

China: Hiding From the Dragon

Imprisonment and torture have not stopped Christianity in China. Thanks to cellphones, missionary zeal and New Testament-style miracles, evangelists are spreading the gospel faster than anyone can calculate.

Just days after the Tienanmen Square massacre in Beijing in 1989, Sister Peng* was delivering a small shipment of freshly printed Bibles to unregistered church leaders when police officers arrested her after she got off a train from Guangzhou. She was traveling to Henan Province, which still serves as ground zero for a Christian revival that has been thriving in China since the 1970s. Peng was about to experience persecution for the first time.

Officers of China's infamous national police cadre, the PSB, threw her in a dirty detention cell. Assuming that she was an anti-government activist, they used an electric prod to make her confess to her "crimes." She stayed in solitary confinement for eight months and was not allowed to see her family.

She was wearing pants and a T-shirt when she was arrested in the summer, so when winter arrived she shivered on a bare concrete floor. Prison guards offered no coats, blankets or feminine hygiene supplies—only watery soup at mealtimes. "For eight months I had no contact with anyone. I just ate soup in my cell," Peng told Charisma during a secret meeting of Christian leaders held earlier this year. "It is really God's mercy that He fed me and kept me warm."

Peng was later transferred to a women's prison, where she stayed for two lonely years. The PSB sometimes made her stand for long periods—once for 11 hours—in a cruel attempt to obtain information about the underground church. But Peng never betrayed her Christian colleagues. While her friends

outside the prison were busy planting churches and delivering Bibles, she led 32 female inmates to Christ from her cell.

That's the way it works in China. Here, even hard-line communists apparently cannot imprison the Word of God.

To Peng, followers of Jesus somehow seem to remain in control in spite of the government's constant crackdown on unauthorized religious groups. "Every time the PSB would ask me something, the Lord would give me what to say," she added. "I would start asking them questions instead, and it would seem that I was in charge of the conversation."

Peng's story has been repeated thousands of times. Hundreds of pastors and evangelists are jailed in China today, but for every one locked up in a cold prison cell there are hundreds more brave, self-supported ministers who elude the watchful eye of the PSB. They worship in homes (although rural groups actually stage outdoor evangelistic meetings), they deliver contraband shipments of Bibles and Sunday school materials smuggled in by foreigners, and they win converts at the rate of 25,000 per day.

Fugitives for God

Peng is 40 now, and she has been running from her captors since she began evangelizing China in 1976 at age 16. She entered full-time ministry in 1981 and has spent more than four years in prison since then. Although she has a husband and a 6-year-old daughter, she must visit them at night to avoid being arrested by the PSB. Government officials are particularly upset because she insists on reaching teenagers—who are forbidden by Chinese law to learn about Christianity.

When Peng began planting house churches in the 1970s (the typical evangelist in China today is a woman between the ages of 18 and 22), rural areas were experiencing a "season of miracles" that continued into the next decade, she said. "We

didn't have Bibles. We didn't have training. There were no foreign missionaries," Peng remembers. "But we started one new house church every day. We just went from village to village praying for the sick—and most accepted the Lord quickly."

After the miracles spread, a wave of persecution began in 1983—and most of Peng's colleagues found themselves behind bars. Among them was the leader of her church movement, Mr. Shi*, 50, who has been in prison four times. He has been tortured with electric prods and beaten with metal bars and bayonets. Yet today he leads a network of illegal "house churches" that represents at least 10 million believers, and he directs his ministry by relying on prayer, cell phones and secret strategy sessions. He changes his phone often to elude detection.

"Even while I am talking with you we are starting churches," Mr. Shi told Charisma. "The work of God's kingdom is so fast. We have gone through a lot of suffering, but the suffering has turned to great joy."

Leaders representing approximately 35 million underground Christians met in a secret location in January to be trained in basic pastoral skills by representatives from a North Carolina-based ministry. Leaders came from all over China—even from far western provinces—and shared meals together for six days of worship, prayer and teaching.

Every leader Charisma interviewed said he or she had spent some time in prison. "I was beaten, slapped, kicked and handcuffed. I was like a slave," said Sister Yi*, 35, one of 10 top leaders of a 4 million-member house church movement. She has been in and out of prison four times.

"I was made to kneel down for long periods, and sometimes I became unconscious," she says. "We did hard labor 16 hours a day. When I read about how the slaves of ancient Rome were treated, I realized I was treated the same way."

Brother Wu*, 47, was jailed twice in the 1980s and again in 1991. He says his worst treatment was in Henan Province, where he was beaten with iron bars and belts. "They beat me so bad I was blue," Wu remembers. "I could not lay down or sit. They hit our shins and ankles with iron rods and also made us carry bricks all day."

