.

The house-church movement began in the pre-1949 missionary era. New converts—especially in evangelical missions like the China Inland Mission and the Christian & Missionary Alliance—would often meet in homes. Also, the rapidly growing independent churches, such as the True Jesus Church, the Little Flock, and the Jesus Family, stressed lay ministry and evangelism. The Little Flock had no pastors, relying on every "brother" to lead ministry, and attracted many educated city people and students who were dissatisfied with the traditional foreign missions and denominations. The Jesus Family practiced communal living and attracted the rural poor. These independent churches were uniquely placed to survive, and eventually flourish, in the new, strictly-controlled environment.

In the early 1950s, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement eliminated denominations and created a stifling political control over the dwindling churches. Many believers quietly began to pull out of this system. They chose to meet in homes, although such activity was highly dangerous. According to a Communist source, by the mid-1950s these groups had grown to be "more numerous than all the other Protestant churches combined."

In 1953, the chairman of the Communist-controlled Religious Affairs Bureau attacked the "rapid growth of meetings in the home" as "suspicious." By 1958, the year of enforced "church unity," the TSPM was prohibiting house churches altogether: "All so-called 'churches', 'worship-halls' and 'family-meetings' which have been established without the permission of the government must be dissolved."

At "accusation meetings," Christians were encouraged to denounce their own leaders as "lackeys of Western imperialism." Despite this, a number of key evangelical leaders took a stand against Communist Party interference in church affairs. Wang Mingdao, pastor of the independent Christian Tabernacle in Beijing, accused Y. T. Wu (the first chairman of the TSPM) and his later successor Bishop K. H. Ting of denying the basic doctrines of evangelical faith. Wang was imprisoned for 23 years. In the south, Baptist-trained Lin Xiangao (later known as Pastor Lamb) was also imprisoned and sent to do slave labor in the coal mines. Allen Yuan in Beijing was sent to labor camp for opposing the TSPM. Many others were also persecuted. It is very doubtful whether the church would have survived in China without their sterling testimony and patient, Christ-like suffering in the dark days under Mao.

### The crucible

Helen Willis, the last Protestant missionary to leave China in 1959, reported that Christians in Shanghai were meeting "frequently in twos and threes to pray, often with tears and much earnestness." Some even met every Sunday in a home to share the Lord's Supper. In 1962, four years after most churches had been closed, a Chinese writer in the *Hong Kong Standard*

described informal Christian activities springing up in many places, despite persecution:

... although the visible and formal churches are dying out, the invisible, formless, non-political and true ones are growing in number in Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing and other towns and cities ... The wife of a former professor at Beijing University belonged to a small prayer group of four Chinese women ... She says there are many such small groups formed by people whose churches have either been shut down or taken over by the Communists. They meet irregularly but not infrequently at different homes for prayer meetings, Bible study and fellowship. They have won many souls who have found God a great help in time of trouble.

There seems little doubt that the long nightmare of the Cultural Revolution (officially 1966-76, although the period of major violence and anarchy lasted only from 1966-69) was the crucible from which the Chinese house churches emerged spiritually refined and poised to spread the gospel across the nation. For an even longer period (1966-1979), all church buildings were closed and Christian activities were banned. Bibles were burnt, and many church leaders (including TSPM pastors) were imprisoned for long years in labor camps. Meeting for prayer and Bible study was extremely dangerous. Miners met in the depths of the northern coal mines, their hymnbooks and scribbled Bible verses disguised as Mao's "Little Red Book." Miao Christian tribespeople in the far southwest hid Bibles in mountain caves to which they climbed for secret meetings.

While the official church was moribund, the house churches kept alight the flame of Christian witness. The church survived as a lay movement, often led by poorly educated Bible women who memorized Scripture and passed on the faith to family members and (if they dared) to neighbors and friends.

### **Reports from underground**

By the early 1970s, the full force of the Cultural Revolution was spent. In 1971-1972, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon visited China, and two places of worship for foreign Protestants and Roman Catholics living in Beijing were opened. The general situation for Chinese Christians was still extremely tight, but by now the first reports of house-church activities were leaking out to Hong Kong, mainly from coastal provinces.

In 1972, a report from southern Fujian said that meetings were more open but were still held only with relatives and close friends. Later reports spoke of 200-300 mainly young people attending Christian meetings in unfurnished rural buildings, as well as a community of over 1,000 believers that had sprung up over the last four years. Many had been converted, including at least one Communist cadre.

In 1974, there were reports of 50,000 Christians meeting in Wenzhou, Zhejiang—now known as the "Jerusalem of China" because of its explosive church growth. These groups became increasingly organized throughout the '70s and held regular Bible studies, witnessing meetings, prayer meetings, training sessions, and seasonal Christian retreats. Early reports of house-church activities in the Wenzhou area have recently been confirmed by the Chinese scholar Li Feng:

They had no churches, but used the mountainous areas of this locality, meeting in mountain valleys, lonely places etc, meeting together at night rather than in the day. They had no pastors, but many believers organized themselves and produced their own leaders. They had no Bibles, but they recited them from memory, using hand-written copies and mimeographed sheets to meet their needs. Although some secret meetings were discovered, local Christian activities continued uninterrupted.

House churches were active not only in coastal provinces but also in central, rural provinces like Henan. In the late '70s and early '80s, a number of charismatic peasant leaders, such as Zhang Rongliang,

Xu Yongze, and Brother Shen, emerged in the Henan house churches. Their evangelism and leadership were so successful that the Fangcheng Church, the New Birth Church (popularly known as "weepers"), and the China Gospel Fellowship each now claim several million members, as do two similar networks based in the neighboring province of Anhui. Since the 1980s, they have expanded their evangelistic activities all over China as far as Tibet and Xinjiang in the far west and Hainan in the far south.

## **Expansion and persecution**

In 1978, the new Communist leader Deng Xiaoping "reversed the verdicts" concerning the millions of people (including Christians) who had been unjustly persecuted during the Mao era. Soon after, the TSPM was formally resuscitated and the first places of Christian worship were officially reopened. For the next few years, the house-church movement saw colossal expansion. Many early leaders, such as Wang Mingdao, were released from prison and provided biblical teaching and godly counsel for the burgeoning movement. Pastor Lamb was released in 1978 and returned to Guangzhou. Today, 30 years later, he leads a flourishing house church of some 3,000 people in the heart of the city.

In 1982, however, the Communist Party published "Document 19" on the control of religious affairs. This stated that "so far as Christians carrying out religious activities in house meetings are concerned, they should in principle not be permitted, but they should not be rigidly stopped. Through work undertaken by the patriotic religious personnel [i.e. TSPM and CCC] to persuade the religious masses, other suitable arrangements should be made." Although various refinements have been added in the last 25 years, this still remains the basic policy of the government towards the house churches. In principle they are frowned on, but in practice the actual implementation of the policy varies considerably from time to time and place to place.

During the government's "anti-spiritual pollution campaign" in 1983, hundreds of house-church leaders and evangelists were arrested and some were sent to labor camps. Although by 1984 the campaign was brought to a halt, the government has sought periodically over the last two decades to enforce registration of all house churches, which means (with a few exceptions) supervision under the TSPM. Although a few independent house churches have applied, the majority have decided to remain unregistered. They believe that the liberty to worship and evangelize free of Communist Party interference is worth the risk of harassment.

At the grass-roots level, however, there is often little difference between registered and unregistered Christians. Many registered churches can trace their origins back to small home-meetings that outgrew their original meeting places and applied for official recognition in order to build larger church buildings. And many of these "official" churches continue to run home-meetings in the cities and to be responsible for pastoral work and preaching in house churches in the suburbs and in the countryside. Local churches in both circles exhibit a fervent Christ-centered, Bible-based faith expressing itself in evangelism and, increasingly, holistic ministry impacting society. Preaching, prayer, evangelism, healing and caring for the sick, visitation, and practical support ministries (such as clinics, old people's homes, ministries to HIV/AIDS victims and drug addicts, and disaster relief) all flourish.

## **A new urban face**

Since Deng Xiaoping restored limited religious freedom, the house churches have developed in unforeseen ways. In the early days, the center of gravity was largely in the rural areas, where even the leaders were often farmers with only primary school or lower- middle school education and virtually no Bible or theological training at all. This led to needless dissension over secondary issues and left many churches open to the devastating inroads of cults such as "Eastern Lightning." In recent years, the torrent of migrant workers from the rural areas into the cities has left many rural churches facing a crisis in leadership and even membership.

Today, the cutting edge of Christian ministry in China has moved from the villages to the cities, many of which are less than 1% Christian. A new wave of students and graduates, including those who were converted and received theological training overseas, provide dynamic leadership. In two decades or less, 50% of China will be urban. Many house churches are already spiritually experienced and well equipped to take up this challenge. So far, although they minister in an increasingly materialistic society, their zeal shows no sign of abating.

*Tony Lambert is the director of China research for Overseas Mission Fellowship (OMF) International.*

## **No Compromise Wang Mingdao (1900-1991)**

Wang Mingdao was born in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion. His mother named him "Iron"—a name that foreshadowed his courageous life. He became a Christian at the age of 14 and later gave up his dream of being a politician to devote himself to Christian ministry. At one point he retreated to Beijing's western hills and read the Bible through six times in 62 days—giving him a deep love for Scripture that grounded his preaching.

Wang worked to build an independent church with its own leaders, its own financial support, and its own evangelistic efforts. By 1949, his Christian Tabernacle (originally a small household gathering) had grown to 570 members, making it one of the largest evangelical churches in Beijing. Wang became widely known as an evangelist and speaker across China. He emphasized doctrinal purity and took a firm stand against any form of political involvement, believing the church and the state to have separate functions. Only the gospel could save his people.

During the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), Beijing fell under the control of the Japanese army, which sought to control the churches of North China. Wang was invited to join the Japanese-led Chinese Christian Federation of North China, but he declined on the grounds that his church was already an indigenous church, not pro-British or pro-American. The Japanese threatened him so many times that he kept a coffin in his house to prepare for the possible consequence of his stance. But the authorities took no action against him. This amazing turn of events, interpreted by Wang as divine protection, strengthened his willingness to be a martyr.

