

China's Ongoing Revival

More than 5 million believers make up only one of the country's many house-church networks.

China's Ongoing Revival

Some of the changes that have come to Hong Kong since the British handed the city and its 6 million people back to China in June 1997 are arresting: the five-starred red flag of the People's Republic of China flying atop all public buildings, or the growing use of the northern Chinese Mandarin dialect rather than the local Cantonese.

But others are more subtle. Despite widespread disillusionment here with the Communist-controlled politics, the city's Chinese churches are thriving and even aggressively evangelizing hitherto unreached parts of the city. Teams of youngsters from the Revival Temple in Kowloon have boldly challenged the professional fortune-tellers of Temple Street with their own experiences of the power of the Holy Spirit in such gifts as the word of knowledge or prophecy.

American Dennis Balcombe, pastor for three decades of the Revival Temple, says there is a much greater openness in evangelical churches today than before 1997 to the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives. There is an exciting new unity among Hong Kong's Christians, he said, adding: "We are on the verge of a revival in Hong Kong."

That revival has already been operating inside China itself

for several years and continues to express itself in striking ways. China's Communist authorities, though permitting officially approved churches to operate, often behave with great harshness toward house-church Christian leaders.

Take Zhang Rongliang, for example, a leader of one of the largest networks of unofficial "house church" Christians in China: the Henan-based Fangcheng fellowship. Another reporter and I first met Zhang in 1998, when his fellowship comprised at least 5 million people.

While we met with them, Zhang and other Christian leaders composed a document titled United Appeal of China's House Church Christians. It politely suggested that China's government deal directly and straightforwardly with China's house churches, rather than insisting that the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was the only legitimate Protestant church organization in China.

Arrested a year later, Zhang was beaten brutally and deprived of sleep for the first several days in custody. Before his release last February, the authorities had hoped—in vain—that under pressure Zhang would reveal details about the organization of his network.

Zhang and his fellowship is a striking illustration of what happens when the Holy Spirit has his way among Christian communities. Many in the Fangcheng fellowship found a new power in their witness after they were baptized in the Holy Spirit in the late 1980s. One of those was a young woman, Lu Xiaomin, then just 20.

Lu was astonished at a prayer meeting she went to in 1990 when

she saw deaf people recovering their hearing and people speaking in tongues. Soon she herself received the baptism in the Holy Spirit and began to pray in tongues.

One night shortly afterward, Lu was so filled with joy that she couldn't sleep. Then the words and melody of a Christian song came into her mind. Hesitantly, because she had no musical training, she told some of the leaders in her house-church community. They encouraged her to sing the songs directly into a cassette recorder.

She started to do so, and by 1998 had recorded some 440 of them. They had not only been printed and distributed but also were being sung in house churches all over China.

I met Lu in south China for the first time a few weeks ago, and she sang some of her songs into my own recorder. She was by now up to 732 songs, with no end in sight to the astonishing inspiration.

Fangcheng fellowship leaders, who know many of her songs by heart, told me that Lu's songs had encouraged them at crucial times in their Christian lives.

In a sure sign of God's desire to continue the revival in China, some of Lu's songs are now being sung in the Three-Self churches whose leaders reject house churches.

For that, and for many other of God's marvelous works in China, there must be laughter as well as joy in heaven.