

China's Emerging Church

The underground church has grown as quickly as China's economy. Although religious freedom is increasing in the nation, Christian persecution is far from over.

It's been said that whatever you hear about China is true—somewhere. Tales of persecution have become well-known, in particular the story of Brother Yun, the evangelist from rural Henan province whose testimony has shaped many Westerners' view of Christianity in China. The best-selling book *The Heavenly Man* tells how, after many years of house-church ministry that saw moves of God alternate with cruel reprisals, Yun eventually escaped into exile.

The Heavenly Man is an important record of Christianity in China, though its publication date of 2002 may have obscured the fact that it recounts events from the 1980s until Yun himself left China in 1997. The signs are that since then, despite ongoing conflicts in provinces such as Henan and Anhui, the situation for many Christians has shifted some.

Several Chinese church leaders say the government is acting on its slogan of building a harmonious society, and the church is one of the elements it is cautiously embracing in its quest for reconciliation.

Spring* is a co-leader of a Beijing house church, a live wire organizer with a finger on the pulse of a citywide network. She points through the window and across a broad avenue to two brand-new apartment blocks that have only just been occupied.

"There are four house churches there," she says. "And in this building," indicating the huge corner-complex where we sit talking, "we also have many churches."

It's impossible to say how many house churches operate in the sprawling capital, she says, but they number many thousands. Her own church runs four congregations in Beijing, and has

another in the neighboring port city of Tianjin that numbers around 300 members. It is unregistered but well-known to the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), the same enforcers of religious policy who pursued Brother Yun.

They have paid a number of visits, usually low-key, though they once arrived with police to prove a point and break up a meeting. "They came and said, 'If you are not registered, you are illegal.' So we just moved to another building," Spring says.

Spring's equanimity might surprise readers of *The Heavenly Man*. With memories of Yun's brutal persecution, how can illegal house churches such as hers now treat the authorities so casually?

"In the Constitution of the People's Republic of China freedom of religious belief is a basic right enjoyed by all citizens," says a 1997 government white paper. But the law is quicksand; there is no place for due process or legal precedent, as legislation exists to sanction Communist Party control, not citizens' rights.

Though often couched in magnanimous phrases, the vagueness of many articles makes them so elastic that they are useless as objective principles. This, and the party's own record of ignoring the law, lie behind an intuitive indifference to legal codes that pervades Chinese society.

"Nothing is really governed by constitution or by laws or by regulations. Almost everything that's governed is determined by relationships," says David Wang, former president of the missions group Asian Outreach, who still travels widely in China.

He is referring to *guanxi*, the underlying principle of virtually any transaction here. Ventures of all kinds try to curry favor with useful and influential people who, on perceiving mutual benefit, will reciprocate. Once established,

it is these guanxi relationships that most often govern dealings between the parties.

For the house churches, it pans out as ongoing dialogue with local officials, particularly the RAB. But, as Wang points out, house churches can be worlds apart, varying from rustic backwaters to rapidly urbanizing areas to the sophisticated milieu of the cities. Their experiences are likewise diverse, though one major blessing is that their diversity has not split them into denominations.

Changing Times

The first house churches emerged among simple farm folk in rural communities, the result of foreign-missionary efforts from precommunist days. After the Communist Party's victory of 1949, the new government tried to direct all Protestant churches into its Three Self Patriotic Movement, representing self-administration, self-support and self-propagation, tying them to the party and proscribing foreign influence.

But Three Self churches preached communist doctrine, not the gospel. Although at least some remnants of independent churches survived, even through the Cultural Revolution, they operated in peril and isolation. Thousands were imprisoned, tortured and martyred for preaching the gospel.

Over time, however, Christianity reached the towns and cities, where it was easier to organize and form networks. From there the networks spread back across the countryside.

Toward the end of Deng Xiaoping's hold on power, which ended in 1992, there was a softening in official attitudes to religion. Spring remarks that many young people became Christians around this time and attributes their conversions to the disillusionment and soul-searching that followed the massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989. It is significant, she says, that many pastors are around age 40.