When the Communists came to power in 1949, Wang continued to stay away from politics and refused to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. His reasons were not political but theological: Many in the TSPM had been influenced by modernism, which denied the inerrancy of the Bible and the miraculous elements in it. He wrote articles arguing that the so-called "imperialist poison" of the missionaries was for the most part the truth of the Bible: "We are ready to pay any price to preserve the Word of God ... Don't give way, don't compromise!" For such nonconformity, Wang, his wife, and other young Christians from his church were arrested at gunpoint in 1955 and taken to prison.

After being confined in a prison cell for a period of time, Wang cracked and signed a statement confessing that he was criminal and promising to join the TSPM. He was released, but he felt he had betrayed Christ like the apostle Peter and grieved bitterly. He revoked his previous confessions as forced lies, and for this he was imprisoned and tortured repeatedly for the next 22 years.

Wang was released in 1979—old, toothless, and nearly blind and deaf. He lived in Shanghai with his wife and son, and regularly held meetings with Christians in their small apartment until he died on July 28, 1991. He is widely recognized as one of the most influential and respected Chinese Christian leaders of the 20th century.

**—Yading Li**



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## Caught Between Rome and Beijing

Chinese Catholics have endured devastating division in the past century.

Kim-Kwong Chan

In the early 1950s, the Chinese Catholic Church and the new Chinese government were on a collision course. The government regarded the Catholic Church as a form of Western interference in China. Catholics regarded the Communists as ideological archenemies out to destroy the church. This tension was tragically apparent in the fate of the Chinese Jesuit priest Bede Cheung. Fr. Cheung organized the Catholic Youth Movement and became the leading Catholic figure to resist the government's attempt to create a "patriotic" (pro-Communist) Catholic organization. He was arrested in 1951 and died in jail three months later. When his family came to retrieve his body for burial, eyewitnesses reported that his body was broken almost beyond recognition and showed signs of torture. His death became an icon of loyalty to the Catholic faith and gave many others the courage to confront the government—courage that was much needed in the violent decades that followed.

### Standoff

The government's suspicion of the Chinese Catholic Church as serving "Western" interests was not ungrounded. Catholicism had come to China in the 1300s and been revived by missionaries like Matteo Ricci in the late 1500s. In the early 1920s, the Chinese Catholic Church had more than a million believers and thousands of clergy. But in 1922, even though 40% of clergy were Chinese, all 41 bishops in China were foreigners. Pope Pius XI finally appointed two Chinese bishops and issued an encyclical affirming that church leadership should be transferred from missionaries to local leaders as soon as possible. In 1949, however, Chinese bishops were still in the minority. The tension between the new Communist regime and the Chinese Catholic Church was heightened by Pope Pius XII, who ordered Catholics all over the world to resist Communism even to the point of death.

After all foreign missionaries were expelled from China, many Chinese dioceses were left vacant. Any new Chinese bishop had to be approved by Rome and was required to take an anti-government position—which meant that these bishops were soon arrested. Meanwhile, the government rallied some Chinese Catholics to establish a "patriotic" Catholic movement in order to lead Catholics towards a more pro-government position.

Chinese Catholics were squeezed between the authority of the papacy and the authority of the Chinese government. If they remained loyal to the pope, they would be seen as traitors by the government and almost certainly face incarceration. If they were loyal to their country, they faced rejection and even excommunication by the church. Throughout the 1950s, neither Rome nor Beijing would back down.

### Deepening divide

In 1957, Chinese clergy held a national conference hoping to find a way to ensure the survival of the Catholic Church in China. Even those loyal to Rome lamented its paternalistic and highhanded attitude towards the Chinese church. As one senior member said, "Those old folks do not know the situation here. The best thing for them to do would be not to give orders imprudently. We are no children; we know what is right and wrong."

The final straw came in 1958 when several Chinese bishops were consecrated without papal approval.

Those responsible believed it was the only option if the Catholic Church was to continue to function in Communist China; Pope Pius XII believed it was a challenge to his authority and excommunicated the disobedient clergy. Soon afterwards, the government formed the Catholic Patriotic Association, commonly called the Patriotic Church (similar to the TSPM for Protestants).

Those who refused to join the Patriotic Church continued their religious activities in secret and often ended up in jail. One such dissenter was Bishop Dominic Deng Yiming, later the archbishop of Guangzhou (Canton), who spent 22 years in jail—17 of those years in solitary confinement.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, all Catholics, regardless of whether they were pro-government or pro-Rome, experienced a catastrophic suppression. Public Catholic activity disappeared. Many priests and nuns were forced to marry. Chinese Catholics felt abandoned by the rest of Christendom.

When China reopened churches in the late 1970s, the division between Catholics reared its head again. The Patriotic Church re-emerged, began consecrating new bishops, and rapidly grew. At the same time, the pope issued a secret order allowing Chinese clergy in the Underground Church to appoint their own successors in a more flexible manner than in the past. The two groups fought over their legitimacy. Each side developed its own leadership, parishes, and seminaries. The schism intensified when the pope prohibited the pro-Rome faction from having any contact with the pro-government faction—despite their common suffering during the Cultural Revolution, common witness to the gospel in Chinese society, and common task of caring for the increasing Catholic population in China.

### **The need for reconciliation**

Catholics in China must deal with deep emotional wounds as they come to terms with decades of bitterness and mistrust on both sides. Underground Catholics still face arrest. They believe they have paid a high cost in blood to preserve the true faith. If the Chinese Catholic Church becomes unified again and these Underground Catholics find themselves sitting side-by-side with Patriotic Catholics, they will feel betrayed by Rome—their suffering would have been in vain.

But the patriotic faction feels that they, too, have suffered in their constant struggle to make a space for the public witness of the Catholic Church under a totalitarian regime. They have felt misunderstood by other Catholics as well as rejected, abandoned, and wrongly punished by Rome, which perhaps did not fully appreciate the difficult situation in which they were living.

One fine bishop is so respected by both factions that an underground prelate wrote personally to Rome pleading for him to be approved. As the bishop was consecrated, without papal ratification, he told this author that he was fully aware that he would be bearing a heavy cross. But this is the cross of the Catholic Church in China—the cross of discrimination, misunderstanding, judgmental accusation, historical wounds, and the experience of being forsaken.

Still, there are some signs of rapprochement. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a letter to Chinese Catholics urging the very thing the two sides most need: forgiveness.

***Kim-Kwong Chan is the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council.***

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## Christianity Fever

**Through a century of political turmoil and disillusionment, waves of Chinese intellectuals have come to Christ.**

Stacey Bieler and Carol Lee Hamrin

For more than 100 years, China's tiny cultural elite has wrestled with the role of Christianity in society. Traditional scholars educated a century ago in state-sponsored Confucianism tended to reject Christianity as a foreign teaching. But the new professionals of the 1910s and '20s, as well as the growing middle class in the last 20 years, have been attracted to Christianity as a way to build a strong modern China. Their initial question is often "What can Christianity do for China?" For some, this utilitarian approach becomes a personal spiritual journey. The pattern has been a tidal wave of interest in times of political upheaval, followed by a low tide, often due to anti-Western nationalism. The third of these high tides is surging in Chinese society today.

## The Golden Age of Protestantism

One hundred years ago, scholar-officials lost hope for reviving the Qing dynasty. Since China had to compete with the West on its own terms to survive as a nation, families began to send their children to Western-style, often Christian, schools in China and the U.S. The modern education offered English, science, and new professions such as medicine, law and journalism. A Christian moral curriculum was often an intrinsic part of the package.

The YMCA brought in Western lecturers on science and social issues, attracting the general public as well as students. Christian voluntary associations led movements against social evils like foot binding and the opium trade and offered social services to poor farmers and migrant workers. T. M. Fan, a Chinese reformer, was the editor of popular Christian magazines that promoted character building and public morality.

The 1911 Revolution, which established the Republic of China, was led by a Western-educated Christian medical doctor, Sun Yat-sen. He is honored today as the "father of the nation." Despite the turbulent years that followed, civil society flowered, and Christianity was part of a worldwide wave of optimistic faith in gradual human progress through education, citizenship, and social reforms. Such hopes receded after Chinese national interests were betrayed at the end of World War I, when the West ceded some of China's territory to Japan's control. In 1922, Communists and anarchists protested the Conference of World Student Christian Federations in Beijing. After three other anti-Christian movements, many missionaries left China.

Revival in wartime universities Christianity next spread rapidly among educated Chinese during the civil war of 1945-49. China Inter-Varsity Evangelical Christian Students Fellowship (IV-China) was inaugurated in July 1945 at a summer conference in Chongqing, the wartime capital. There were 160 students representing 40 of China's 60 universities present.

Calvin Chao (Zhao Junying), the general secretary of IV-China, held powerful evangelistic campaigns in Chengdu, Sichuan province, the home of two great universities and the wartime refuge for five others. 168 students became Christians in four days. Their hearts and minds were open after living as refugees and seeing the desperate poverty in the mountains of southwestern China. In July 1947, 350 students from every Chinese university gathered for an IV conference outside of Nanjing. Chao opened with a reminder

that Christians must prepare to be persecuted for the name of Jesus. Closing testimonies sparked a revival among the students.

Despite the growing political tensions, student work continued on almost 80 campuses, with Bible classes, retreats, and radio broadcasts. Teaching focused on 1 Peter, which had prepared the first-century church for persecution, and on prayer. The Nationalists were suspicious that IV-China was hiding Communists among its members, and the Communists wanted to crush the students' allegiance to Christ. Campus workers sponsored the first (and last) city-wide evangelistic campaign in Beijing in the summer of 1948 and established soup kitchens and outreach in the city's refugee camps.

After the Communist takeover in 1949, faculty, staff, and students had to attend political study groups. Yet students were able to keep holding prayer meetings and conferences until 1955, when silence fell. The series of political campaigns culminating in the Cultural Revolution targeted the elite classes, trying to break their allegiances to the West. From 1966 to 1976, all schools were closed, and professors and students were sent to the countryside to learn from the peasants.

When schools and churches began to reopen in 1978-1979, many Chinese thanked the missionaries who had helped them prepare for persecution: "What you did for us in Peking [Beijing] was exactly right for us young Chinese Christians at that time." One medical student, who had maintained a steady witness despite 12 years in prison, became a cancer researcher and leader of numerous house churches. Professor Feng Xizhang, a prominent U.S.-trained nuclear physicist, resurfaced in retirement to lead Bible classes in the university district church, mentoring the next generation of lay leaders.

