

Tortured Evangelist Supernaturally Escapes High- Security Prison by Simply Walking Out

Liu Zhenying fell to the floor convulsing, his frail body coursing with electricity. Prison guards, electric-shock batons in hand, stepped back unashamedly as he lost consciousness.

Inside Nanyang Prison, located in China's Henan Province, 25-year-old Liu was beginning the 75th day of his fast from both food and water. Although he was 5 feet 5 inches, he weighed less than 70 pounds and had to be carried to a room where officials had arranged for his family to see him. The Public Security Bureau (PSB), China's secret police, was hoping Liu's wife and mother would convince him to renounce his "superstitious" beliefs and reveal the identities and locations of his unregistered house-church contacts.

When Liu regained consciousness, his head was in his mother's lap. She was sobbing. His young wife and sister peered at him in horror. He was an unsightly pile of skin and bones, covered in crusty blood and filth. His ears were shriveled like raisins, and portions of his scalp were exposed because the prison guards had ripped his hair out.

Only a birthmark convinced Liu's mother that the man she was holding was her son. Soon they were all crying. Liu broke his fast by sharing communion with his family. Then he cried, "I will see you all in heaven!"

That was April 7, 1984. Liu believed he would soon die for the Lord in that prison, but God had other plans. He was released four years later but imprisoned and tortured twice more before

escaping China in 1997.

Today, Liu Zhenying, 49, is known to Christians around the world as Brother Yun (pronounced “Yoon”), a name Chinese believers gave him to protect his identity. Thousands have been inspired by his account of supernatural intervention and miraculous survival, which he detailed in his autobiography, *The Heavenly Man* (Piquant Editions and Monarch Books).

Co-authored by Paul Hattaway, the book has been translated into 33 languages and has sold more than 800,000 copies. In 2003, it won the United Kingdom’s Christian Booksellers’ Book of the Year Award.

But more than being a testimony of one man’s spiritual journey, *The Heavenly Man* offers a glimpse inside the Chinese underground house-church movement, a Christian community that is poised to reach the world with the gospel.

China’s Christian Awakening

Although the numbers vary, observers estimate between 100 million and 130 million Christians live in China, an indication that nearly 10 percent of the nation’s 1.3 billion people may be believers.

Protestant missionary work to South Asia began exactly 200 years ago when Robert Morrison landed in Macao in 1807. The Scottish missionary eventually translated the Bible into Chinese from his base in the coastal city of Guangzhou. Later, missionaries such as Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission in 1865, carried the gospel into interior provinces such as Henan.

There were roughly 1 million Christians living in China when Mao Zedong’s community army took over in 1949. But Mao’s regime looked to turn back the tide. “The first thing Mao did was expel all missionaries, throw pastors in prison or labor camps where most of them died, destroy church buildings and

burn Bibles,” Yun says. “By the 1970s, it was said the only Bibles left in China were in history museums in Beijing.”

Yet when Mao’s bloody Cultural Revolution ended with his death in 1976, an underground Christian movement erupted. It was around this time that a proselytizing 17-year-old Yun first became a wanted criminal in China, having led 2,000 people to Christ in his native Henan Province during his first year as a Christian.

He says his zeal came from his mother, a poor and backslidden woman who, while caring for her cancer-stricken husband and near suicide herself, tearfully turned back to God one night in 1974. The prodigal gathered her five children (Yun was the fourth of five) and told them Jesus would save them. They prayed all night for their father, and he was healed. Yun says God then told him to be His witness “to the south and the west.”

The young evangelist continued to preach despite the constant threat of arrest. Even after Mao’s brutal reign ended, Chinese authorities continued to persecute Christians. In 1983 after a secret house-church meeting in a village, PSB officers arrested Yun.

As he was being kicked and dragged through the snow, Yun feigned insanity to warn other believers to run, shouting, “I am a heavenly man! I live in Gospel Village! My father’s name is Abundant Blessing! My mother’s name is Faith, Hope and Love!”

