

The Changing Face of China's Church

Tony Lambert

The church in China does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is experiencing unprecedented change that mirrors the rapid pace of change in society at large. Caught up in this vortex, the question is, "Can the church keep up and adapt itself for effective witness in 21st century China?"

A Rapidly Changing Society

While societal changes are many, there are several that wield great influence. Urbanization is one that is reflected in the ratio of rural to urban dwellers which will soon be 60 to 40 compared with 80 to 20 just a few years ago. The result is massive dislocation that includes a "floating population" of seasonal and permanent migrants numbering in the tens of millions. Economic development, which under Deng Xiaoping had been rapid for two decades, now seems to be slowing due to the economic meltdown in Southeast Asia. China has survived but faces serious problems with inefficient State-controlled industries. Millions are becoming unemployed and the government fears the social unrest that is on the increase.

Loosening of control at the grass-roots level has led to a fragmentation of society allowing much greater freedom in travel, but also resulting in a huge increase in crime, drug-use, the spread of AIDS and other evils. While civil society is vastly freer now than when under Mao, it has also experienced a downside. The ideological vacuum that came with the collapse of Maoism as a pseudofaith has led to a "crisis of faith" in Marxism and a great resurgence of religion, especially Christianity, Buddhism, folk-religion and new cults. The spread of materialism and, in some cases particularly with the urban youth, hedonism and nihilism as well, causes young people to seek out business opportunities and strive to "get ahead". All this presents a challenge to the church, which must adapt to a rapidly changing environment while remaining true to the eternal message of Christ.

The Changing Face of the Church

Government policy towards religion and the church. This policy, granting limited authority under the Communist Party leadership, was codified in 1982 in Document 19. Ten years ago there was hope for radical change and perhaps even the dismantling of repressive structures of control; however, the events in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989 ended it. Since then, government policy at central and local levels has sought to restrict and repress all unregistered religious activities. Policy documents have all become more detailed, compared to those issued in the '80s, as authorities seek to close loopholes. The last few years have seen a serious increase in repres-



In 1985 the registered church in Jiuquan, Gansu rented an old cottage in the suburbs for its meetings; in 1989 it built a small church; in 1993 it added a hall; in 1996 it tore down the entire building and built a large church with a four-story tower.

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A number of months ago, while visiting in south China, I met young leaders of house churches, each with a mobile phone.

●
While searching for a member of a house church that I intended to visit while in China, I was told, "Oh, she's emigrated to Canada!"

sion of unregistered house churches in many areas, especially in Henan, Anhui and Jiangsu. However, this policy has become more and more out of touch with reality, as local officials observe the positive effects of Christianity and as society, in general, loosens up, allowing for greater freedom for Christians in spite of government policy. Over the long term, something will have to "give."

The Three Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council. The retirement of Bishop Ding a couple of years ago has allowed the TSPM/CCC to fall into the hands of the older TSPM leaders from the '40s and '50s with their liberal theology. This is a step backwards. However, a younger generation of TSPM/CCC graduates, many of whom are more open and genuinely evangelical, is coming to the

TSPM has provided the legal framework for this, it should not be forgotten that these achievements owe far more to millions of committed Christians all over China using meager resources and contributing in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

I believe the TSPM affiliated churches have been influenced by the Spirit of revival just as the house churches have, providing a strong counter-current to the control and limitation imposed by the authorities. Churches and pastors vary. In some, the Holy Spirit has the upper hand and much is being accomplished for the Lord; in others, the dead hand of the State and formalism crush the church.

The house-churches. The house church movement has grown, diversified and matured in recent years. Several "streams" have appeared, some

TSPM and restrictions have been placed upon them. Many other churches have vigorously resisted registration on the theological grounds that Christ is the Head of the church. They are prepared to go underground again and risk persecution rather than allow the State or the TSPM to interfere in church affairs. There are cases where churches appear to have been allowed to register with the government without accepting TSPM control; however, this is unusual. In general, the situation differs by area and in many areas there has been a significant tightening in recent years.

While theological differences have emerged on some issues, in most cases these reflect the vigorous growth of the church and its concern for biblical truth but, on occasion, are indications of personal rivalries among strong leaders. Overall, there has been a significant advance in the maturity of the house church movement. This was expressed in August 1998 as several of the largest groupings issued a joint statement appealing for dialogue with the government, an end to persecution and the release of Christian prisoners. The tone was irenic with no denunciation of either the government or TSPM. This maturity was also reflected in a joint "Confession of Faith" which was issued a few months later to show the world that house churches are not cults (as is often claimed by the authorities and TSPM). The confession very clearly showed that mainline house churches are biblical evangelicals with a high orthodox view of the Bible, the Trinity and the person of Christ. For the most part, they hold to traditional premillennial eschatology and are open to charismatic gifts while

There has been a significant advance in the maturity of the house church movement.

fore. In the long term, the future of the TSPM/CCC is problematic, as its fifties-engendered control system is increasingly anachronistic and deeply resented by many Chinese Christians including many TSPM pastors.

The TSPM/CCC churches have now had twenty years of relative freedom during which an impressive infrastructure has been built. According to the most recent TSPM statistics, there are 13,000 churches, 35,000 registered meeting-points, 20 seminaries and over 20 million Bibles that have been legally printed in the country. While the

claiming millions of members. In some areas the house churches have their own buildings and have functioned semi-openly. In recent years, particularly the last three, the issue of registration has come to the fore and has caused division. Some house churches have registered, seeing government recognition as the only way to continue effective ministry. In some cases they have been allowed to carry on unhindered while in others they have been bitterly disappointed. Their leaders have been dismissed and replaced by those acceptable to the

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avoiding extremism. The response of the authorities in late '98 and early '99 was to instigate several mass arrests of house church Christians in Henan—an indication that they are unwilling to stop repression and engage in dialogue. However, for the first time, the house churches gained the initiative and won positive international publicity.

The new generations. There is no more stark contrast than that between generations in China. We often forget that leaders today in their eighties and nineties were born prior to 1911 in imperial times when the pigtail was still obligatory and the 2,000 year-old Confucian examination system still held sway. Older leaders, who suffered during the fifties and the Cultural Revolution are still highly respected throughout the Chinese church. While the

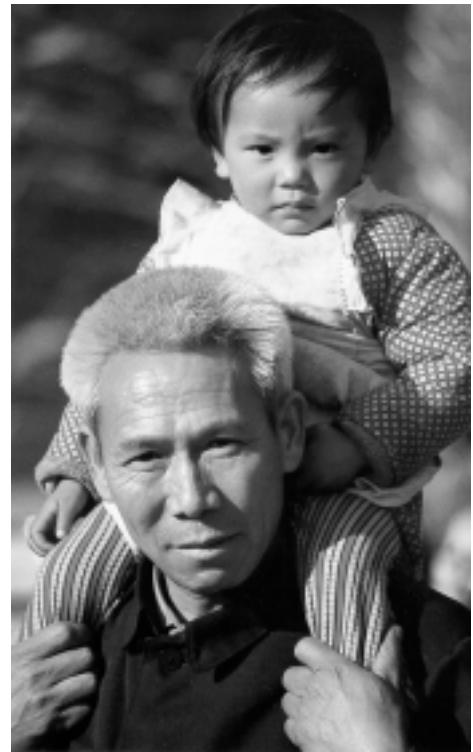
leaders is emerging across China in both house churches and within the TSPM.