### **Spiritual search after Mao**

By 1980, official education exchanges restarted. Older scholars went abroad at first, followed by graduate students, until nearly 100,000 were overseas in any given year. Fascination with the West prompted curiosity about its cultural roots in Christianity.

After attending a church service in Cambridge, England in 1979, the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi wrote, "Chinese intellectuals know something about the Renaissance, but very little about the Reformation. ) The Reformation was certainly no less influential than the Renaissance, and in fact the two are *inseparably* linked." A decade later, Fang sought refuge in the American embassy in Beijing after being blamed for instigating the Democracy Movement—a series of mass protests led by students and intellectuals calling for government reform.

On June 4, 1989, the Chinese army crushed the demonstration in Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds of young people and arresting many. This violence, followed by the collapse of European Communism in 1990-1991, dashed many people's hopes for gradual democratic reform. They began to take Christian teaching more seriously since it offered a realistic understanding of sin. "Christianity fever" spread rapidly. Western teachers of English in China played a major role in demonstrating and explaining the power of self-giving love.

Before the June Fourth tragedy, Chinese scholars and students in North America had begun to attend English classes, potlucks, and Bible studies hosted by campus ministry workers. However, many carried deep scars from the Maoist past and were loath to trust any doctrine again. They also knew that their actions were being monitored and might be used against them when they returned to China. But after 1989, many more Chinese abroad became Christians. Magazines in Chinese for both seekers (***Overseas Campus***) and believers (***Christian Life Quarterly***) offered convincing testimonies. One Chinese scholar wrote, "I personally believe that China would have no future without embracing Christianity." Over time, Chinese graduates who stayed in the U.S. as young working professionals formed their own churches.

A number of pro-democracy activists who escaped China in 1989 became Christians. Yuan Zhiming wrote

how shocked he was to experience the fierce infighting for power and fame among his pro-democracy comrades, and also to discover that their idealized Western society was flawed. Yuan experienced unconditional love for the first time in a Princeton Bible study group. He was baptized and entered seminary. He concluded that economic modernization and democratic institutions were useless without personal rebirth and a transcendent faith in God's ultimate authority. To this end, Yuan has produced a series of powerful films that are reaching thousands of Chinese for Christ.

By the late 1990s, Protestantism was growing faster in China than any other belief system. Urban house churches, spawned by groups that proliferated on campuses through the 1990s, provide a support system for young professionals and their families as well as returned scholars. Though these Christian groups are not registered with the government, they meet in apartments, rent commercial space for special events, and are trained through Chinese language seminaries throughout the Asia-Pacific. They participate in the burgeoning "virtual community" of Christian websites, databases, blogs, online counseling, and prayer chat rooms.

Christianity is touching all sectors and levels of society. University humanities departments have generated nearly 100 religious study centers, and conferences and field research have begun to explore the relations between faith and economics, or religion and law. Some faculty members have become "hidden" Christians, who like other state employees cannot yet risk being baptized or attending church. Chinese Christian writers and artists are beginning to compose their own novels, poetry, music, and drama. Both of the founders of the China branch of PEN, the international writers' association, are Christians. One prominent journalist and social critic is no longer surprised when her friends announce, "*Wo xin jiao*," literally meaning "I'm a religious believer"—everyone knows this means they are new Christians.

A growing number of new Protestants are surfacing in the legal profession. They want to build a legal culture through public education and pursuit of justice in the courts. Many are inspired by Martin Luther King's Christian principles of nonviolent resistance. Even business professionals are sharing their testimonies in glossy business magazines in China. Mr. Cao is one of several self-made millionaires who have found a new identity and hope in Christ and who now fund health and education projects for the rural poor.

### **The emerging church in China**

As the Chinese search for a new social philosophy in this new century, China's resurrected church brings hope for the future. Public opinion about Christianity has turned from negative to positive. Believers report, "Many people, including high government officials, have the opinion that Christians have an important role in dealing with matters such as family, marriage, interpersonal relationships, drug abuse, and alcoholism."

People want to build up a new public morality to combat the rampant self-centeredness, sexual license, materialism, corruption, and cynicism. One professor of religion believes that only the Christian framework offers both higher purpose for the individual and positive social values, helps Chinese identify with global modernity, and preserves conservative moral values, including the priority of the family. A senior researcher who has surveyed Beijing Christians concluded that the Christian spirit of humbly loving God and loving others "can help people to transcend themselves and become better persons. It is only through the individual Christian who acts as 'salt and light' that Christian influence can be achieved."

*Carol Lee Hamrin is a Chinese affairs consultant, research professor at George Mason University, and senior associate with the Global China Center (GCC) in Charlottesville, Virginia. Stacey Bieler is a GCC Research Associate.*

### **Salt and Light**

***During the Golden Age of Chinese Protestantism (1900-25), many Chinese Christians studied in the U.S. and returned to serve their country. Mary Stone, James Yen, and Yifang Wu were three***

*pioneers who sowed seeds of today's revival and offer models for educated urban Christians.*

## **A Healing Gospel**

### **Mary Stone (Shi Meiyu, 1873-1954)**

Nothing was ordinary about Mary Stone's life. Her parents were among the first Christian converts in central China; her father was a Methodist pastor (martyred during the Boxer Rebellion) and her mother the principal of a Methodist girls' school. Mary was one of the first girls whose feet were left unbound despite the risk to her marriage prospects. She and her friend Ida Kahn became two of the first three Chinese women to obtain a medical degree in the U.S. She also became the first Chinese woman ordained in central China.

When Mary and Ida returned to China in 1896, they set up a mission clinic and nurses' training center in the Yangzi River port of Jiujiang. Within months they were overwhelmed by the demand. At times they treated 5,000 patients per month. "Although we were so rushed that we did not even sit together to eat our regular meals," Mary wrote in a letter, "yet we felt it was the happiest Christmas we have ever had."

Mary served the mission hospital for 25 years, first with Ida and then with American missionary Jennie Hughes, with whom she adopted four orphans and gave foster care to others. Whole families and villages became Christian as a result of her ministry. She was known for her radiant smile.

In the 1920s, Mary and Jennie resigned from the Methodist Women's Foreign Missionary Society because they objected to modernist trends in doctrine, which Mary called the "rice Christianity" of social action without faith. They launched the nondenominational Shanghai Bethel Mission to reflect their "old fashioned faith." Their work grew to include not only a church and the Bible college run by Jennie, but also Mary's hospital and China's largest nursing school, primary and secondary schools, a clinic for poor migrant workers in Shanghai's industrial area, and eventually several homes for war orphans.

Dr. Mary Stone can be given much credit for the revivals of the 1930s and 1940s that built up the independent Chinese church and sustained it through decades of war and revolution. The Bethel evangelistic bands traversed the nation. After the Japanese attack in 1937 destroyed the Shanghai compound, Mary set up a base in Pasadena, California, to raise money to support Bethel Mission in Hong Kong. In the post-Mao era, the Chinese Christian leaders her mission trained have gone back to China, providing teaching and financial support for the massive revival of today's church.

## **A New Heart for the Nation**

### **James Yen (Yan Yangchu, 1893-1990)**

James Yen, an athletic young man with an energetic smile, had become a Christian as a boy while studying at a CIM school in Sichuan. After graduating from Yale University in 1918, he did literacy work with Chinese laborers in France. He vowed that he would devote his life to the "release of the pent-up, God-given powers in the people ... When we have a new heart, we become new people, and then we have a new society, then there is a new nation."

Yen returned to China in 1920 and started the Mass Education Movement (MEM), recruiting volunteer teachers and using a set of four readers with 1,000 Chinese characters. The YMCA and YWCA eagerly used the new resource, and the MEM spread.

James and his wife Alice, who was born and educated in the U.S., wanted their lives to reflect John 1:14: "The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." So they left the big city to live in the poverty-stricken countryside in Dingxian, a county of 400 villages north of Beijing. They wanted to address all four interlocking problems of village life: illiteracy, disease, poverty, and misgovernment. Yen convinced American-trained Chinese graduates in agriculture, education, drama, medicine, and political science to live

and work in the primitive conditions of Dingxian. This living example of humble service was contagious. In 1933, 180 delegates from 14 provinces came there for a National Christian Rural Reconstruction Seminar. During the Japanese occupation, the MEM opened the National College of Rural Reconstruction near Chongqing, the wartime capital of Free China during the Japanese occupation.

In 1943, Yen was honored at Carnegie Hall on the 400th anniversary of the death of Copernicus, along with nine other "modern revolutionaries" including Albert Einstein, Orville Wright, Walt Disney, and Henry Ford.

After the Communist victory in 1949, James moved to New York and then started rural work in the Philippines. In 1960, he founded the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) and spent the next 30 years improving the lives of thousands of poor farm families in the Philippines, Africa, Central America, and Southeast Asia. Recently James Yen was honored on Chinese television as one of the outstanding Chinese leaders of the 20th century, and books on his approaches to development have been published. Today, IIRR is working in Yunnan, one of China's poorest provinces.

### **Abundant Life Yifang Wu (1893-1985)**

Yifang Wu graduated as student president of the first class of Jinling College for Women in Nanjing, the first and largest college for women in China. She had become a Christian there after a family financial crisis and several suicides left her alone in the world. Wu later recalled how a Christian classmate's "loving sympathy for me uplifted me out of self-imposed isolation . . . Gradually I understood the real meaning of life and learned to aim at a worthy life purpose." She and her classmates helped choose the school's motto, "Abundant Life" (from John 10:10), which she made her own.

After receiving a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, she became president of Jinling the first Chinese woman to hold a college presidency. In the 1930s and 1940s, Wu became involved in national and international circles, working on war relief with Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, and meeting reformer Jane Addams and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She served twice as president of the National Christian Council. As the only woman on a senior government advisory committee, she inspired women nationwide with a living example of capability, humility, and compassion. In 1945, Wu was the only woman in the Chinese delegation helping to draft the U.N. Charter, and the first woman to sign it.

