

The Case of Zhang Yinan

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Will China ever be a Christian nation? Ask that question of the average American academic Sinologist (someone who is an “expert” on China) and he or she will laugh at you. Others, including some in the U.S. State Department and even the CIA, don’t dismiss that possibility so readily. They know, as I recorded in my book *Jesus in Beijing*, published last year, Christianity has grown so fast that many in the Chinese Communist Party consider the faith a growing potential threat to their hold on power.

But what about Chinese Christians themselves? Are they an opposition political force, or do they continue to focus on bread-and-butter Christian issues like freedom of worship and evangelism?

One remarkable man who has found himself in the cross hairs of that part of the Chinese establishment that regards Christianity as a mortal foe of the Communists’ rule is Zhang Yinan. Zhang, 46, is one of the very few Chinese “intellectuals” (meaning, in China, anybody with higher education) who has devoted himself to documenting the story of Christianity in modern China.

He graduated from the Nanjing University of Science and Technology in 1989 and was led to faith later the same year. After wandering through many different expressions of both “legal” Christianity and house-church Christianity in China, Zhang found himself most drawn to leaders of the Henan-based Fangcheng fellowship (named after the Henan county in which the movement got started, Fangcheng).

He observed at close hand efforts of different branches of the house-church movement to come to a consensus on doctrine and policy, including a historical meeting in Zhengzhou in August 1998, which produced the United Appeal [to the government] of Various Branches of the House Church. Zhang also paid close attention to the composition of the Confession of Faith that was signed by some of the original August 1998 signatories and was published in November 1998.

Zhang kept a private prayer journal throughout. This was his undoing in September 2003, when Henan police raided his house, searched it and used prayers from his private prayer journal as so-called evidence to show that Zhang was trying to overthrow the government. The police also found the text of a "Christian Constitution" for China that Zhang had written down but never published or spoken about to others.

Despite the protests by lawyers that the privacy of letters and journals is protected by the Chinese Constitution, Zhang was sentenced early in 2004 to two years in a labor camp.

What is so interesting about Zhang is that, while never engaging in any political activity, he has nevertheless been thinking through the political and cultural implications of a China that might, one day, be Christianized. Zhang is so widely read that his courtroom appeal in February 2004 quoted from John Winthrop's City Upon a Hill sermon, Montesquieu and, of course, the letters of Paul. Copies of Zhang's wide variety of writings (including his prayer journal) have fortunately been brought out of China to the West and will eventually probably be published.

Zhang's imprisonment totally gives the lie to the claim (often spread by members of China's Three Self Patriotic Movement and

the China Christian Council) that when Christians are jailed in China, it is because they are lawbreakers or are anti-government. Zhang is clearly neither. He is guilty of thinking thoughts originally thought by all great Protestant Christian thinkers from the 16th century onward.

Many observers of China seem to believe that democracy will sort of emerge in China from the chrysalis of capitalism and pluralism, the same way a butterfly naturally comes alive after first being a caterpillar. But the history of freedom of faith in Europe and the United States, as well as the history of democratic governance worldwide, suggests otherwise. Tyrants, bullies and conservationists of outdated ideologies use police power, whenever possible, to silence challenges to their rule.

Pray for Zhang Yinan and for China's transition to democracy.