The rural/urban divide. Some areas of China are still extremely backward. Recently I visited Miao villages in south China where people were living in hovels more like cowsheds than homes. About 50 million people are still classified by the government as living in extreme poverty (the UN believes the real figure is over 200 million). Probably over 70% of the church is comprised of peasants—many of them caught in the poverty trap. A huge number of people in the countryside are either fully or seasonally unemployed. Millions head for the cities in an unending “blind tide.” The Three Gorges Dam project alone is uprooting about two million people, many of whom are being thrown into

faced with a vast field for practical Christian ministry such as drug rehabilitation, ministry to AIDS sufferers, serving in orphanages and work with the blind, mentally or physically handicapped to name a few.

Continuing church growth. The last 25 years have seen the greatest growth of the church since Pentecost—in Mainland China! The national TSPM leadership admits to 13 to 15 million believers, but provincial TSPM leaders have issued figures totaling nearly 18 million. This indicates 18-fold growth

Ken Benintendi



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death of Wang Mingdao in 1990 marked the end of an era, those who suffered and survived passed on a priceless heritage of biblical truth and living testimony that ensured the survival and revival of the church in the seventies and eighties.

Nevertheless, a whole middle generation is often now missing. Today, a much younger generation in their twenties and thirties is emerging. In the cities, the more affluent ones sport mobile phones and wear designer jeans. These Christians “knew not Mao”; for them the Cultural Revolution is only history. The first two decades of the 21st century will similarly see the emergence of another young generation who “knew not Deng.” Between the older and younger leaders a tension exists. Under the TSPM system many promising theological graduates return to provincial cities only to find themselves barred from effective spiritual ministry. Still, despite many hindrances, a keen younger generation of

dire poverty.

All these factors impact the church. Promising young leaders are forced by poverty to go to the cities to become taxi drivers or entrepreneurs; many have been forced to leave full-time or part-time ministry in the struggle to survive. Many rural churches are barely able to function; the poverty of their members is unbelievable by our standards.

In the cities, mass unemployment now looms and is already endemic in some regions. Some churches are reaching out to the poor in their midst by conducting literacy classes. Others are holding clinics. Under the TSPM system, it now seems that in many areas churches may engage in a much broader scope of social action. In some areas political constraints still restrict such initiatives but, in general, the situation is opening up. The likelihood that social conditions will continue to deteriorate as the economic recession bites means that churches are

over the last three decades. However, the real figure is probably closer to 50 million.¹ This growth has many underlying reasons, but the bottom line is that many areas in China are experiencing a genuine revival. In Lanzhou I witnessed 250 people being baptized. In Liaoning I saw hundreds gathering at 6 a.m. in the pitch dark to prepare for an 8 a.m. service that was packed with 1,000 worshippers. The pastor told me that in 1995, one thousand people had been saved and added to his congregation! This is genuine revival.

Growth brings its own problems—

not the least of which are the lack of trained leadership and the inroads of false teaching. In Jiangsu province the ratio of registered pastors to Christians is 1 to 10,000, while in Henan it is 1 to 50,000 and in Anhui only 1 to 60,000!¹² The 1,200 theological students in seminary training at any one time are only a tiny drop in the ocean. Large numbers of part-time workers are trained during the agricultural slack seasons, but there is a chronic lack of trained leadership. House churches have their own training programs, some excellent and others very poor. Many overseas Christians are now involved in leadership training, a strategic and vital area for reinforcement that requires careful strategy, much field work, cooperation and humility.

The rise of cults. Another downside of growth is the spread of heresy. Since the "Shouters" became active in the early 80s, the Chinese church has been bedeviled by an increasing number of cults, many of them homegrown.

There are the Lingling, *Beiliwang* (Established King), Lightning from the East, Cold Water, Disciples, Wilderness Sect as well as others. We must not overlook the fact that Buddhism, Daoism, folk-religion and secret societies are again flourishing in China, providing a spawning ground for syncretistic cults on the fringes of orthodox Christianity.

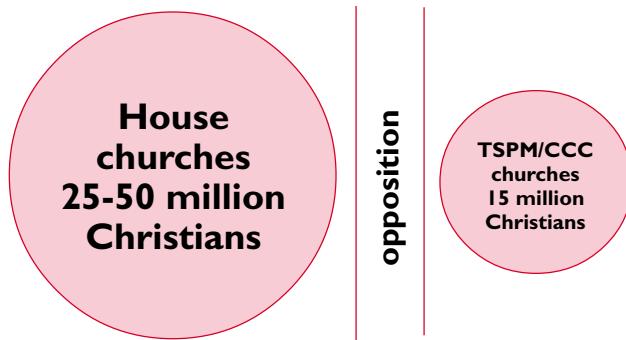
How widespread is the problem? Recently government researchers estimated that up to 100,000 people had been affected by the Disciples in Guizhou province. The total number of Shouters has been estimated at 250,000. Based on such figures, I guesstimate that between 5% and 10% of China's "Christians" may be members of cultic groups. The situation is serious but not yet chronic. Efforts are being made to circulate books and booklets against the cults by both the CCC and the house churches, but materials are inadequate. Much more could be done by providing literature, tapes and broadcasts to support our

brothers and sisters in their spiritual warfare against deception.

Another serious aspect of the cult phenomenon is the attitude of the authorities and the TSPM. Since cults are seen as subversive to society and the State, they are targets for suppression. The strange, hybrid alliance of the TSPM with the Communist authorities as an official "State church" can be traced back to longstanding Confucian attitudes towards heterodoxy in Imperial times. In the case of Christianity, the devastation caused in the 1850s by the Taiping Rebellion has not been forgotten. A weird, but potent blend of Old Testament religion with folk-religion provided the fanatical impulse behind a political movement that led to 20 million people being killed. The authorities today have lost their former tight control of the countryside and are very nervous that secret societies and cults might become a focus for political subversion. The unexpected mass demonstrations in the center of Beijing in April 1999 by the *Falungong* cult and

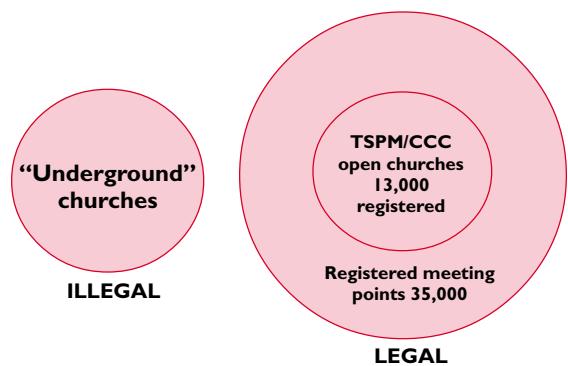
Models of the Church in China

Model 1: As Frequently Viewed by Those Outside China



The house churches are seen as totally separate from the TSPM/CCC churches and the two groups as opposing each other. This model, however, is too simplistic. It ignores the wide diversity within the church and the fact that many churches are "in the middle". While it contains an element of truth, the reality is far more complex.