Worried about what Communist rule might mean for Christian institutions, she chose to stay and try to keep Jinling open. After all Christian schools were merged into secular state institutions, Wu served in provincial education posts, government-sanctioned Protestant and women's associations, and the National People's Congress. She was sent to do manual labor and undergo thought reform during the Cultural Revolution. But she retained her faith and her commitment to the transformative power of education, pointing with pride to the high percentage of Jinling graduates among China's senior intellectuals.  
—Stacey Bieler and Carol Lee Hamrin

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 98: Christianity in China

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## From Foreign Mission to Chinese Church

Missionaries in China were hampered by pressures from home, mistakes in leadership, and identification with the West, but they planted the seeds that would someday yield an astonishing harvest.

Daniel H. Bays

In the first half of the 20th century, the foreign missionary movement in China matured, flourished, and then died. In these same decades, a Chinese church was born—a church that is today growing incredibly rapidly. From 1900 to 1950, Christianity in China forsook its foreign origins and put on Chinese dress. The turbulent forces of history, which shaped all aspects of China's politics, economy, and culture, also burst upon foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians.

If we take a historical telescope and focus just on two years, 1932-1934, we can see the transformation of Christianity in China in mid-stream. And it began with a transformation of the missionary endeavor itself.

On an autumn day in 1932, Pearl Buck, born in China of missionary parents and herself a famous missionary there, strode to the podium in the ballroom of New York City's Hotel Astor to address 2,000 Presbyterian women. Buck had just received the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Good Earth*. Now she addressed the topic "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" Her answer was technically "yes," but it was so qualified and unenthusiastic, and her criticisms of missionaries for being arrogant, ignorant, and narrow-minded were so trenchant, that she left her audience stunned. This event ignited a firestorm of agitated comment by both critics and defenders of foreign missions in almost all quarters of American Protestantism. It was a sign of the times.

Another sign of the times was the publication of *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years*, commissioned by John D. Rockefeller Jr., the foremost individual financial supporter of missions in the U.S. Widely circulated and read, the Laymen's Report advocated an overhaul of missionary thinking, especially on such questions as the exclusivity of Christianity.

Also in 1932-33, Robert Service, the former UC-Berkeley track star who had pioneered the establishment of YMCAs in western China, was unexpectedly sacked. In the midst of the Great Depression and dwindling contributions, the YMCA and other well-established missions in China had a massive financial crunch in the early 1930s. Their expensive institution-heavy facilities, especially hospitals, schools, and colleges, swamped the mission budgets. Many missionaries headed home.

The missions movement was clearly on the defensive.

### Hopeful Signs

Despite these negative portents, however, there were still enthusiastic young people answering the "call" to China. The China Inland Mission (CIM), that remarkable multinational creation of J. Hudson Taylor's, continued the dramatic growth it had enjoyed since the late 1800s. Its "faith mission" principles (no denominational or other regular financial support) managed to adapt to the new climate of scarcity.

Even as other missions were shrinking because of discouragement or shrinking budgets, the CIM launched a successful campaign to add 200 missionaries. David Adeney, a young Cambridge University student, learned of this campaign for "the 200" and felt a strong call to China. He came to north central China in

1934 and found his niche working with students, which he did until he left in 1950. He established ties which remained intact though dormant for more than 30 years, and which were renewed in heartwarming fashion when Adeney returned to China in the 1980s.

In addition to signs of life in theologically conservative missions like CIM, a wave of Pentecostal revivalism was sweeping through some parts of China. A traveling Norwegian evangelist, Marie Monsen, was the catalyst for the famous "Shantung Revival." Participants saw tongues of fire and heard roaring winds, and some even fell to the ground half-conscious. Pentecostalism, with its stress on the "gifts of the spirit," including prophecy, divine healing, and speaking in tongues, also fed the growth of most of the independent churches that had begun organizing by the 1920s.

In these years it could be dangerous to be a Christian in China, whether foreign or Chinese. A few months after David Adeney's arrival in 1934, one of the most dramatic incidents of martyrdom in China missions history occurred. John and Betty Stam, an attractive young couple who were products of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and had come to China with the CIM a couple of years before, were stationed in a small city in Anhui province (central China). When Communist troops captured the city in late 1934, they beheaded the Stams and killed some local Christians who pleaded for the foreigners' lives, but the Stams' three-month-old child was safely taken to a nearby mission station. This story gained much publicity and motivated many young people to go to the mission field.

The effect was much the same as what happened after the death of Yale graduate Horace Pitkin in the Boxer Uprising of 1900. Pitkin died along with more than 10 other foreign missionaries—Presbyterian, Congregational, and CIM—in Baoding, not far from Beijing. His death spurred a surge in mission applicants, many from East Coast colleges, and the establishment of the Yale China Mission in the early 1900s.

### **The End of the Golden Age**

The Boxer Uprising had begun as a peasant rebellion against the increasing commercial, political, and religious encroachment on Chinese culture by Western nations. The Boxers killed hundreds of foreigners, including about 250 missionaries and missionary children, as well as 20,000 or more Chinese Christians (who were considered traitors). In retribution, the occupying troops of eight nations killed at least that many other Chinese in 1900-1902. It was a disaster for China. Yet paradoxically, this national trauma triggered a national reform movement. For a short time, the xenophobia of the past was discredited and China was more open to the West. (Later, the Communists would praise the Boxers as patriots.)

This gave Christian missions in China the largest opportunity they had ever had—truly a "Golden Age." Mission schools suddenly had high prestige and waiting lists. Members of the elite class became Christians. Rates of growth skyrocketed, especially for Protestants. After the revolution which overthrew the feeble Manchu dynasty in 1911-1912, the provisional president of the young Republic was Sun Yat-sen, a baptized Christian. In 1913, the Republic's second president asked the foreign missionary community in China to pray for the nation. Protestant missionary numbers soared from more than 1,300 in 1905 to 8,000 in 1925. Many Christians were confident that events were moving inexorably towards the "Christianization" of China.

It was not to be. The Golden Age lasted less than two decades, until the mid-1920s. What went wrong? During that time, practically all missions in China failed to sufficiently cultivate a Chinese leadership in their mission structures and to permit that leadership to shepherd the flock into independent and self-supporting local churches. The rhetoric of moving from (foreign) mission to (Chinese) church was always present, but it was mainly hollow. At times it appeared that the foreign mission establishment had given way to Chinese leadership. The national missionary conference of 1907 had only half a dozen Chinese delegates out of more than a thousand; the next major conference in 1924 was called the "Christian" (not "missionary") conference, and more than half the delegates were Chinese.

But looks were misleading. It was at best a partnership, and an imbalanced one at that. In almost all cases, missionaries still controlled the purse-strings. The result was that the best Chinese leaders nurtured by the Protestants—such as Cheng Jingyi, respected head of the Church of Christ in China, and Yu Richang (David Z. T. Yui), gifted national secretary of the YMCA—never shed the image of being subordinate to foreign missionaries.

The Protestants put Chinese in leadership roles where they at least had the appearance of responsibility and power, even if that power was limited by close association with foreign missions. The Roman Catholic Church in China suffered even more from tokenism. The Catholic hierarchies in China had for decades permitted (and closely supervised) the training of Chinese priests, who were given mundane tasks and little responsibility. But no Chinese bishops were consecrated until 1926, after a couple of maverick European missionary priests, in particular Fr. Vincent Lebbe, convinced the pope to break the stranglehold that the European hierarchy had over the Chinese clergy. Even so, Chinese priests still continued to be largely relegated to secondary roles in the local parishes, and the new Chinese bishops were shunted into subsidiary functions.

### **Tainted by Association**

There was almost certainly no conscious conspiracy among foreign missionaries to deprive Chinese leaders of the means of emerging and flourishing. There was often respect, genuine friendship, and collegial cooperation between missionaries and Chinese priests and pastors. But in the new political atmosphere that was brewing after 1920 in China, such ties were fatally compromising to the Chinese involved.

In the 1920s, popular resentment against foreigners' legal privileges in China, which dated back to treaties signed by the Manchu government in the mid-1800s, boiled over. This popular nationalism fueled the rapid rise of two major political parties that have dominated Chinese politics from the 1920s to the present: the Kuomintang (the Nationalists) and the Communists, which became bitter rivals and then mortal enemies. The leader of the Nationalists was Chiang Kai-shek, himself a Christian convert and married to Soong Meiling, the daughter of one of China's most prominent Christian families. Under Chiang, there were several other Christians in government positions and polite, even cordial relations with the foreign mission establishment. But even Chiang agreed that foreign privileges should be eliminated as soon as possible, especially immunity from Chinese laws.

Missionaries were among those who enjoyed these privileges. There had been the occasional missionary prophet (for example, Frank Rawlinson, editor of the Shanghai missionary journal *The Chinese Recorder*) who warned that the seeds of the "treaty system," as it was called, might bring a harvest of wrath someday. That day arrived in the mid 1920s, and the most radical elements of Chinese opinion considered missionaries, and for that matter Chinese Christians as well, lackeys of foreign governments and of "world capitalist exploitation."

These attitudes, which pervaded the Communist Party, continued strong until the last foreign missionaries were expelled from China in 1951-1952 by the new government. The missionary community, and the mission project as a whole, paid a high price for its failure to distance itself from at least some aspects of Western political, military, and economic power in China.

This portrayal of the missionary record may seem unfair to some. Missions had brought many blessings to China. Chinese Christian schools had been the first places where Chinese could receive a modern education, and the first to permit enrollment of girls and to employ women teachers. Missionary hospitals and clinics had saved tens of thousands of lives, and missionary-coordinated famine relief saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Missionaries had been leaders in the movements to abolish the opium trade and to end the custom of binding and crippling the feet of young girls as a means of increasing their desirability for marriage.

All in all, the missionaries' contribution to the making of modern China was considerable. Though they were reviled and demonized by the new regime after 1949, they are quietly given credit for their accomplishments and warmly welcomed back to visit China today.

## Homegrown Faith

If missions were anathema to many Chinese, and many Chinese Christians were tainted by their identification with foreign missionaries, how did Christianity enter the Communist period with enough resilience to survive the dark valley of 30 years and to flourish since 1980?

After Japan went to war with China in 1937, most missionaries left, but hundreds stayed in "Free China," beyond Japanese reach, and ministered during the Pacific War. About 1000 others were interned in camps by the Japanese, where many died, including Eric Liddell of *Chariots of Fire* fame. Chinese Christians who remained under Japanese rule now suddenly had full responsibility for their churches and fellowships, and many rose to the challenge, developing leadership skills that were later useful under Communism.