One of several Christians to be arrested that night, Yun spent four years in Nanyang Prison. There he rejected numerous enticements to join the government-sanctioned Three-Self Church, as do most Christians in China. Members of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement or the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association face legal restrictions on core Christian practices, including evangelism, youth outreach and home

groups.

Because Yun refused to conform, prison officials resorted to beatings and electric shocks in an attempt to penetrate his house-church connections. "They wanted me to reveal names of co-workers and meeting places," Yun told *Charisma*. "With thick needles they squeezed acids under my nails, and I fainted from the pain. I woke up and told them nothing."

Unlike many Western teachers who equate Christianity with comfort and abundance, Yun preaches a gospel that emphasizes suffering and ruin. He sees affliction as a way to commune with God.

"I did not really suffer for Jesus while in prison—I was with Jesus," he writes in his book. "The ones who really suffer are those who never experience God's presence."

Revivalist Rolland Baker—who with his wife, Heidi, ministers among the poorest of Africa—says Yun's life is one "so totally captured by [Jesus] that no imaginable hardship or persecution can stop him from being more than a conqueror."

Yun says there was a time when he allowed ministry "to become an idol." After being released from Nanyang Prison in 1988, Yun says he temporarily lost sight of God and became overzealous and obstinate. He ministered around China at a breakneck pace, ignoring his wife's pleas to slow down.

Yun later admitted that he had forgotten his "first love." Of his second imprisonment in 1991, he says, "The Lord graciously allowed me to rest in Him behind bars."

Released in 1993, Yun says he soon developed a burden to see unity among China's house churches, a passion he shared with his mentor, Peter Xu Yongze, who at that time led China's large house church, the Born Again Movement.

The unity movement, later named Sinim Fellowship, spread so

quickly that by early 1997 word of it reached the office of high-level communist officials in Beijing. Subsequently, the PSB raided a clandestine Sinim meeting in Henan's provincial capital of Zhengzhou.

Trying to avoid arrest, Yun leaped from the second-floor window but fractured his leg. He was met on the ground by the PSB, who beat him and issued electric shocks. Sharing a wall between their cells, Yun and Xu, who also was arrested during the raid, were tortured for several days at Zhengzhou's Number One Maximum Security Prison. Yun's legs were beaten with clubs to rule out an escape attempt.

Yun says torture taught him an important lesson: "Even though God did not speak a word to me, no matter how much I cried; even though God didn't immediately set me free from the pain and terror; I have come to understand that He was there."

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After six weeks on the prison's third floor, Brother Yun believed God wanted him to escape. So on the morning of May 5, 1997, after his wife in a vision that morning told him to "open the iron door" and after Zu whispered to him that the time had come, Yun asked the guard for permission to use the bathroom.

Although he barely could stand on his battered legs, when the iron door opened, Yun says he suddenly was able to walk on his own, which he did, right past the first guard. On the stairwell he says he grabbed a broom to pretend he was tidying up the place, then proceeded past the second guard, who looked straight through him. Praying with every step, Yun says he

reached ground level and found the third iron door open as well. Stepping onto the courtyard and into broad daylight, Yun thought he would be shot in the back at any moment.

But amazingly, when he reached the prison's main gate, it was open too. He walked onto the busy Zhengzhou streets and a taxi pulled up. The driver asked, "Where to?"

Controlling the Uncontrollable

Yun later learned that no one had ever escaped from Zhengzhou Prison. The facility has since closed, and Yun's breakout is considered an unsolved mystery.

Today Chinese authorities continue to hunt down unregistered Christians. In parts of the Henan countryside, signs offer rewards of up to 50,000 renminbi, or roughly \$6,400—a fortune for working-class Chinese—to anyone who reports Christian meetings.

Yet clandestine worship services continue. When *Charisma* visited one such meeting in Henan Province in December, 200 leaders, most of them young women, sat crammed in a second-story room of an old industrial building where they listened to a minister from the West. Four believers positioned themselves in the hall to watch for the PSB. The preaching lasted for hours. At dusk, the windows were shaded and overhead lights came on.