Model 2: As Viewed by the TSPM/CCC



The TSPM/CCC churches or registered churches are seen as legal while the house churches are seen as unregistered, underground illegal elements. "Anti-China" elements from overseas are seen as controlling them. This view is frequently propagated in the West. However, it ignores the reality of many independent house churches.

its subsequent repression are further proof of the government's fear of sectarian movements. In ignorance, or sometimes deliberately, central and local authorities target orthodox evangelical unregistered Christians for arrest, fines and other harassment despite their protestations of orthodoxy and non-involvement in politics. They need our prayers.

The impact of the West. When I first went to Beijing in 1973, there was no advertising; rather billboards with quotes from Mao decorated every street corner. Now, McDonalds and KFC have invaded every major city and the trappings of Westernization are seen everywhere. With capitalism now condoned, Western materialism, colliding with the innate propensity of the Chinese to make money, produces a heady—and in some cases ugly—mix. We may ask, "What is to be done?" in the face of such enormous needs and problems along with opportunities for the gospel. The danger is that we shall

rush in with plenty of enthusiasm, and perhaps plenty of money, and wreak havoc with the best of intentions. Let us stand back and try to view the overall situation impassively.

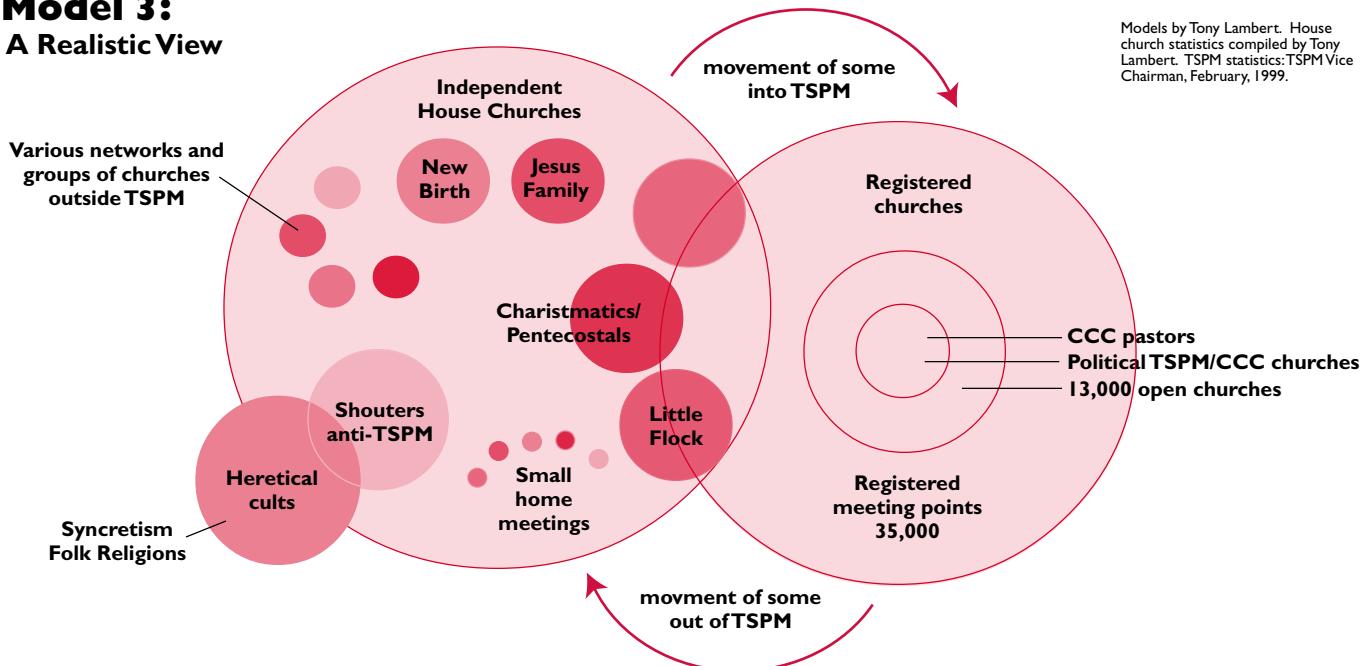
The revival of the last three decades has been a work of God through a totally indigenous movement. The missionaries had been expelled by 1952. Radio and literature work had significant impact beginning in the late 70s, but otherwise, until recently, Western input and impact was minimal. We must face the fact that God, through His suffering people, raised up to Himself a glorious church without our programs, money or involvement—but not apart from our prayers.

Now, however, the situation is significantly different. Overseas involvement is growing all the time—not just from North America, but from South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Europe, Australia and many other countries. In China, the "Three Self" principles are being frayed very thin as churches write letters thinly disguising their begging for

funds to help build bigger buildings (no doubt very much needed for expanding congregations). House churches are also faced with great temptations when lavish overseas donors dangle vast sums of money in front of them. The great problem for well-meaning Christian donors contributing overseas is accountability. We must face the unpalatable truth that China today is riddled with corruption.

Bishop Ding, prior to his retirement, was greatly worried by the possibility of the resurgence within China of denominationalism financially supported by overseas denominations and missions.³ Recently I met with young rural house church leaders who struck me as godly, serious individuals effective in ministry. One told me he was working with a network of 20,000 Christians, yet I was told later that often they did not have enough money for food. What message does Western Christian affluence send to poverty-stricken Christians and non-Christians? What temptations does it expose them to?

Model 3: A Realistic View



The reality is quite complex. There is a movement of some house churches into the TSPM and more recently, a small movement of some churches out of the TSPM. Some "house" churches have registered but have not joined the TSPM. Among the churches outside the TSPM are various networks and groups of churches. Some groups espouse heterodox elements and through syncretism become cultic.

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The much vaunted "unity" under the TSPM/CCC is, in fact, quite fragile. We are on the brink of again imposing a cultural and economic imperialism on the church in China, however well meaning we might be. Handouts are not the way forward. In the old days, when the CIM sought to establish self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating churches in poor rural and tribal areas, the temptation to donate a few dollars to aid the church or its pastor was overwhelming—but was resisted. Rather, believers were encour-

Schools, the training of Sunday School and youth workers, materials for the illiterate and semi-literate, apologetic books for students and intellectuals and materials in "minority" languages. Too many groups want "their" program or materials translated into Chinese at vast expense because they worked elsewhere in the world, but they do not consider their cultural relevance or that similar materials, produced by other Christian organizations, may be in existence. This is egotism—not evangelism!

We need to work with Christians

Hans Wilhelm



God has seen fit to raise up a vital church in China.

Within the next few years, Mainland Chinese evangelicals will number more than those in the United States.

aged to give sacrificially. Today, it is those same churches that have often become the core of the recent spiritual revival. There is a hard lesson here. God has blessed and honored the suffering and self-sacrifice of His people in China. Now materialism is sweeping the country. Will we, who are ourselves saturated in materialism, unthinkingly further the process and so destroy the independence and very spirituality of the people we wish to aid?