In the brief period between the Japanese surrender in August 1945 and the Communist victory in 1949, a few thousand missionaries returned (including David Adeney). By this time the hated treaties were gone, and foreigners were under Chinese law. But after the Communists took the upper hand in the civil war and established their new government, they decided in 1951, in the context of the Korean War, to expel all foreign missionaries. Dramatic stories abound about the extrication of the last missionaries from the remote hinterlands of China.

Thus ended the foreign missions movement in China, but not the Christian movement. From the 1920s on, there had been another, very healthy development: the growth of independent, wholly Chinese-led movements that had roots deep enough for believers to hold fast when the storms came. By 1949, it is likely that 25% of Chinese Protestants were in these independent churches. They constitute a surprisingly little-known story, with some fascinating personalities.

The fiery evangelist John Sung traveled the country and drew huge crowds. Fundamentalist pastor Wang Mingdao (who would have a fateful clash with the new regime in the 1950s) built his own "tabernacle" for services in Beijing in addition to speaking all over China. Watchman Nee was working out his Holy-Spirit-centered theology. Paul Wei, a Beijing cloth dealer, founded the True Jesus Church, which grew explosively. Jing Dianyong developed and ruled rural Christian communities of the "Jesus Family," based on the principles of common ownership and group-directed life. There were important female leaders as well, including Mary Stone. Her Bethel Seminary in Shanghai produced the "Bethel Band" of zealous young musician-evangelists, who spread revival all over China.

Resilient groups of believers carried on, both in the missionary-related and the independent churches. The missionaries were flawed but sincere sowers of the seed; it was left to the Chinese Christians to take their faith into the last half of the 20th century and reap a bountiful harvest in the 1980s and beyond.

*Daniel Bays is professor of history and director of the Asian studies program at Calvin College.*

## A Gallery of Missionaries

**Lemuel Nelson Bell** (1894-1973). L. Nelson Bell and his wife Virginia were medical missionaries for the Southern Presbyterian Church. They served at the Love and Mercy Hospital in Qingjiangpu, in the province of Jiangsu, for 25 years before finally returning the U.S. in 1941 during the Japanese occupation. Their daughter Ruth (far right), the future Mrs. Billy Graham, was born in China. In 1956, Bell and Graham co-founded *Christianity Today* magazine.

**Minnie Vautrin** (1886-1941). As a teacher at the Ginling (Jinling) College in Nanjing, American

missionary Wilhelmina (Minnie) Vautrin was in the city when the Japanese army invaded and the horrific "Rape of Nanking" occurred. Rather than fleeing, Minnie stayed and turned the college into an asylum for thousands of women and children, saving many lives. But the memory of the looting, burning, raping, and killing she had witnessed haunted her. She later had a nervous breakdown, was hospitalized in the U.S., and took her own life.

**Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe** (1877-1940). Born in Belgium, Catholic missionary Vincent Lebbe became a Chinese citizen because he believed that missionaries should identify as closely as possible with the Chinese people. He strongly advocated the consecration of Chinese bishops, and his influence eventually led to this ideal becoming a reality. He was taken captive by the Communists in 1940 and died soon after.

**John and Betty Stam** (1906/07-1934). One of the most dramatic missionary martyr stories of 20th-century China was the public beheading of the Stams, a young CIM couple who had graduated from Moody Bible Institute, by Communist soldiers in 1934. Their baby daughter Helen was hidden in blankets and rescued by Chinese Christians. The courage of the Stams inspired many others to become missionaries.

**Eric Liddell** (1902-1945). Olympic-gold-medal winner Eric Liddell, celebrated in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, ran a much harder race than most people know about. After the Olympics, he moved to China, where his family were missionaries. During the Japanese invasion, all foreigners were interned in prison camps. Eric was a beloved spiritual leader and friend in his camp, showing special concern for the young people. He died of a brain tumor only months before the camp was liberated.

**Jonathan Goforth** (1859-1936). After barely escaping from the Boxer Uprising, Canadian missionaries Jonathan and Rosalind Goforth returned to China in 1901. Jonathan prayed that God would bring revival to China as he had in Korea, and in 1908 Jonathan witnessed such a revival while preaching in Manchuria. For the next three decades, he became one of the most widely known itinerant evangelists in China.

### **The Billy Graham of China John Sung (1901-1944)**

Though his ministry lasted only a dozen years, John Sung blazed a flaming trail of revival across China and most of Southeast Asia. Born the son of a pastor in southern China in 1901, he was sent by his family to the United States for theological study. Instead, he enrolled in a university and went on to earn a Ph.D. in chemistry. A guilty conscience then led him to Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he was converted after hearing a young evangelist whom his fellow students mocked as too simplistic.

As a fresh convert, Sung was so zealous that the seminary president had him committed to an insane asylum. For the next 193 days, he read the Bible 40 times. On his way back to China, he threw almost all his diplomas overboard (except the Ph.D. to show his father) and dedicated himself to full-time evangelistic work.

From 1928 to 1940, Sung traveled all over China and also Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. He preached to large crowds, some of whom walked long distances in bad weather to hear him. A painful physical ailment sometimes forced him to preach sitting or even lying down. Tens—perhaps hundreds—of thousands were converted through his ministry. He never emphasized miracles, but countless people were healed through his prayers after he had preached.

Despite multiple threats on his life, narrow escapes from death, and repeated warnings from powerful people, Sung fearlessly denounced sin and called for total faith in Christ and radical obedience to the Great Commission. Especially in his early years, he often exposed the faults of church leaders publicly; some hated him for it, but many more humbled themselves and changed their lives.

He organized evangelistic teams wherever he went. Those who were moved by his example and teaching formed several Bible schools. He knew that he must strengthen the Chinese church: "One day the Western funds will stop coming, then the churches will be in a dilemma. But only then will the churches in China have revival."

His recently discovered and translated diaries reveal John Sung to be a man of tender conscience, constant self-examination, daily repentance, and unremitting pursuit of holiness. In the end, his constant travel and preaching took its toll, and he was forced to rest for the last three years of his short life. But during that time he became even more convinced of certain spiritual truths: "For a servant of God to have authority in every sentence he utters, he must first suffer for the message he is to deliver. Without great tribulation, there is no great illumination."

—*G. Wright Doyle, director of the Global China Center and the China Institute*

### **Everything for the Lord Watchman Nee (1901-1972)**

"I want nothing for myself," said Watchman Nee, "I want everything for the Lord." These words summed up the life of one of the most important Chinese church leaders, evangelists, writers, and martyrs of the last century.

Nee's grandfather was a Congregational minister. His mother had been brought up Methodist. He received a Western education in missionary schools and was converted by the powerful preaching of evangelist Dora Yo. Although he was grateful to the missionaries for bringing the gospel to China, Nee was also critical of them and of the state of the Chinese church. He spoke against the church's superficiality and the inability of some ministers to lead their converts on to spiritual maturity.

Nee formed an independent Christian assembly in Fuzhou in 1922. It practiced believer's baptism and a weekly Lord's Supper, and was governed by elders rather than by a single pastor. Nee believed from his reading of the Book of Acts that such an assembly should be the only church in a particular locality. In 1928, he moved his base from Fuzhou to Shanghai, where outsiders nicknamed his group the "Little Flock Church." His followers formed new evangelistic groups, launching a nationwide movement.

The revival sparked by the Little Flock helped rouse the denominational churches from their complacency and energize them to meet the deeper spiritual needs of the people. Nee emphasized "the priesthood of all believers" and urged the Chinese churches to train their own leadership, develop their own forms of ministry, stop being dependent on foreign financial support, and spread the gospel. These principles prepared Chinese Christians for the terrible conditions they would face under Communism. By 1950, the Little Flock had 70,000 members in 700 assemblies.

Nee became an eloquent, widely-known evangelist and writer who had a gift for calling people to a deeper spiritual life. He believed that a human being is composed of a body, a soul (intellect and emotions), and a spirit (which communes with God), and his teaching stressed the need for spiritual regeneration and sanctification in order to understand Scripture rightly and live in step with the Holy Spirit. His sermons and books—the best known of which is *The Normal Christian Life*—continue to be republished in a number of languages and are read all over the world.

In 1956, Nee was publicly tried, condemned as the head of a "counter-revolutionary clique," and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He died in May 1972 at a labor camp in the Anhui province. Today, the Little Flock is the largest Christian group in China and has an international following.

—*Yading Li, senior associate of the Global China Center*



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Prodigal Son

**A third-generation Chinese Christian describes his journey from persecution to Communism to faith.**

My grandfather, a country doctor in north China, became the first Christian in our family through a CIM missionary. Later, he also became the first member of my family to suffer persecution when he was tortured to death during the 1947-48 Communist land reform.

My father, the eldest son, graduated from a Christian high school just as the Japanese army invaded north China. He was severely beaten by Japanese soldiers for helping the church provide food and shelter to Chinese refugees. He made his way to southwest China, completed seminary training, and was ordained.

In 1954-55, when the government closed most churches, my father was denounced for propagandizing "spiritual idealism" and our family was given a "black" label, meaning we were to be totally ostracized. My mother divorced my father and left me at age five. Forced out of the parsonage, we lived in a shack at the back of the churchyard, which became a factory. Father was forced to do hard labor for the next 25 years. My only childhood memory is being hungry all the time.

As a young boy, I could only see that my family was responsible for my being bullied at school. When the Red Guards were sent out of the cities to the countryside, I volunteered to go. In November 1968, 12 teenagers arrived in a very remote mountain village. Working hard 12 to 14 hours a day, we barely survived. Since my father was a "criminal," I was usually alone. Many times, I sat on top of a mountain watching the sheep and wishing I weren't alive.

I kept up my hope for the future by secretly reading anything I could find. After I managed to leave the village to work in a factory, I studied even harder, but still in secret. After Mao died, college entrance exams were resumed. I passed, despite very sharp competition and only an eighth grade education. Deng Xiaoping's policies allowed us "black" elements to find a way back into society. I was even recruited by the Communist Party.

I always blamed my father for my troubles. Only after I was married, finished school, and had a good job did I reconnect with my father and his family. While I was a visiting scholar in the U.S. in 1990, he came to live with my wife and son.

That year was a major turning point in my life. When I learned the whole story of the June Fourth killings [in the 1989 Democracy Movement], I felt terribly saddened by what the government did in Tiananmen Square. I now had to face the question, "Should I continue to serve the Communist cause?"