Chinese prisons are infamous for their meager rations. Wu was given only two bowls of soup a day. Brother Xing, who was jailed in 1991, often found worms at the bottom of his bowl. "I got very dizzy because we were not allowed to eat much—only three bowls of rice soup a day," he said.

Despite horrific conditions, many of these living martyrs say God often performed miracles to protect them—or even free them. Back in the 1970s, during Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution, an elderly pastor named Brother Xiu* had to sleep in a bare cell with a concrete floor and no toilet for eight months. He developed a skin disease as a result of living in filth. Later, when he and 100 other Christians were being held in a detention center in the city of Fangcheng, in Hunan Province, the group began singing praise songs when suddenly, he says, "the door opened by itself, and we escaped."

Brother Zhao*, 50, a former Buddhist, was released from his most recent prison stay in early January after 16 months. During the time he was incarcerated, his colleagues started more than a dozen Bible training schools and sent hundreds of church planters into China's major cities where the gospel has not enjoyed as much success as in rural areas. Though Zhao has suffered much, he smiles broadly when he is asked about the future of the Chinese church.

"This is the day we have longed for. I believe we will see our nation Christianized," he said.

In his most recent clash with the PSB, Brother Zhao was arrested because he and three other prominent house church

leaders released a declaration demanding that the Chinese government release all unregistered Christians from prisons and labor camps, stop persecuting and fining believers, stop calling house churches “cults,” and acknowledge “God’s great power.” The document, called A United Appeal and released in August 1998, represents the boldest step yet for the underground church—which now is estimated to include as many as 80 million Christians. Zhao later mailed a copy of the document to China’s president, Jiang Zemin.

“The enemy began to attack us severely in 1996,” Zhao said, noting that four of his top leaders were arrested that year. “The government made it a goal to wipe us out. They say we are too big and too well-organized so they feel threatened. They think the house churches are against the government, but we teach Christians to obey the government. They don’t understand that.”

Repeating the Book of Acts

China’s Christians certainly have tasted New Testament-style persecution, but they have also witnessed New Testament-style miracles. The two, it seems, go hand in hand. In China, adversity is the breeding ground for spiritual revival.

When Charisma asked a group of church leaders to describe their most memorable miracle, most found it difficult to choose an incident to describe.

“There are so many,” one pastor said, laughing. Brother Xiu said he was most astounded in 1985 when an infant was raised from the dead after he preached to a group of 70 villagers in Shangxi. “The baby began to cry, and after that everyone wanted to become a Christian,” he said. A new church was formed immediately as a result of that miracle.

Brother Wu said a girl in Hubei Province was raised from the dead in 1992 after committing suicide by drinking poison. Brother Zing* from Anhui Province said dozens of people were

healed of deafness and lameness two years ago in the city of Mongchung. "But we have had to limit these outdoor meetings lately," Zing said, "because the government's crackdown has affected all churches."

Indeed, there is evidence that a new wave of government oppression has been unleashed in China. In December 2000, just prior to the house church leaders' conference, dozens of unregistered churches in the eastern coastal city of Wenzhou were bulldozed, padlocked or confiscated and turned into museums. Also, a 21-year-old man, Liu Hai Tao from Jiaozuo in Henan Province, died in prison last fall. International human rights organizations say he was denied medical attention.

No one knows how many Chinese Christians are currently in prison. A spokesperson for the Washington, Freedom House said estimates range from a thousand to "tens of thousands," but figures are impossible to obtain. Chinese believers have refused to align themselves with the government-controlled Three Self Church—which in most cases does not allow its members to evangelize, talk about healing or minister to anyone under age 18.

But the government's attempts to squelch the church often backfire. Brother Shi, who is considered an apostle in the Chinese house church movement, says God supernaturally paralyzed the chief of police in 1993 in Xinye County, in Henan Province. The story sounds like something from the book of Acts.

"We were having an outdoor crusade in a sports stadium, and there were so many people coming that the streets were blocked," Brother Shi explained. "When the sheriff arrived, he was very angry. He pointed at us, and he commanded his officers to arrest us. But suddenly his arm was stuck, and his feet could not move. He was like a statue!

"His officers tried to put him in his car, but it was

difficult because his arm was sticking out. Before they drove him away, he sent word to us that he wanted us to visit him at his office after the meetings. When we arrived there that afternoon, he was still paralyzed. He asked us to pray for him, and he told us: 'I want to become a Christian. Please give me a Bible.' When we prayed for him he was finally able to move his arm and his feet!"