Help from overseas Christians will continue to grow—it is inevitable. It is our task, then, to channel funds and aid in a responsible way that ensures accountability. Much more cooperation and coordination is needed to target increasingly specialized areas of need such as materials for Sunday

within China wherever possible as well as with long-standing organizations based in Hong Kong and Taiwan that have great experience in China ministry. We also need to consider the strong emerging church among the Mainland Chinese diaspora in North America and elsewhere. This body is producing strong leaders on the cutting edge of intellectual trends in China and is beginning to produce first-class materials for witness to Chinese intellectuals and scholars.

Final Thoughts

God has seen fit to raise up a vital church in China. Within the next few years, if not already, Mainland Chinese evangelicals will number more than those in the United States and there-

fore comprise the largest national evangelical church in the world. It is a sobering and encouraging thought that half a century of persecution, repression, harassment and discrimination, far from destroying the church, have seen it grow to perhaps fifty times the size it was on the eve of the Communist victory in 1949. This church is largely biblical and evangelical. I have not touched on specific theological issues, but here would simply point out that while much mainline denominational Christianity in the West has sunk largely into apostasy, and evangelicalism has been increasingly marginalized, in China, zealous and costly adherence to the biblical gospel has resulted in what is probably the greatest revival and church growth in church history.

What have we to learn from their experience and spirituality? What have they to contribute to world evangelism? Could it be that Chinese Mainland Christians harnessed with the affluent and theologically trained overseas Chinese Christian churches will provide the spiritual renewal and impetus for a major surge in worldwide evangelism in the 21st century? We are privileged as we enter the new millennium to learn more of Christ through our Chinese brothers and sisters, to serve them, and to help them fulfill the Great Commission.

ENDNOTES

1. Lambert has published detailed statistics in his new book, *China's Christian Millions: The Costly Revival*. See the book review in this issue. Ed.

2. Based on TSPM figures.

3. I share those concerns, perhaps for somewhat different reasons. I recommend Jonathan Bonk's book *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Orbis, 1994).

Tony Lambert is the director of China research for OMF International and the author of *China's Christian Millions*. This article is taken from an address given at a China briefing in April, 1999 in Tucson, AZ.

Putting Christianity on the Map —for Chinese Intellectuals

Samuel Ling

As China continues her journey toward modernity and postmodernity, many forces are competing to shape the 21st Century Chinese mind. Christians in the West do well to take note of the rise of indigenous religions (as well as novel forms such as *Falungong*); the prevalence of a Western-influenced, materialistic lifestyle based on the pursuit of money; a native, anti-foreign and anti-American nationalism; and the influence of the media in the lives of 1.3 billion Chinese. In this cacophony of voices, we must not forget those writers, teachers and thinkers generally classified as "intellectuals" (*zhishi fenzi*). They, too, are trying to shape Chinese thought and society. Some of them, in fact, are engaged in the development of Christian theology in Chinese context (*hanyu shenxue*), albeit in a form seldom noticed and recognized by theologians in the West.

Since the death of Mao, Chinese academicians in the fields of literature, history, philosophy and the social sciences have attempted to re-build their theoretical foundation in a more open context. Since "philosophy" and "metaphysics" were buzz words associated with Marxist-Maoist orthodoxy, and China in the 1980s had not yet totally rejected Marxist ideology, theoretical inquiries in art and literature became arenas where one could discuss "ontological" issues with relatively more freedom. One may discuss questions which are "ontological" (which is desirable) without being "metaphysical" (not desirable).

Liu Xiaofeng is one "Cultural Christian" seeking to find some form of "ontology" for life, through his inquiry into aesthetic and literary theory. His search for the "home of existence" led him to Christian theology. Today, Liu's direct and indirect efforts in writing, translating, and editing have resulted

in the publication of dozens of books on "Christian thought," "Christian theory" and "Christian culture" through China's academic press. Christianity now has a presence and a spokesperson in China's intellectual circles through these "Cultural Christians."

Some definitions are in order here. Many Chinese professors of philosophy, foreign languages, literature, art, history and social sciences have taken an interest in Christianity as an academic subject of research. These are accurately called "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity" by Edwin Hui of Regent College. Within this larger group, a few have taken a per-

with a bachelor's degree. He then went to Beijing University in 1982, studied aesthetics and received his Master of Philosophy in 1984. In 1985, Liu went to Shenzhen University (just north of Hong Kong) and taught in the Chinese literature department. In 1989, he began his doctoral studies in systematic theology under Professor Heinrich Ott in Basel, Switzerland, and received his Doctor of Theology. Liu is presently academic director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies on Tao Fong Shan, in Shatin, Hong Kong. He is also an honorary research fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is adjunct professor at Beijing

**Christianity now has a presence and a spokesperson
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"Cultural Christians."**

sonal (but unconventional) step of faith in Christ. These are "Cultural Christians." They do not identify with any church nor do they attend church. They are, however, promoting Christian ideas and values in the Chinese academic context. Their goal is to make Christianity (understood in their own way) a visible force in China's search for a new social and intellectual order in the 21st Century. Liu Xiaofeng is the most visible and most prolific "Cultural Christian."

Born in 1956 in Chongqing, Liu Xiaofeng studied Chinese classical poetry with his father. Belonging to the "Cultural Revolution" generation, he was assigned to the countryside after high school graduation. In 1978, when university entrance examinations were resumed in China, Liu was admitted to the Sichuan College of Foreign Languages. He studied in the French and German departments, and graduated

University's Institute for Comparative Literature and visiting professor in the Chinese department of People's University in Beijing.

Liu has authored five works. The first was *Romanticism, Philosophy and Poetry: Explorations on the Poeticizing of Philosophy*.¹ He continued his search for the ground (or "home") of existence in his second book: *Salvation and Freedom*. He compiled a series of articles written for *Reading* magazine in the volume, *Toward the Truth on the Cross: Introduction to Twentieth Century Christian Theology*. More recently he has written *Introduction to Social Theory on Modernity: Modernity and Modern China* and *The Heavy Flesh: Narrative for an Ethic for Modernity*.

Liu has also published collections of shorter pieces and has sat on numerous editing committees which have produced monumental series of volumes introducing Western thought and Christian theology to China. Signifi-

cant titles include *The History of Christian Thought and Scholarship Treasury*, *The Contemporary Continental European Religious Thought Series*, *The Best of Twentieth-Century Russian Spiritual Philosophy Series* and *Modern Society and Man: A Series of Translations of Famous Works*. He has written for, or edited journals such as *Christian Culture Review*, *Christian Culture Journal*, and *Logos and Pneuma: Chinese Theology Review*.