Sensing the more lenient attitude, some churches made approaches to the RAB, with mixed responses. In Brother Yun's home province not much has changed.

"You go to a small village in Henan," Wang says, "where I would say both the officials and the house-church leadership are less educated, they are older, they are more traditional, and therefore they would be ... of the 'just after the Cultural Revolution' mind-set. That is, we still have class enemies in our society."

Ping*, a longtime associate of Brother Yun's, says the RAB still aggressively "hunts" unregistered church leaders in the provinces where the majority of house-church Christians reside. Rather than easing its oversight, the government is merely changing its tactics, he says.

For example, in Beijing in the past, when authorities learned of house-church meetings, they raided the location, fined everyone and told participants' employers that they had been caught in an illegal religious gathering. "But now, suddenly, the authorities are fining the landlords that are renting the spaces to the churches with heavy fines," he says. "That means the churches are finding it very difficult to gather in large groups."

And though China is poised to become the world's largest Bible producer, Ping says the books are largely for export; domestic Bible distribution is still tightly controlled.

"In the last 20 years, we have distributed more than 10 million Bibles," Ping says. "If it were just possible for me to have my tracts and purchase Bibles with no strings attached, I would gladly do that, but that is not the reality. It does not relate if you want to have one copy or five copies from the bookstore, but if you want to have several boxes or a whole truckload, it is still the same."

However, the house churches in the major cities, with their

growing professional-class memberships, have found the RAB much more accommodating.

“They find that relating and dialoguing with the urban house churches is a very important step toward building community harmony,” Wang says. “For instance, in this [May] earthquake, my understanding is that the Ministry of Civil Affairs has taken quite strong initiatives in approaching the different urban churches to attract and mobilize their medical personnel to become engaged in relief work.”

Although trends can be identified, there is no nationwide consistency of approach.

“While there has been a general decrease in persecution in some areas, I caution against observers being too optimistic,” says Paul Hattaway, director of Asia Harvest, which serves Chinese house churches. “Many house church leaders from some [rural] areas in Henan and Anhui see little or no changes, and some report that the last 12 months in the build-up to the Olympics has been the most difficult for them since the severe persecution of 1983.”

In early June, Texas-based China Aid Association (CAA) reported that nine house-church members in Henan province were detained for assisting earthquake victims. In Hebei province, a Bible school was raided in May, according to CAA, and in the same area China’s Public Security Bureau broke up a prayer service for earthquake victims.

“Don’t think of ‘a nation’ of China. Think of a geographical area called ‘China’ with many different ethnic and language groups and different situations in every part of the nation,” says Dennis Balcombe, pastor of Hong Kong’s Revival Christian Church.

Originally from California, Balcombe has spent 40 years in China ministering in all areas and circumstances, and speaks Mandarin and Cantonese fluently. Whereas he once spoke of the

vicious persecution of Chinese Christians and told of churches being bombed, he has since noted a remarkable and sustained change.

Yes, some places still have problems, he admits, citing Hunan province, south of the similar-sounding Henan.

"I was in Hunan just recently, and ... it's still very communist, it's still very run-down, the infrastructure is not up to what it is in the coastal areas," he says. "The people, the thinking and the Christians are still very small compared with other parts of China, and there's still persecution."

Nonetheless, he says: "We find all over China much more freedom. ... Compared to how it was in the Cultural Revolution, or 10 or 20 years ago, China is very free."

It is, however, a freedom that needs to be earned and protected. Balcombe has spent a lot of time developing good relationships—*guanxi*—with police and the RAB, stemming from a time when he was actually blacklisted by the government and barred from entering China. He invited several officials to his church, paying for their airfare and accommodations in Hong Kong.

"Because I paid for everything they were embarrassed not to come to church," he says, "so they came ... and they liked our church, and so now I have a lot of these officials as very good personal friends."

It has enabled him to build bridges between the police and Christians wary of officialdom, often justifiably so because of past abuses. And it gives him a privileged insight into the latest official thinking.