Because meetings like this one are hundreds of miles away from Beijing and Shanghai—Westernized cities often visited by tourists—crackdowns are routine. In Henan last year, 174 Christians were arrested, more than in any other province, China Aid Association reported.

Human rights experts say a Chinese law called the Regulation on Religious Affairs—which the government-monitored *China Daily* newspaper heralded in 2005 as "a significant step forward in the protection of Chinese citizens' religious

freedom”—actually helps facilitate heavier house-church crackdowns. “The situation is not getting any better,” Amnesty International’s Mark Allison told *USA Today* that year. The new law is “more an attempt to control religious groups than to loosen restrictions,” he said.

“There’s no question that the absolute biggest threat to the [Chinese] Communist Party is Christianity,” says China missionary Daniel Powers (not his real name), a former U.S. Marine sniper. He says the rise of the government-backed Three-Self Church is China’s way of “controlling something they can’t control.”

In this same area of Henan last summer, Zhang Rongliang, leader of the 10 million-strong China for Christ Church, was sentenced to seven years in prison after the PSB went house-to-house in his Zhengzhou village, confiscating Christian material they believed linked him to Western organizations.

The leader who replaced Zhang is in hiding and told *Charisma* he feared Zhang was being tortured and that treatment for his diabetes was being withheld.

During the 1980s, Brother Yun ministered several times with Zhang. They once hid from the PSB huddled together all night in a field under freezing rain. They were also at the same meeting on the night Yun was arrested in 1983 and sent to Nanyang Prison.

“In prison we were put in separate cells,” Zhang says in Yun’s autobiography. “But we cried out along the prison corridors, hoping our voices would [encourage] each other.”

Like other house-church leaders, Yun went into hiding after his 1997 escape from Zhengzhou Prison. A few months later, Yun and his wife, Deling, believed God was saying Yun needed to leave China and seek political asylum in Germany. Deling and their two children, Isaac and Yilin, could follow later.

With nowhere safe to hide in Henan—and after frightened hosts in Hubei Province asked him to leave—Yun and his family took refuge with Christians 400 miles away in the coastal province of Shandong. “We all cried and prayed in the Beijing hotel room the night before he flew out,” a member of the Shangdong family who drove Yun to Beijing airport in September 1997 told *Charisma*. “He was about to use a false passport ... so we prayed for protection.”

Airport officials laughed at the glaring discrepancy between Yun’s appearance and the passport photo, but cleared him to board Air China’s nonstop flight to Frankfurt. After in-depth investigations in Germany, Yun received a high-level refugee status and began sharing his testimony in churches.

Yet Yun continued to face opposition. Two years after fleeing to Germany, he learned that a Hong Kong-based ministry leader was accusing him of exploiting Western churches for financial gain.

“In hindsight, this was an ideal time to observe Yun’s life, as he ministered under this tremendous cloak of accusation,” says Dale Hiscock, executive director of AsiaLink Ministries. “Not once did I ever hear one negative comment from Yun. He knew he was under attack and simply trusted God.”

After Yun responded to the accusations, the controversy began to quiet. But several months later, Yun faced the kind of persecution he had always known in China. While he was in Myanmar in 2001, trying to help his family escape to Germany, Yun was arrested, tortured and beaten for seven months in a squalid Yangon prison.

With parasitic worms visibly crawling beneath his skin, Yun sought to share the gospel with other inmates, and many made decisions for Christ. He says it was God’s will for him to be “a seed buried in that prison”—where in a cesspool of disease and unimaginable pain revival began breaking out.

His seven-year prison sentence was reduced to seven months and seven days—roughly the time it takes for a seed of wheat to sprout, Yun says. After his release in September 2001 from his final imprisonment to date, Yun once again faced accusation from fellow Christians.