Why should Christians care about

We in the West need to take note that it is often in the fields of art and literature that Chinese thinkers are taking the lead to shape China's future—not necessarily in philosophy. What does the Church of Jesus Christ have to say about freedom? Do we dare to make the distinction between the autonomous human mind and spirit, declaring one's independence from God his Creator, on the one hand, and true freedom to live for the glory of God in

affiliation, are promoting Christianity in China. We can find few parallels in church history.² We must come to terms with this unique development, whether we like it or not! Shall we dig into Scripture and church history to find clues on the proper mode of response?

Fifth, the key to understanding Liu's intellectual inquiry is to feel the pain and anxiety of contemporary Chinese intellectuals as they seek to fill an ideological vacuum and shape China's social, spiritual and moral order for the future. An understanding of modern Chinese intellectual history, especially since the May Fourth Movement (1915-1927), will aid in this. A review of existentialism and its impact on Protestant theology (through the writings of Barth, Brunner, and Heidegger) will definitely help us understand the Chinese plight. A biblical evaluation needs to be made on both the existential and contemporary Protestant response to man's search for a "home."

How will Christians respond to "Cultural Christians?" First, with an earnest attempt at understanding. Second, with friendship, dialogue, and well-defined collaboration. Third, by providing a biblical response which is sensitive to the Chinese context.

ENDNOTES

1. Liu's works are written in Chinese. These titles have been translated for this article. Ed.

2. Edwin Hui has given us a very even-handed evaluation and critique of these "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity." His essay will be found in a forthcoming book, *Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel*, to be published by China Horizon.

Liu Xiaofeng and the whole movement of "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity?" First, Liu Xiaofeng has crossed over from aesthetic theory to Christian theology to social-cultural theory. He is recognized as a member of China's intellectual elite. It is highly significant that such a broadly trained scholar is an advocate of Christianity in China's academic circles! Such breadth of concerns should challenge Christians in the West to dialogue with scholars like Liu on the theoretical foundations of civilization. The Christian faith once took a leadership role in the shaping of Western thought, morality, and culture (until John Locke and the rise of Deism). It is high time that Christians in the West return to the articulation of a biblical and all-encompassing world-and-life-view, and dialogue with our Chinese colleagues. The collapse of modern culture and the rise of a pagan, postmodern culture demand nothing less.

Second, it is highly significant that Liu began in the 1980s with aesthetic and literary theory. He exemplifies the search, by China's intellectuals, for a human element in philosophy and, more fundamentally, for the emancipation of the human spirit in a post-Marxist context of limited (but expanding) academic freedom.

all endeavors of life, on the other? The latter view of freedom implies a critique of the quest for humanity, even in China's post-Marxist context. This is difficult for Chinese to hear, because "humanism" seems such a hypnotizingly beautiful dream. Jesus says you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.

Third, while overseas Chinese and non-Chinese theologians may not know what to do with Liu's massive translation and editing effort, it is clear that, as we enter the 21st century, there is a "Christian voice" participating in the intellectual debate in China on how to shape her social, spiritual and moral order. This is one of Liu's primary goals in life: to put Christianity on the front stage of contemporary Chinese intellectual development. He has succeeded.

Evangelicals should rejoice that such an effort is made, with fruit, in a post-Marxist society to put Christianity on the map of intellectual discourse. We in the West, in a post-Christian context, are struggling for "space" to speak in the public square. There needs to be collaboration and conversation with people like Liu.

Fourth, Christians may be perplexed that "Cultural Christians," who are not baptized and have no church

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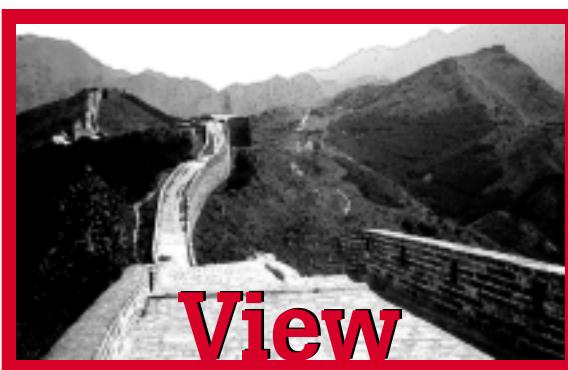
No Stranger

The Church in the Eyes of the Chinese

After over 20 years of economic reform, nothing seems to really catch the eyes of the Chinese today. Walking along the streets of Beijing packed with towering five-stars hotels, bright computer software stores, a shining McDonald's arch and other fancy neon signs, with cars of many different makes scurrying around under skyscrapers surrounded by expressways, one may think, "Everything the West has, we have here as well." From news regarding potential US presidential candidates and the Australian referendum concerning ties with the British royal court to NBA sports and the World Cup qualifying games, it is all available on television in any corner of China. If you have a minute to chat with an ordinary Chinese walking along the street, you might be surprised to find that he knows as much as you do about Wall Street's ups and downs and the latest moves of Bill Gates. For Pabst Blue Ribbon beer-drinking, Marlboro-smoking, jeans-loving Chinese, Western contacts have become as frequent as the daily soap operas. Is there anything that Chinese have no knowledge about or any issue left that causes them to pause before expressing an opinion? There should be. For most Chinese, one of these hard questions is, "Do you know anything about the Christian church, and how do you look at it?"

At the mention of the word "church," a complex and cautiously subtle expression will come over the face of an ordinary Chinese person. Church? The moment the word is uttered you suddenly realize that you have trespassed into a land of seriousness. This term is not an everyday one; it is associated with so much information and imagination that for some Chinese it is a very sensitive word.

The history of Christianity in China can be traced back to at least the Tang Dynasty(618 - 907A.D.) with the Nestorian presence in Chang An (now Xi'an), the capital of the empire. From the time of the Ming and Qing dynasty periods, when many missionaries entered China, churches began to appear in different parts of the country. By 1949 China had



View from the Wall

By Huo Shui

5 million Christians. However, the Chinese government has never responded positively to the presence and growth of the church during either the church's "debut" under the Ming and Qing Dynasties, or during the Republic (1911-1949) era and communist rule. The history of evangelism in China is full of man-made mistakes, prejudice and persecution. During the time of the Cultural Revolution in the 60s, the church as the "residue" of the Reactionaries was declared "cleaned up" by the government. People back in those days would immediately associate the church with imperialism and the superstitions held by a bunch of backward older men and women who knew nothing about science and truth.

However, by the end of the 70s when the Cultural Revolution was over, Christianity was expanding at a speed no one had anticipated. China, at that time, did not officially have even one foreign missionary, yet the church was quietly re-

vealing itself in every corner of China. From coastal provinces to inland areas, from urban centers to rural counties—there were church activities everywhere one would go. The miraculously revived church was like scattered patches of new green growth, vibrant and full of life in the barren land of a dead society held under the tight control of the communist regime. If one mentioned the word "church" to people at that time, their response would have been that the church was a mysterious, curious phenomenon, and no one could make sense of why so many were emerging in

China. Though there was prejudice against the church, people no longer thought of it as reactionary.

Since the end of the 80s and the decade of the 90s, the church has continued to grow though at a lesser speed than that of the 70s. The government has changed its attitude of indifference toward the church; instead of despising or belittling it, the government has engaged in an effort to search for a counter policy and the means to control it. Gradually, ordinary people have found that they have some sense of tolerance and, even respect, for the church.