I visited churches everywhere I went and stood quietly observing how the Christians behaved. I could see they freely chose to believe, and many helped me without knowing a thing about me. I began to rethink my father's life. There was a stark contrast between June Fourth and my father—who never argued, never cheated, was always patient and kind, and was respected by all who knew him. I realized Marxism has no words to address a person's individual needs. Where does love come from? Where do goodness and evil come from? I enjoyed reading the Bible's answers to all these questions. God began to be real to me.

One special day I visited a Christian scholar who shared words from the Bible as a personal message for

me. I was filled by the Holy Spirit as God spoke to me. I was so happy that I cried. A Communist with a heart of stone never sheds tears! Then I knew that the only explanation for my life's journey was that God loves me, gave me my father, and was blessing me today through this stranger. I humbly accepted Jesus Christ.

I decided I had to use my knowledge and life experience for God, not for myself. I would serve God, not the Party. The U.S. didn't need more Christians, but China did, so I would return to China.

When I saw my father, I immediately told him, "Now I'm a believer." He smiled and said, "I have prayed for you for 30 years." I realized I loved and respected my father because he lived his whole life true to his belief. Happily, my son loved his grandfather and respected my choice. So when he went overseas to university, he immediately was baptized and joined the church. He has become the fourth-generation Christian in our family.

The author's name has been withheld to protect his identity.

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## Recommended Resources

Dig deeper into this issue's theme.

### Books

- David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Regnery Publishing, 2003)
- Alwyn Austin, *China's Millions* (Eerdmans, 2007)
- Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford University Press, 1996)
- Stacey Bieler, *"Patriots" or "Traitors"? A History of American-educated Chinese Students* (M. E. Sharpe, 2003)
- Kim-Kwong Chan and Alan Hunter, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, 1993)
- Kim-Kwong Chan, *Struggling for Survival: The Catholic Church in China from 1949 to 1970* (Hong Kong: Christian Center for Study of Chinese Religion and Culture, 1992)
- Jean Charbonnier, *Christians in China A.D. 600-2000* (Ignatius, 2007)
- Ralph R. Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese* (Wipf & Stock, 2004)
- Ralph R. Covell, *The Liberating Gospel in China: The Christian Faith among China's Minority Peoples* (Baker Books, 1995)
- Shen Xiao Feng, *No Limitations* (World Serve Publishing, 2006)
- Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of Modern China* (Yale, 2001)
- Carol Lee Hamrin, Samuel Ling, Daniel Baida Su, eds., *Soul Searching: Chinese Intellectuals on Faith and Society* (P&R Publishing, 2000)
- Carol Lee Hamrin, ed., with Stacey Bieler, *Salt and Light: Lives of Faith that Shaped Modern China* (Pickwick Publications, 2008)
- Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Brazos Press, 2002)
- Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin, eds., *God and Caesar in China* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004)
- Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (Monarch Books, 1999, 2006)
- Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1991)
- Leslie Lyall, *A Biography of John Sung* (Armour Publishing, 2004)
- Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volumes I and II* (Orbis Books, 1998, 2005)
- Daniel L. Overmyer, ed., *Religion in China Today* (Cambridge, 2003)
- John Sung, *The Journal Once Lost: Extracts from the Diary of John Sung*, compiled by Levi Sung (Armour Publishing, 2007)
- Edmond Tang and Jean-Paul Wiest, *The Catholic Church in Modern China* (Orbis, 1993)
- Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu, eds., *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (M.E. Sharpe, 2001)
- Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Orbis Books, 2007)
- Tetsunao Yamamori and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Witnesses to Power* (Paternoster Press, 2000)

### Videos

- Yuan Zhiming's DVDs, including *The Cross: Jesus in China*, are available through the China Soul for Christ Foundation ([www.chinasoul.org](http://www.chinasoul.org)).

## Websites

- Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity ([www.bdcconline.net](http://www.bdcconline.net))
- Global China Center ([www.globalchinacenter.org](http://www.globalchinacenter.org)): academic research center devoted to Chinese history, society, and people, with special regard to Christianity
- Pray for China ([www.prayforchina.com](http://www.prayforchina.com)): regional statistics and profiles of Chinese leaders and missionaries
- China Institute ([www.chinainst.org](http://www.chinainst.org)): charitable organization dedicated to reaching educated Chinese
- ChinaSource ([www.chsource.org](http://www.chsource.org))
- Amity News Service ([www.amitynewsservice.org](http://www.amitynewsservice.org)): website of the China Christian Council

## Other resources

- ***ChinaSource Journal***
- OMF International's newsletters ***Global Chinese Ministries*** and ***China Insight***

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## The Race Marked Out For Us

A Palestinian Christian finds the path from hate to forgiveness.

Jennifer Trafton

"I believe God made me for a purpose—for China. But he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure."

One of my all-time favorite lines in one of my all-time favorite scenes in one of my all-time favorite movies: *Chariots of Fire*. Eric Liddell, walking on the lush green hills outside Edinburgh, explains to his beloved sister Jenny why he is training for the Olympic Games rather than spending all his time preparing for missionary work in China. I admit it: whenever I hear Vangelis's famous theme and see those scores of feet thumping the beaches of St. Andrews, I get as teary-eyed as some get watching Rocky Balboa run up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Eric Liddell's conscientious stand against running on Sunday and record-breaking victory in the 400-meter finals won him a measure of cinematic immortality, and *Chariots of Fire* won several Academy Awards. But the real race of Liddell's life is told only in the epilogue. After winning his gold medal, he fulfilled what he believed was God's ultimate purpose for his life: He went to China, cared for the sick and wounded in war-torn areas, was imprisoned with other foreigners in a Japanese internment camp, and died there.

This much harder contest, the test of Christian courage and commitment in the face of war, persecution, and suffering, was one that thousands of Chinese Christians had to face over the course of the 20th century.

As the world prepares for the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing, China's past violations of human rights and religious freedom and its current dealings with Tibet have become a topic of international controversy. We have yet to see what the fallout will be for both the state-registered and unregistered Chinese churches, which have been bursting with new life for decades despite numerous limitations.

It's impossible to understand the dynamic growth—and unique challenges—of Chinese Christianity today without looking back at the events of the last century. And when we do, we find a remarkable story of endurance and innovation, courage and creativity, intense suffering and transformative action. The Chinese church has been like bamboo, that ubiquitous Chinese symbol of strength, flexibility, and perseverance—growing even in the midst of harsh conditions, bending but not breaking in the wind.

Many, many thanks to Dan Bays, Carol Hamrin, and Stacey Bieler for all of their additional help in planning and preparing this issue of the magazine for publication. We could never have done it without them.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12:1–3)



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 98: Christianity in China

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## Timeline

China in the 20th century.

### The Golden Age of Protestantism

#### 1900

30,000 Chinese Christians and 200 missionaries are killed during the Boxer Uprising; Wang Mingdao is born

#### 1901

Watchman Nee and John Sung are born

#### 1904

Samuel Pollard begins missionary work among the Miao

#### 1905

Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission (CIM), dies

#### 1908

Revival breaks out in Manchuria under the ministry of Canadian missionary Jonathan Goforth

#### 1911

Revolution overthrows Qing dynasty; Sun Yat-sen becomes provisional president of new Republic of China; James Fraser arrives in Yunnan province and begins missionary work among the Lisu

#### 1912

Sun Yat-sen founds Kuomintang (Nationalist Party)

#### 1914-1918

World War I

#### 1917

Paul Wei founds True Jesus Church in Beijing

#### 1919

Treaty of Versailles awards German properties in Shantung, China, to Japan; China feels betrayed and refuses to sign; May Fourth student protest in Tiananmen Square marks new surge of nationalism and cultural reform in China

#### 1920

Mary Stone launches Shanghai Bethel Mission

#### 1921

Chinese Communist Party is founded in Shanghai

#### 1922

Communists and anarchists protest Conference of World Student Christian Federations in Beijing

**1923**

James Yen founds Mass Education Movement; starts rural reconstruction in Dingxian three years later

**1926**

First two Chinese Catholic bishops are consecrated; Jing Dianyong starts Christian community that later becomes known as the Jesus Family

**1928**

Watchman Nee starts "Little Flock" church in Shanghai; Yifang Wu becomes president of Jinling College for Women

**War and Revolution****1930**

Norwegian missionary Marie Monsen visits Shandong and sparks Pentecostal-like revival across the province

**1931**

Japan invades Manchuria

**1932**

Pearl Buck gives speech, "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?"; *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years* is published in U.S.

**1934**

CIM missionary David Adeney arrives in north central China; John and Betty Stam are beheaded

**1937**

Wang Mingdao builds Christian Tabernacle in Beijing

**1937**

Japan invades north and central China; Communists and Nationalists unite in war against Japan; Japanese soldiers commit atrocities during the "Rape of Nanking," during which American missionary Minnie Vautrin harbors women at Jinling College

**1939-1945**

World War II

**1941**

U.S. allies with China after Japanese attack Pearl Harbor

**1943**

James Yen honored in Carnegie Hall as one of nine "modern revolutionaries"; Eric Liddell is sent to a Japanese internment camp along with other missionaries and foreigners in occupied territory (he dies there in 1945)

**1944**

John Sung dies

**1945**

China Inter-Varsity Evangelical Christian Students Fellowship is inaugurated in Chongqing and student revivals begin; Japan surrenders, ending WWII

**1946**

Civil War breaks out between Nationalists (led by Chiang Kai-shek) and Communists (led by Mao Zedong)

**1948**

Last Inter-Varsity evangelistic campaign is held in Beijing

**1949**

People's Republic of China is established as a Communist state

### **Isolation and Persecution Under Mao**

**1950**

Protestant leaders led by Y. T. Wu meet with Premier Zhou Enlai and form Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)

**1952**

All foreign missionaries are expelled from China; Watchman Nee is arrested

**1955**

Wang Mingdao is arrested; many churches closed

**1956-57**

Communist Party invites public criticism in "Hundred Flowers" movement, then suppresses it

**1958**

TSPM enforces church unity and closes more churches; Catholic Patriotic Association appoints bishops without papal approval, splitting Catholic church in China

**1958-62**

Mao's "Great Leap Forward" program of economic development is a disaster, causing a famine that kills 30 million people