Led by a Germany-based Vietnamese-Chinese businessman who helped in Yun's 1997 escape from China by giving him a passport, several Chinese church leaders issued an open letter denouncing Yun as a fraud. The group claimed his testimony of supernatural intervention was false, that he exaggerated his influence among China's house churches and that he was exploiting Western Christians.

"I have been challenged many times with this," Yun told *Charisma*, his eyes welling with tears. "But when I'm before the Lord in prayer, the Lord has never allowed me to say anything negative. I have just been blessing them, each one of them, in the name of Jesus."

Hattaway says a group of Chinese house-church leaders investigated the charges against Yun and found his story reliable. Other Christian leaders also have publicly come to Yun's defense.

"I've known Yun very well since the early 1980s," Dennis Balcombe, senior pastor at Revival Christian Church in Hong Kong for almost 40 years, says in an open letter posted at Asia Harvest's website. "I have seen closely his ministry and traveled with him on many occasions [while he was still in] China. He has my total support as a man of God with high integrity, who has in the past and is presently making a great contribution to the kingdom of God."

Bob Fu, president of China Aid Association and a former Chinese prisoner himself, told *Charisma*: "I think Yun is a genuine servant of God who is very sincere and full of passion for the gospel."

Persecution has made Yun “even more fervent and fiery for Jesus,” evangelist Reinhard Bonnke told *Charisma*. “I am sure that he will be among the Lord’s anointed of the next generation, who build the kingdom of God in the toughest places on earth. I appreciate and honor this great servant of God.”

Back to Jerusalem

Today in his ministry worldwide, Yun clings to the calling he received as a teen, to be a witness for the Lord “to the south and the west.” But Yun senses that beyond just sharing his testimony, he also carries a burden.

While still in China, Yun had a powerful encounter in 1995 with Simon Zhao. It was at a meeting where Yun sang an old Chinese hymn, a death-defying anthem to preach the gospel westward, “marking toward Jerusalem.” Through tears, Zhao told Yun he had written the song 50 before.

During the 1940s, Zhao had led a mission called the Northwest Spiritual Movement. The group had its roots in Shandong Province, where a Christians clan called the Jesus Family lived by the slogan “Sacrifice, Abandonment, Poverty, Suffering, Death.”

The vision for both groups was to move the gospel into the regions of western China and beyond. By 1949, Zhao and his missionary band were arrested in a remote area of China. For his radical faith, Zhao endured beatings in a communist labor camp for nearly 40 years.

Yun promised Zhao that he would help carry on that missionary vision, which is today known as Back to Jerusalem. The campaign aims to spread the gospel from China to every Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim nation across the 10/40 Window, a region from West Africa to East Asia.

Yun believes many of China’s Christians, refined in the fires

of persecution, are now ready to lose their lives in reach the lost. "I feel very strongly that the time has already come for the church in China to bring the gospel back to Jerusalem," says Yun, who like others believes the Back to Jerusalem vision could be the "last leg" of fulfilling the Great Commission.

"The greatest change will come in the Middle East not when more soldiers go there to die. It will take messengers of Jesus Christ proclaiming the gospel. When they start to die, real change will take place."

Pelle Karlsson, president of Back to Jerusalem Inc, an organization with which Yun is affiliated, believes Yun's testimony is "an alarm clock to the church in the West, off and sleeping. It calls the church back to that deeper level of commitment—to take the cross for real."

Ironically it was China that for centuries was thought to be sleeping. Napoleon Bonaparte, the French emperor who was conquering Europe while missionary Robert Morrison was sailing for China, once said: "Let China sleep. For when she wakes, she will shake the world."

Many would say it is a prophecy now being fulfilled in China's powerful economy. But others believe a spiritual force is emerging in China—an underground church poised to evangelize the world. "The vision the Lord has given the Chinese church is to bring Jesus to every people group—from the Great Wall of China to the Eastern Wall of Jerusalem," Yun says.

It may not be the kind of awakening Napoleon once envisioned. But today, in clandestine house churches across China, a revival generation is stirring.

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