Today, at the end of the 90s, after five decades of atheistic government indoctrination, people, especially the young, are embracing the church, and Christianity is becoming their faith and pursuit. Without favors from the media, or the benefit of publicity from open debates or overwhelming promotional brochures, the Chinese church has thrived as

**At the mention of the word "church,"
a complex and cautiously subtle expression will come over the face
of an ordinary Chinese person.**

thorns in the desert and reeds in the marsh, becoming deeply rooted in this great land of the East. Young people's pursuit of Christianity and their faith in Christ has no resemblance to the Red Guard's impromptu expressions of excitement during the Cultural Revolution; their choice is based on careful reasoning. Their link with Christianity does not compare with joining the Communist Youth League and the Party, which bring about opportunities for bureaucratic promotion. That older people embrace Christianity indicates a re-evaluation of their lives, and now they are excitedly making up for the lost years while their church affiliation is a silent statement of protest against the injustices they suffered during the last few decades. Still more are coming with a heart to pursue truth and freedom. Most have started by observing the Christians around them in whom they have seen new hope radiating and the great power of love.

The church is no longer a synonym for the anti-revolutionary, the backward, the superstitious, the feudal or the running dogs of imperialism. However, Christianity in China is far lower in status than, for example, science and technology, which are encouraged by the government and allowed to be openly discussed. Although less prejudice and discrimination are imposed on the church than previously, lack of knowledge about the church is very common among the public.

The public is fed up and furious with the corruption of the Party-controlled government. They are asking if the church might not be an option to solve their social problems. Can the church help change their status quo? These questions reflect a Chinese tradition of pragmatism and utilitarianism that remains the major stumbling block in their path of pursuing the truth. For those who otherwise would have no prejudice towards the church, this tradition is like an invisible wall that keeps them away from church pews. To them, the Church remains intangible and unreal, hard to define. These good, practical citizens of China believe little of what the government

has been telling them through propaganda in the media and school texts and do not wish to say anything negative about the church; however, for the present, watching from the sidelines is as far as they are willing to go. They constantly experience their spiritual life as a two-fold torture stemming from the thirst of their soul alongside their engagement in worldly gains. They are waiting, pondering, and comparing as they waver back and forth.

What is the church? To ordinary people in China it is such a simple, and yet puzzling, question. On the one hand, you have the appearance of

booming mini-churches and meeting places combined with the public's gradual realization of the church's benefits to society while, on the other, the government is imposing a higher degree of control over, and continual propaganda against, the church. While all this makes church-related issues controversial, at least one thing has become less controversial: the church is no longer a stranger to Chinese society.

Huo Shui is a former government political analyst who writes from outside China. Translation is by Ping Dong.



Strategic Teaching Opportunities

Hans M. Wilhelm

In recent years the church in China has continued its steady growth. A number of phenomena have emerged which have never been witnessed before. First, the average age of believers is gradually going down—more young people are being attracted to the faith. Second, the general educational level of believers is rising, and many intellectuals are turning to Christ and the church.

Shanghai's renowned *Mu En* church confirms these changes. Of the 440 people taking part in training courses for new believers, most were young people, and nearly 25% had completed some form of higher education. What are the reasons for this? In the past, intellectuals harbored an indifferent attitude toward Christianity viewing it as a foreign import that opposed traditional Chinese cultural values. This perspective has been re-evaluated and a new openness has emerged.

According to Dr. Wilson Chow,

President of the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong, the church in China has three main needs. First is a great need for training good volunteer workers, *Yi gong*. These volunteer workers are like ministers, not laymen. They have given up their jobs or have retired and now work full time in the church. For example, in the

Hans Wilhelm



There is a need for training emerging leaders and future pastors who are attending seminaries and Bible schools.

province of Zhejiang, there are 7,000 of these volunteers, most untrained. The Chinese church leadership is currently training these *Yi gong* at a rate of 150 at a time, for forty days, four times a year. At this pace, it will take 12 years

Continued on page 13

ChinaSource Resources

Serving China Together.

Samuel Ling, PhD., editor

This collection of essays is divided into three parts: Historical Perspectives on China; China Today; and Partnership in Chinese Service. Authors include Samuel Ling, Anthony Lambert, Jonathan Chao, Carol Lee Hamrin, Daniel Su, Wilson Chow, Mark Elliott and James H. Taylor III. 79 pages, 1996, spiral bound

Strategic Considerations for China Service. By Huo Shu

This monograph deals with economic, social and political change in China, provides explanations of China's government system, the official church and unregistered groups and how to deal with each; and discusses sugges-

tions for overcoming weaknesses in China service. 14 pages, revised 1999, paper binder

Serving China: A Primer for Pastors, Churches and Ministries.

A ChinaSource and China Harvest publication. This remarkable prayer and resource guide includes an introduction to the church in China, China's current modernization efforts, its ethnic minorities and practical guidelines for contemporary Christian service in China. 29 pages, 1998, spiral bound

Song of a Chinese Sparrow

Based on a true story, this video chronicles the journey to faith of one young woman in China who was exposed to the Gospel through Christian radio, literature and the witness of Christian

professionals serving in China. 12 1/2 minutes, NTSC or PAL format, English or Chinese.

Megatrends: The Chinese, Asia and the World. By Dr. Samuel Ling

Dr. Ling discusses the church in China within the broader perspective of the Chinese church worldwide and its relationship to the church in the West. 30 minutes, NTSC, English

Why China Needs Christians Now More Than Ever. By Dr. David Aikman

Using examples from post-Communist Eastern Europe and drawing upon his own intimate knowledge of China, Dr. Aikman presents a challenging case for the role of Christianity in guiding China's future development. 42 minutes, NTSC, English

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Serving China Together, Samuel Ling, PhD., editor

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Peoples of China

The Church Among the Peoples of China

Jim Nickel

I will never forget the experience of worshipping in a church in a village of the Yi people in Guizhou Province on a Sunday in 1995. Joyfully these Christians lifted praises to the Lord in indigenous song and dance, scarcely giving the Pastor five minutes at a time for a sermonette before bursting out in more worship. We were told that 70% of this village was Christian.

Scenes like this are rare, but increasing in China today. Recent research has revealed some very challenging details concerning the status of Christianity among the many people groups of China. In a soon-to-be-published book on the peoples of China, Paul Hattaway profiles 491 people groups, the vast majority of which are unreached. Over half of these groups have no known Christians among them!

On the other hand, there are a number of people groups in China with significant Christian populations. (See box on page 13.) These statistics demonstrate that the peoples of China can, and will, respond positively to the gospel if only given the chance to hear it in an understandable and culturally appropriate way.

The names of some of these groups will be unfamiliar to readers whose knowledge of the people groups of China is based on the list of 56 nationalities officially recognized by the government. Christian researchers are finding that these somewhat arbitrary groupings, created by the government of China, are not very useful for our purposes. Those who would obey our Lord's commission to make disciples of *panta ta ethne* of China will need to look beyond the 56 nationalities to the realities of the many ethno-linguistic

distinctions between the many peoples of China.

