

# 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.

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## 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*

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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.

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## **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**