**1960**

James Yen founds International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR)

**1966-76**

Mao launches Cultural Revolution and instigates Red Guards to eliminate remnants of the old culture from China; all churches and universities are closed; church leaders, students, and elite are sent to work in the countryside

**1972**

President Nixon visits China; first reports of secret house churches leak out; Watchman Nee dies in labor camp

**1973**

Miao pastor Wang Zhiming is publicly executed; later he is one of ten 20th-century Christian martyrs commemorated in Westminster Cathedral

**1976**

Mao Zedong dies; radical leaders of Cultural Revolution are arrested

## **Reform and Reopening**

### **1978**

Deng Xiaoping reverses many of Mao's policies, pursues economic reforms, and improves relations with West

### **1978-1979**

Churches and universities begin to reopen; church leaders are released from prison; TSPM is reestablished; house churches flourish

### **1980**

China Christian Council is formed; Bishop K. H. Ting becomes leader of CCC and TSPM

### **1982**

Document 19 articulates government religious policies

### **1983**

During the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign," hundreds of house-church leaders are arrested and sent to labor camps, but are released by mid-decade

### **1988**

Billy and Ruth Graham visit China, meet high-level officials, scholars, and leaders of TSPM and house churches

### **1989**

June Fourth Democracy Movement in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere is violently suppressed; many protestors flee to U.S. and some become Christians

### **1991**

Wang Mingdao dies

### **1997**

Hong Kong is returned from British to Chinese authority; K. H. Ting retires

### **2000s**

Thousands of campus and young professional groups are meeting in China's cities

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 98: Christianity in China

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## To Every Tribe

**Early missionaries laid the groundwork for mass movements to Christ among the minority peoples of China.**

Ralph Covell

Who would think that in one relatively small geographical area in China, over half of the 480,000 people are committed to Jesus Christ? The area is Yunnan, one of the southwest provinces, and the people are Lisu, one of the large non-Chinese minority people groups. Over the past 100 years, Christianity has in some cases spread even more quickly and thoroughly among these ethnic minorities than among the majority (Han) Chinese. Whole clans and villages have come to Christ. In nearly every case, these mass movements can be traced back to seeds planted by some very influential early missionaries.

When the People's Republic of China drew up its first constitution in 1954, it defined the country as a "unitary multinational state in which all the nationalities are equal." The principal nationality is the Han people—those traditionally considered Chinese, who originated during the Han dynasty at the time of Christ. This dominant group numbers more than one billion people. The other 56 nationalities range in population from several hundred to 15 million. They live in China and are patriotic Chinese citizens, but they have their own unique language, history, and land. Politically, they are Chinese, but culturally they have another identity.

For more than 1200 years, Christian missionaries have sought to bring the gospel to the minority nationalities of China. Beginning with the Nestorians during the Tang dynasty (618-907) and continuing at least until the advent of the People's Republic of China, emissaries of the cross have tried to penetrate Mongolia, Tibet, and areas in what is now Xinjiang in northwest China. In the late 19th century, missionary work began among the many minority groups in southwest China.

In the decades leading up to 1949, conditions among these nationalities did not favor the Christian missionary effort. At that time minority peoples were despised, or were at best second-class citizens (they are no longer). Religious hierarchies oppressed them. Feudalism was rampant. Local conditions were chaotic because the central government lacked effective control. Many groups were ravaged by infighting as well as by struggles with other groups. Travel conditions were difficult and dangerous. Education was almost nonexistent, and there was no written literature. The planting and use of opium was the foundation of local economies. Banditry and murder were everyday occurrences. Deadly diseases killed off missionaries, as well as the local people. Apart from times of special crisis, missionaries and local Christians usually were free to preach the gospel. But they faced enormous social, political, and religious challenges.

With the exception of the Mongols, all nationalities in northern China are Muslim. The Mongols and Tibetans believe in Lamaism, a form of Buddhism. Nearly every group in southwest China believes in spirits, or animism—a traditional religion. As missionaries began to reach out to the minorities, the Muslims and Buddhists resisted vigorously. These groups were very structured, with holy books, a priesthood, places of worship, and religious communities. Animistic groups, on the other hand, often received the gospel enthusiastically and saw their lives and communities dramatically changed. This can be seen clearly in the cases of the Lisu and Miao peoples.

## The Lisu

The Lisu live mostly in western Yunnan province near the northern border with Sichuan, and also in a few counties in Sichuan. The first Protestant foreign missionary to concentrate his ministry on them was James Fraser of the China Inland Mission, who began his work in Yunnan in 1910. Initially the gospel message bore little fruit. After a short time, Fraser realized that he was in a spiritual battle against demon worship, ancestral rites, the use of opium, and addiction to whiskey. He devoted himself to long periods of prayer.

During one of these times of prayer, Fraser came to the conviction that the Lisu and other minority groups like them came best to Christ by families, or even by many families, in what came to be called mass movements. He increasingly focused on the bridge from individuals to families. His change of approach gradually resulted in hundreds of families turning to Christ from many villages. By 1918, 60,000 Lisu believers had been baptized. Fraser was not alone in his convictions, and the same results were seen by other mission societies such as the English Methodists, American Baptists, and Assemblies of God.

During a waiting period of two years, new Lisu converts were taught Christian beliefs and helped to give up opium, whiskey, and demon worship. Then they were baptized and led into programs of ongoing discipleship. One of these was the Rainy Season Bible School, in which people took advantage of slack times in their farming seasons to study the Bible. Fraser did everything he could to help the people in practical ways, such as bringing medical supplies with him as he visited their villages. But he was firm in his belief that the emerging churches should not become dependent on foreign aid.

Lisu church leaders now credit Fraser for keeping them from depending too much on outside help. Today, there are nearly 300,000 Lisu Christians. The Religious Affairs Bureau has suggested that Christianity be considered the official religion of that minority group. The Amity Foundation recently reprinted the Lisu New Testament—using the script and translation that James Fraser developed.

## **The Miao**

Different groups of the Miao people, with different languages and cultures, are scattered across the Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Hunan provinces. J. R. Adam, a CIM missionary belonging to the Free Church of Scotland, was the key figure in the early development of Protestant work among this nationality. In 1899 and in the early 1900s, he traveled to hundreds of villages and baptized 7,000 Miao, largely in the province of Guizhou.

The various Miao peoples were badly oppressed by the Chinese and other minority groups. Therefore they were deeply attracted to the Christian message of Jesus' suffering on the cross—how could they refuse him who had suffered so much for them as a suffering people? "You do not really mean that God loves us Miao, do you?" asked one after hearing the preaching of English Methodist missionary Samuel Pollard, who began working among them during the first few years of the 20th century.

Pollard fought against the oppression of the Miao, clashing with Chinese officials when they dealt unjustly over matters of land ownership. He was concerned about the poverty of the Miao and helped them to buy their own land and to save money which could then be invested in a type of credit union. For this he was nearly beaten to death at the orders of a greedy landlord.

Pollard taught Miao Christians how to pray for God's protection from evil spirits. Under his leadership, new Christians saw Jesus as the great liberator from this evil demonic world. This, along with his clashes with landlords, gave Pollard a standing among them that was unique for a white foreigner. He also forbade infant betrothals, set the marrying age of men at 20 and of women at 18, and forbade bridegrooms to give dowries (buy wives) at weddings. Later Miao Christian leaders came to see these "laws" as great helps to spreading the Christian faith.

Pollard's sense of fellowship with the Miao led him to emphasize the Communion service as the best way

to bring the heart of the gospel before the people. He referred to the Miao's mass conversions to Christ as a "sacramental movement."

After the Communist takeover, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, Miao Christians endured intense persecution. But Communist officials' attempt to stamp out Christianity among the Miao had the opposite effect: Independent evangelists arose, house churches multiplied, and more and more people turned to Christ. When Westminster Abbey commemorated 10 Christian martyrs of the 20th century in 1998, a Miao leader, Wang Zhiming, represented those who had died in China. The well-loved pastor had been executed in front of a crowd of over 10,000 people in 1973.

Today, there are nearly a million Miao Christians. How are the Miao facing modern Chinese society? In some senses, they are becoming more Chinese—learning Mandarin, wearing Chinese clothes, and using electricity, radios, television sets, and tape recorders in their homes. They continue to hold fast to their faith.

In some areas of China, Communist officials continue to create conditions in which it is hard for the church to grow, but many have begun to see that trusting Christ helps people live better lives and there is no reason to oppose Christianity.

***Ralph Covell is senior professor of world Christianity at Denver Seminary and a former missionary for 20 years in China and Taiwan.***

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## Worshipping Under the Communist Eye

The birth of an "official" Chinese church helped Christianity thrive in public under political constraints.

Ryan Dunch

The former Anglican cathedral in a provincial capital is jammed to the rafters. Dressed in a simple black robe and white surplice, the old deacon leads the congregation through the hymns, liturgy, and announcements that take up the first hour of the service. A thousand voices echo from the unadorned brick walls as they recite the Apostles' Creed, and the elderly blind pianist, raised in a Christian orphanage until the Communist victory in 1949, leads her small choir through a lovely rendition of "Alas, and did my Savior bleed?" The young pastor Lin [a pseudonym] is preaching today, and the congregation knows his worth—he would have been ordained two years earlier but for objecting to government interference in a church election. The young family struggled financially as a result, but the damage to his standing with the Religious Affairs officials also raised his credibility with the believers.

Lin's sermon is short today, by Chinese standards: an exposition of Deuteronomy 33:27, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms," truncated to a mere 30 minutes to leave time for baptisms. The candidates for baptism are called forward—nearly 40 of them, from college students and cell-phone-toting entrepreneurs to middle-aged laborers, white-collar workers, and elderly matrons. One by one, they repeat their baptismal vows before the font and are signed with the sign of the cross. Then the pastor presents them to the joyous applause and welcome of the assembly. As always, the sung Doxology—so much more emphatic in Chinese than in English—concludes the liturgy, followed by "Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing" as the pastors and choir recess from the sanctuary.

Pastor Lin and his congregation are but one face of the open churches in the People's Republic of China, often called the "official" or "TSPM" churches due to their affiliation with the state-sanctioned organizations for Protestant Christians, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council.