One problem created by looking at China through the lens of the official groupings is that we can easily overlook dozens of unreached people groups, assuming that they are the same, or nearly the same, as a reached group within their nationality. The Miao peoples, for example, could be considered to have been reached, based on the fact that 70% of the Small Flowery Miao and 53% of the Big Flowery Miao are Christians. The reality is that there are dozens of Miao people groups that have no known Christians among them. The many people groups in-

cluded under the umbrella of the Miao nationality speak dozens of mutually-unintelligible languages and dialects. For the gospel to be transmitted from one group to another within the Miao nationality requires cross-cultural evangelism.

Besides these ethno-linguistic distinctions, there are other barriers to the flow of the gospel from one group to another within China. The differences between rural and urban peoples serve as a case in point. The church in China is predominantly a rural church, with Christians making up less than 1% of the population in most of the cities of China. Significant socio-cultural barriers will need to be bridged and other challenges overcome if the church is to fulfill the Great Commission in the cities of China. *China's Unreached Cities*, a new book profiling 52 needy cities of China, should help the church around the world to begin to respond more effectively to this challenge.¹

The peoples of China can, and will, respond positively to the gospel

if only given the chance to hear it in an understandable and culturally appropriate way.



People Groups of China with a significant Christian presence

People Group	Percent Christian
Miao, Small Flowery	70%
Lipo, Eastern	67%
Ayi	59%
Miao, Big Flowery	53%
Lisu	42%
Depo	40%
Lashi	33%
Kado	33%
Gani	29%
Jingpo	27%
Wa	25%
Derung	21%

Differing educational levels constitute another barrier to the flow of the gospel. There is a growing movement of interest in Christianity among intellectuals in China, but most of these individuals do not feel comfortable in existing churches, whether they be affiliated with the TSPM or one of the older house church networks. In all likelihood, new churches will need to be started to accommodate the needs of these new believers.

One of the great challenges that needs to be addressed is the lack of clarity concerning the many unreached peoples among the Han Chinese, especially in inland areas of China. As demonstrated by the accompanying map, the growth of the church among the Han Chinese has largely been limited to the coastal provinces and a couple of others adjacent to them. Churches in the other provinces with significant Christian populations (i.e., in the southwest and the far north) are largely composed of minority believers. What about the need of the Han Chinese in these areas to be evangelized?

Even in the areas where the Han church is the strongest, there appear to be large numbers of Han Chinese who are cut off from the gospel by virtue of the fact that they are native speakers of a different language or dialect than the Christians in their area. They may understand Mandarin well enough to grasp the meaning of the gospel when it comes to them in that language, but a barrier of acceptance may well exist because of their natural pride in their

own heart language. As a Hakka Christian explained to me recently, "My people may understand you if you speak to them in Mandarin, but they will really open their hearts to you if you speak to them in the Hakka language."

In addition to these issues, there are still large areas of China where the church is practically non-existent. In Tibet, in the Muslim northwest, in the Guanxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and in most of the interior provinces of China, the vast majority of the people have access to neither the gospel nor a church where they can worship the living God. In all these areas Han Chinese comprise a significant portion of the population, and full-orbed evangelistic efforts will need to take them into account along with the minority populations for which these regions are known.

The church in China is not oblivious to the challenge of the unreached in China. Recently the leaders of five large house church networks in China set a goal of seeking to reach 40 million people with the gospel during a month of evangelism. And this is not merely mono-cultural evangelism. Trainers are increasingly receiving requests from church leaders in China for assistance in developing competence in cross-cultural evangelism and church planting.

"I will build my church," Jesus said, "and the gates of hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18, NIV). God is fulfilling that promise in China today. Let us stand with our brothers and sisters in the churches of China through our prayers and practical assistance, utilizing whatever channels God has given us, to support and encourage the growth of the church among all the peoples of China.

ENDNOTE

1. Available from Asian Minorities Outreach, Box 17 Chang Klan P.O. Chiang Mai, 50101, Thailand or PO Box 901 Palestine, TX 75802, USA. E-mail: amo@xc.org Website: www.antioch.com.sg/mission/asianmo/

Jim Nickel is the President of the Institute of Chinese Studies in Colorado Springs, CO. E-mail: <jnickel@xc.org>

Continued from page 10

to train them all indicating the great need that exists for help with training.

Second is the need for training emerging leaders and future pastors who are attending seminaries and Bible schools. Existing seminaries and Bible schools need to be enlarged so that more students can be enrolled. The China Christian Council (CCC) is currently building four new theological schools in China; nevertheless, there is still a long ways to go.

Third is the training of seminary and Bible school teachers and faculty. In order to reach out to intellectuals, pastoral workers need to continue their own growth and learning. Seminaries and Bible schools need to set up suitable courses for this purpose. Trained pastors and Christian workers must be given the opportunity to return to seminary every few years for a period of time for "top-off" training and spiritual refreshment. However, the reality is that present seminary faculties still experience major struggles and shortages in coping with the need to provide basic theological education. The CCC leadership has recognized this need and has appealed for short-term and longer-term (six months to two years) seminary professors from the West to fill this gap. Courses in the areas of apologetics, family and pastoral counseling, pastoral theology and leadership development are desperately needed.

Evangelicals are faced with the challenge of assisting in this training which can have a profound effect on the future of the church in China. Seminary professors need to be encouraged to spend a sabbatical year, or a couple years of their retirement, in this strategic ministry. China's millions, literally, could be affected. If we do not rise to this occasion others will.

Dr. Hans M. Wilhelm, the son of German missionary parents to China, served with OC International from 1954-91. Currently he serves as Vice President/Training with an organization involved in China. ■

Book Review

The Costly Revival

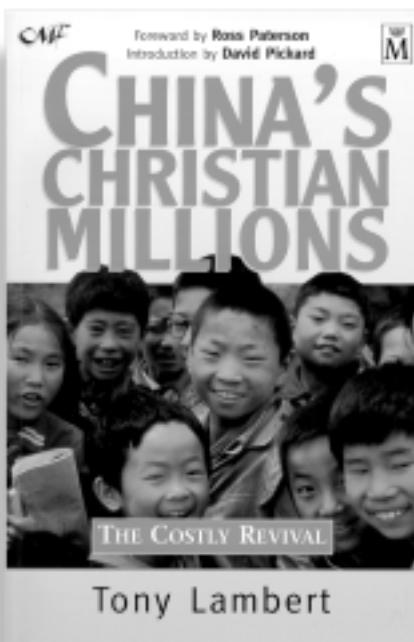
China's Christian Millions by Tony Lambert, OMF International and Monarch Books, 1999. ISBN 1 85424 431 0, paperback, £8.99. In the US\$ 19.99 plus \$3.20 postage. Special introductory offer for ChinaSource readers while stocks last: US\$ 12.99 plus \$3.20 postage. Order from OMF Books USA by calling toll free 1.888.663.2665; fax 1.303.430.4165; email <OMF_Books_USA@CompuServe.com>

A review by Alex Buchan

Books on the Chinese church tend to be one of two types: weighty academic affairs showing how great erudition is no defense against naive conclusions, or super light testimony-fests from evangelicals giving the impression that every Christian in China has been miraculously healed from a rare disease or has spent 20 years in solitary confinement. Few books successfully offer a balanced perspective on what is admittedly a complex subject; that Tony Lambert has just produced one that is both informed and readable is a welcome achievement.