Says Balcombe: "They're basically saying: 'We think having a good, strong Christian church in China is a good thing. ... Not only do we not oppose it, we really want it because Christians are hard-working, they're moral people, they have values,

they're honest people, they pay their taxes, they do what they're supposed to do, they don't get in trouble—as long as they don't get involved with politics.'”

‘One Body’

Although dialogue can open doors, attempts at secrecy can cause problems. “You cannot outsmart these people,” Balcombe has said. And likewise Ruby*, another unregistered house-church leader in Beijing, smiles ruefully and nods her head. The authorities know what's going on, and although they now take a less harsh approach, they can still make life tough if they want to.

A graduate of a prestigious overseas Bible college, Ruby has developed a widely recognized teaching ministry since her return to China and is in daily contact with church and network leaders. She offers another angle on official thinking: The government no longer knows how to deal with the house-church movement. It knows networks are forming and growing but is not taking action.

The reason, she believes, is partly that the churches are ebbing as a perceived threat, but also because the old heavy-handed repression would no longer work. There are too many churches in the networks now and a half-billion cell phones in China. If trouble brewed, word would soon get around and the networks would come to support one another.

The demography of church membership is also changing, especially in the major cities, Ruby explains. Many students and professors are asking about Christianity or becoming Christians—or as Wang puts it, “A rippling effect is spreading higher up in society—more intelligentsia, more professionals, more leaders.”

More party members, too, Ruby believes, though the numbers are unknowable because atheism is one of the membership conditions. But today's new members, especially the young, are

much less likely to have joined from political conviction.

Xinhua reporter Lori* openly admits in an English class that she views her Communist Party card as a passport to promotion. She sees communism as no more than a label now, especially after China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization.

The Three Self churches have changed, too, reflecting the evolving government stance. Wanda*, a senior officer in a Hong Kong nongovernmental organization that has extensive dealings with churches in China, says the separation between Three Self and house churches is melting fast.

"Now the division's no longer so clear because you've got Three Self pastors coming out and forming house churches," she says. "Talking to some of the urban church leaders, their views are actually that one day there won't be that division, we'll all be in one body ... working hand-in-hand."

Ruby's teaching ministry has expanded to embrace Three Self churches, which are also discovering a new appeal to youth.

Balcombe points out that "a lot of young people are flocking to Three Self churches because they're becoming very evangelical, even very charismatic, even very Pentecostal." He adds his voice to Wanda's and to the voices of those who say systematic Bible teaching is a major need, especially among leaders.

Obstacles remain, however. House churches are still required to register before they are considered to be legitimate Christian groups, but many churches refuse to register because that would require them to have a designated church building, an ordained leader and defined meeting times. Many house churches do not have these. Registration means surrendering to Three Self, which would reorganize the church with a new leadership, premises and meeting times.

For many, such as Spring, the sacrifices would be too great.

“The church doesn’t want to be controlled by the Three Self Church because they don’t have any relation to us,” Spring says. “Why should we be regulated by them?”

Her church’s plan to combine its five congregations would be considered reckless by some house-church leaders, as it would draw too much attention.

“Usually if you keep between 30 and 60 people [the police] let you alone, depending where you’re at,” Balcombe says. “If you get over 100 people, especially if you’re getting a few hundred people, you’re really pushing it.”

It may or may not provoke stern measures. Balcombe tells of a growing church in Guangdong province that now comprises several congregations. “From time to time the group would get too big—60, 80, 100 people—and the police know what’s going on, so they’d come by and say, ‘You’d better split your group up now,’” he says.

China is hugely diverse—the fact must not be forgotten—but the church has earned official favor that will be hard to dislodge in these days of promoting societal harmony.

“China is an open door,” Balcombe concludes after reviewing the changes and new opportunities. “The bottom line is that communism has been a tool of God to strengthen the church and create a hunger in the hearts of the people.”

**Denotes name change to protect identity.*

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