For the most part, these churches began as the hard-won fruits of missionary efforts in the century before 1949. Conceived and nurtured through the political breakdown of the ancient Chinese empire, the failure of the first Chinese republic, and the pressures of imperialism, war, and revolution, these churches inherited a rich but ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, they benefited from the commitment and sacrifice of many of the missionaries, and from the institutional riches that mission generosity had made possible: schools and universities, hospitals, publishing houses, and ministries that brought tangible as well as spiritual benefits to Chinese society. But they were also plagued by the question that faces so many of the newer churches around the world: how to honor the work of the missions without remaining beholden to them, to establish their independence from missionary control, and in so doing to reclaim their credibility in the eyes of their countrymen.

### An opportunity to reform?

Efforts to forge unity across denominational lines and cultivate Chinese leaders for the churches became especially urgent in the 1930s, as the Great Depression and the outbreak of war wreaked havoc on missionary funding and personnel. The great colleges and hospitals began to seem more like expensive millstones around the slender neck of the young Chinese church than visible symbols of Christian altruism. Similarly, divisions based on European and American denominationalism looked increasingly wasteful in the new climate of scarcity and weakness, as the new independent Chinese churches, such

as Watchman Nee's "Little Flock," were apt to point out.

Independence, patriotism, unity, and sustainability were thus already major issues for the Protestant churches well before the Communist revolution of 1949. Following the revolution, many Chinese Christian leaders saw the new political reality as an opportunity to address them.

In April 1950, six months into the new regime, a delegation of prominent Protestant educators, editors, and denominational leaders traveled to Beijing to meet with the country's new masters. It was already clear by this time that schools, hospitals, and other church-run social enterprises would be taken over by the socialist state, but the future of the churches as religious entities was more hopeful. With the subtlety and diplomacy for which he would become famous, the Premier, Zhou Enlai, reassured them of the new government's good intentions toward Christians—and also spelled out the government's expectations that the churches would free themselves from imperialist influences and embrace the new political order.

The Protestant leader who embraced this call for internal reform most enthusiastically was Y.T. Wu (Wu Yao-tsung or Wu Yaozong, 1893-1979), who became the dominant figure in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement until the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. Wu was a YMCA secretary, author, and Christian magazine editor who had converted to Christianity in his youth. He was a man of strong convictions, influenced by the social gospel and the ethical teachings of Jesus, and impatient with the caution and the more conservative, supernaturally-oriented theology of the churches. For Wu, the new era offered the prospect of purging the Chinese church of its links with American and European imperialism and making it truly independent, under the slogan of the "three selves": self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating.

In consultation with Premier Zhou, Wu and his colleagues published the "Christian Manifesto," which argued that Christianity in China had been used as a tool of imperialism and called on Protestants to renounce foreign missionary ties and to support the new government. The nationwide signature campaign that followed gathered 400,000 signatures for the Manifesto, and in effect marked the beginning of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

Taking shape in the tense political atmosphere after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the Movement was an association of individual Protestants dedicated to the internal reform of the church, but it quickly came to be regarded by the government as the body responsible for keeping the Protestant churches patriotic and independent of foreign control. Over the 1950s and early 1960s, it oversaw the denunciation of missionaries, the weakening of denominational structures in favor of the TSPM, and the closure of first rural and then "surplus" urban churches in the name of consolidation.

These developments closely mirrored broader political pressures in the nation, as China's Communist leaders struggled to define the correct Marxist direction for the country. Profound fissures opened up within the leadership over many issues, including the place of religion in a socialist society. Tensions came to a head in 1966 when Chairman Mao Zedong launched the unprecedented social upheaval known as the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." The Cultural Revolution was simultaneously Mao's way of toppling his opponents within the Party leadership and a mass outpouring of revolutionary enthusiasm, particularly among the young. Mao believed that 17 years of socialism had not succeeded in purifying China of the evils of class society, and he incited the revolutionary masses to attack his political enemies and eliminate all cultural vestiges of the old society from the Communist utopia.

Open religious life of all sorts was suppressed entirely during those 10 years, all churches were closed, and church leaders were attacked, criticized, and sent to the countryside to reform themselves through productive labor. The long history of Christianity in China had ended in the final extinction of the church, it seemed.

## **A new national church**

After Chairman Mao's death in 1976, the Communist Party retreated from Mao's radical vision of complete socialist purity and embarked on a course of economic reforms and limited political liberalization. Toleration for religious worship was reinstated from 1978, in order to accommodate the small remnant of elderly religious believers that Communist Party leaders thought remained. That expectation was soon confounded as religious activities of all sorts gathered influence and adherents, including among the young. Thirty years later, the Chinese government continues to struggle with how to manage this new reality.

Among Protestant Christians, the change in policy was both a source of rejoicing and an opportunity to move forward more positively than had been the case before 1966. Party policy still insisted that Protestants must be loyal to the Communist state and independent of foreign control and funding. It also insisted that all church affairs should be supervised by a nationwide "patriotic religious organization" answerable to the Party. For many Protestants, however, the TSPM savored of political extremism due to the role it had played in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, it had always been an association of individuals rather than churches. Many of the more radical leaders of that period had passed from the scene (Y. T. Wu died in late 1979). Accordingly, in 1980 the new Protestant leadership founded the China Christian Council to serve as the national ecclesiastical expression of the Protestant churches in China. In practice, the two organizations have overlapped considerably in personnel and responsibilities, and they are often referred to together as the TSPM/CCC. Local differences in worship style persisted, but denominational structures were not restored, and the Chinese church became officially "post-denominational."

The new church leaders faced immense challenges. They had to locate the deeds of church properties that had been expropriated during the Cultural Revolution and persuade the local authorities to return these premises to the Protestants for worship. They had to restore regular worship across China's vast territory, both in areas where the officials were relatively cooperative and in the many regions where Party leaders still thought of religious believers as retrograde blemishes on socialist society. They had to persuade the people of a poor country to begin financially supporting church work again. They had to renew contacts between the Chinese churches and Christians abroad, yet without compromising the independence of the Chinese church. Most pressing of all, they had to train a new generation of Christian workers after 30 years of limited and then zero theological education.

It was fitting, then, that the man who emerged as the key leader of the TSPM/CCC in post-Mao China was a theological educator, Bishop K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun, born 1915), president of the Jinling Union Seminary in Nanjing. An Anglican bishop with graduate degrees from Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York, Ting was a different sort of leader than Y. T. Wu. His intelligence and tact made him able to gain the respect of Communists, Christians of different stripes, and leaders of other religions. Ting's Christian faith was also more spiritual in orientation than Wu's, and he was able to work with evangelicals as well as more liberal elements within the church. Over the 1980s, Ting became increasingly vocal in advocating for the interests of the church and against some of the more clumsy efforts by government and Party authorities to control church affairs—including early efforts to create a registration system for churches. He also came to acknowledge frankly the existence of Protestants in China outside of the TSPM/CCC aegis. Ting retired in 1997 at age 82. Christians both inside and outside of China will debate his legacy for a long time to come, but the importance of his leadership cannot be denied.

## **Imperfect, vital ministry**

Comprising at least 32,000 churches, 16,000 meeting points, and 18 million worshippers (according to 2004 figures), the TSPM/CCC is larger and more diverse than any single denomination in the U.S.A. With only 2,600 ordained ministers (one per twenty congregations), the shortage of trained pastoral leadership remains dire. Yet the growth of the church has been remarkable by any standards, and does

not appear to be abating. The Amity Foundation, the social service arm of the TSPM/CCC churches, has published over 50 million Bibles in Chinese since the mid-1980s.

Independence, patriotism, unity, and sustainability persist as perennial issues for the Chinese church. The relationship between the church and China's authoritarian state is likewise a major challenge for church leaders, whether in the open churches or the unregistered ones. So also is discerning the line between unregistered Protestants and the quasi-

Christian new religious movements that have been proliferating in China over the last 20 years. For all these challenges, the churches affiliated with the TSPM/CCC occupy an essential place as the main publicly-visible expression of Protestant Christianity in Chinese society. Like all churches, the TSPM/CCC church reflects the Christian gospel imperfectly, but it is vital for China's Christians and for Christian witness within Chinese society.

*Ryan Dunch is associate professor of history at the University of Alberta, Canada.*

### **Religious freedom and Chinese law**

The current Chinese Constitution (adopted in 1982) grants "freedom of religious belief," but only specifies that right as belonging to the individual citizen. It refers to, but does not define, "normal religious activities." These two items have been pressure points in religious policy and law ever since. Article 36 reads as follows:

"Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination."

### **An Evangelical Patriot and Critic Marcus Cheng (Chen Chonggui, 1884-1963)**

The ideals of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement appealed to evangelicals as well as to mainline Protestants in the early years of the People's Republic of China. The life of Marcus Cheng exemplifies this. Cheng, the son of a poor artisan, grew up as a Christian in the small independent Swedish Covenant Church mission. He earned his B.A. at Wheaton College in Illinois, then returned to China and went on to become a leading evangelical educator and evangelist. In 1943, Cheng founded a seminary in the wartime capital, Chongqing (Chungking), and as its president was one of the most respected national figures among conservative Protestants when the Communists came to power.

Cheng was also a patriot. He agreed that China's churches needed to purge themselves of their imperialist and bourgeois ties, and he denounced the "imperialist distortion of Christianity" which had kept Christians aloof from the revolution. He became one of the founding members of the TSPM. "Formerly I was 'above politics,' [but] I now have a real concern for politics and the economic reconstruction of our country," he wrote in 1952.

As a high-profile evangelical, Cheng also became a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a non-Communist advisory organ of the government. In 1957, the Communist Party called for people to offer their criticisms and suggestions on the work of the government, under the slogan "Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend." In March of that year, Cheng made a strong speech on the floor of the CPPCC in which he complained of the haughty and

blasphemous attitude taken towards Christians by some government workers. Contention between theism and atheism was to be expected, he argued, but should be carried out "without abuse or name-calling." The speech received national media coverage.

But the Pandora's box of criticism opened up by the "Hundred Flowers" movement quickly exceeded the comfort level of Party leaders, and a purge of "rightist" elements followed. Many prominent intellectuals and social leaders fell from grace. Cheng came under attack as a leading rightist in Protestant circles. He lost his leadership positions in the church and the CPPCC from that time until his death in Beijing in 1963.

***Ryan Dunch***

## **Religious freedom and Chinese law**

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