Brother Shi smiled as he explained how the sheriff's attempt to shut down the meeting in Xinye actually helped spread the gospel. "In one year, 15,000 were added to the church in that area," Shi said. "It created an incredible disruption because so many were saved." In nearby Zhouko County, hundreds more were saved after three teen-age boys were paralyzed in a similar way after they began taunting some evangelists.

"The leader of our meetings pointed to the boys and said, 'Lord, bind them!' Suddenly the boys could not move," Shi said. "Their friends began to offer us cigarettes if we would free them. They thought we were using magic, but we explained to them that it was the power of God."

One thing is certain: Neither teen-age hecklers nor communist storm troopers have quenched the zeal of China's underground church. The harder the government presses in on the Christians, the more passionate they become about spreading their faith inside and outside the world's most populous nation.

"Although we have gone through a lot of trials and attacks, greater revival is coming. The future of the Chinese church is glorious," said Brother Zing, who at age 37 represents a new generation of visionary leaders within the underground movement. Imprisoned twice now, Zing's passion is to take the gospel to the more than 50 ethnic minority groups in China. He has sent church-planters to Nepal and Tibet—where sword-wielding Buddhists attacked his team in 1997.

Zing believes this latest wave of persecution is due to Beijing's fear of Falun Gong, a fast-growing Chinese cult that has attracted a worldwide following. But he believes he will see a day when the house churches will send evangelists around the world. "We have had 100 years of suffering, but that has brought wisdom," Zing said. "There will come a day when the Chinese government will open the door and give us real freedom."

Sister Peng shares that optimistic view. In fact, she is already preparing Chinese teen-agers to be part of a missionary army. "I used to think that missionaries going from China would not happen until after I die, but God has shown me that it will soon be time," she said. "I want to raise up 700 missionaries. God is going to raise up apostolic teams throughout China. It's our time to go to the world."

How You Can Help China's Unregistered Church

House church leaders say their most urgent need is ministry training-to prevent false teaching.

Hundreds of Chinese pastors are arrested every year in China, but persecution is not the most serious problem Christians face in this country. When Charisma asked a group of house church leaders what they consider their toughest challenge, they all agreed it is heresy.

Just like in New Testament times, young churches in China are bombarded by strange doctrines that split congregations. The house church movement—which has grown to an estimated 80 million people—has been fragmented by unbiblical beliefs or practices.

One group often referred to as "the Shouters" follow a Taiwanese teacher who claims that his movement is the only true church. Some of his members have recently repented of

promoting false doctrines and are modifying their theology. Another isolationist group known as the Rebirth Church (also called “the Crying Movement” because of a teaching that insists on tears to prove true devotion to Christ), is beginning to cooperate with other house churches after years of separatism.

A pseudo-Christian cult known as Eastern Lightning is spreading false doctrines among churches that are led by naive pastors who have scanty theological training. Members of the cult pretend to be true believers for a while, but they gradually introduce a bizarre teaching about a newly incarnated female Christ who demands to be worshiped—or else.

“Eastern Lightning is very deceptive. They react violently if you refuse to believe them. They have even cut people’s ears off,” said Brother Shi*, leader of a 10 million-member house church movement in Henan Province.

Shi and his colleagues say the only way to fight this onslaught of heresy is to increase the level of training for their pastors, and to provide more Bibles and discipleship materials for lay members. He estimates that only half of China’s house church members own a Bible.

“We need 7 million Bibles a year,” he added. “The need is always greater than the supply.”

That need confuses Christians in the West—who are often told that China’s state-sanctioned Three Self Church prints large quantities of Bibles at the Amity Press in Nanjing. But the Bibles printed in China are distributed primarily to the Three Self churches, leaving unregistered groups dependent on Bibles smuggled in by foreigners.

Many U.S. organizations today are meeting the demand for Scriptures in Chinese languages. One North Carolina ministry, however, has taken the need for training seriously by sponsoring intensive, monthlong pastoral schools in Chinese

cities. The events require high-level security to avoid arrests.

“Everything we do is stealth,” said a co-founder of the training schools, who requested anonymity. “The leaders of these movements are aggressively planting new churches every day in ways we cannot imagine. They want to go into the cities. They want to go into Muslim countries. They have the passion and the calling. The best way we can help them is by coming alongside to serve: teaching them how to pastor, how to provide counseling and how to develop youth and children’s ministries.”

Charisma is raising funds for the Chinese church. Every \$100 gift will pay for a Chinese pastor’s travel, lodging, meals and training for one month. A gift of \$50 will support a full-time evangelist for one month. A \$25 gift will provide a pastor with five Bibles. Tax-deductible gifts can be made payable to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL, 32795-2248. Please note on the check that the gift is for “China House Church Project.”