Lambert's book, titled *China's Christian Millions*, represents the fairest and best introduction to the contemporary Chinese church that I have seen. His recipe is obvious—mix facts, statistics, history, documents and anecdotes into a good read for the non-specialist. Not only do you get lots of stories, but you end up actually knowing, for example, what the Three Self Patriotic Movement is, or the importance of Document 19 for church-state relations.

Lambert is well qualified as a guide to the Chinese revival. As OMF's long-standing China researcher, he translates more letters and documents from China's Christians than possibly anyone else. Still, he has gotten out from behind his desk often enough to encounter the revival at the grassroots, as shown by many of the stories that are



For introducing someone to the story of the contemporary Chinese church, or even if you want a fast-moving refresher of key events and documents, there's not a book to touch this one.

the result of his own research. He created a splash in 1991 with the publication of the *Resurrection of the Chinese Church*, the first serious work to provide documentary evidence that house churches were a far bigger force than most academics reckoned at that time. Ironically, he raised an even bigger splash in 1994 when he released a set of statistics in *News Network International* with the provocative claim that there were "not more than" 35 million Christians in China—a claim that did not endear him to evangelical ministries that routinely traffic in figures of 60 million

plus. This book does not contain an actual estimate, though he dismisses figures of 80 to 100 million as unproven, but if you add up his figures they come to around 40 million today.

His task, in his own words, is to provide (a) an overview of the scale of revival, (b) some reasons why God has worked in this way, and (c) some sobering truths we need to learn. Out of fourteen chapters, thirteen deal exclusively with the overview. The first four sketch the basic outlines of the registered and unregistered church. His treatment of the Three Self Patriotic Movement has three characteristics essential to a balanced perspective: he accepts progress, acknowledges repression and avoids over-simplification. If in that chapter he has been addressing evangelicals that tend to write the TSPM off as a hopelessly compromised institution, his chapter on the house church addresses those who would tend to dismiss house churches as dangerous extremists. He traces the confusion back to the ambiguities of Document 19 which states that "Christians undertaking religious activities in home-meetings...should not, in principle, be permitted. But they should not be rigidly prohibited."

The next nine chapters go through the revival topic by topic, drawing out the great diversity within Chinese Christianity. The chapter on Henan, the heartland of the revival, is invaluable, and the chapters on minorities, heresies and intellectuals are also excellent.

Two carps do not detract from the overall impact. One is that for all his attempts to make the book readable, the writing is often dull. Lambert's skills as an analyst greatly exceed his abilities as a storyteller. Anecdotes often lack color and emotion apart from excerpts from testimonies. I also question his assessment of the August 1998 United Appeal by ten house church leaders. He hails the document as one that "marks the coming of age of the house church movement!" That may be a bit overblown since it is hardly typical of house church leaders to issue appeals to their government via visiting

Western journalists and append their names at the bottom.

In my opinion, the best chapter, by far, is the last one. Here Lambert conveys great passion as he answers the question "Why did China experience this great revival?" He brilliantly critiques both Chinese Marxist and Western academic explanations, then adds devastatingly, "It is worth noting that suffering is absent from the list of reasons for church growth, from both the Chinese and Western academics. (From the former because of political constraints, from the latter probably because it is outside their experience.)" He sees the lessons of the Chinese revival as a combination of respect for the authority of Scripture, obedience, prayer, repentance, seriousness, and a true valuing of Christ and his cross.

The question is whether these are the fruits of revival rather than its causes. After all, if revival is about adhering to the inerrant Word, why are America's conservatives not experiencing revival also? Are Western Christians really that bad at praying compared to their Chinese brothers and sisters? I felt his crucial question—where did the revival come from—remained unanswered. But then, perhaps it is the nature of revival (contra Finney et al) to be mysterious!

For introducing someone to the story of the contemporary Chinese church, or even if you want a fast-moving refresher of key events and documents, there's not a book to touch this one. It's even valuable as a reference book, containing a province-by-province summary of the church in a lengthy appendix. And, for the scholar, it whets the appetite for Lambert's updated version of *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* due next year.

Alex Buchan is the Asia Bureau Chief of Compass Direct and has been writing on the Chinese church since 1987.

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Can we afford to do nothing for China?

The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu said, “Do nothing, and nothing is not done.”

Sound illogical? It is—to the Western mind, which generally sees action (doing something) as preferable to inaction (doing nothing). In fact, we often equate doing nothing with negligence—which usually makes the situation worse. Chuang Tzu’s idea that doing nothing can have positive results flies in the face of Western logic, which says, “Do nothing, and nothing gets done.”

In China, where the opportunities are many and the need of a billion people without Christ demands an immediate response, inaction—or doing nothing—would be unthinkable. Certainly much needs to be done. But upon closer reflection, Chuang Tzu’s dictum may indeed be relevant for those contemplating China involvement today.

Following the rush of Western evangelical ministries into Eastern Europe and the former USSR in the early 1990s, it became apparent that, for all their good intentions, many of these organizations were

not well prepared.¹ Specifically, they lacked an understanding of the culture into which they were entering, they had no previously established links to the existing church in the region, and very few of their people had language skills. This is not to say that no good work was done; simply that much more could have been accomplished had more organizations taken the time to prepare adequately.

In China the opportunity for involvement is immediate, and the desire of churches and organizations outside China for involvement is great. Thus, to spend time in preparation may be seen, at first glance, as doing nothing of worth or consequence to meet the pressing needs.

However, without some knowledge of Chinese culture, outsiders will be hard-pressed to communicate the Gospel or assist Chinese Christians in a meaningful way. Working relationships with the existing church are essential in order to truly participate in what God is already doing in China while preventing the kind of depen-

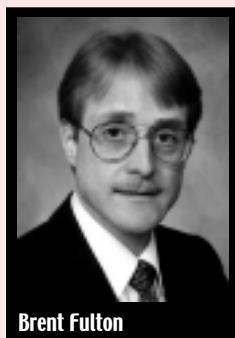
dency and paternalism that was prevalent during the mission era in China. Finally, a willingness to learn the language signifies a long-term commitment to China and opens the doors to relationships that would otherwise be out of the question for a foreigner in China.

All of these take time; but, ultimately, it will be time well spent. In this sense Chuang Tzu was right. While it may appear on the surface as if we are doing nothing of immediate consequence in China, we can take the time and pay the price for preparation now. Or, we can skip this important step, only to find ourselves struggling to catch up (or simply dropping out) later, when even greater opportunities arise.

Can we afford to do “nothing” for China? We can’t afford not to.

1. Mark Elliott, “Western Protestant Ministry in the Former Soviet Bloc: Are There Lessons That Could Apply to China?” in *Serving China Together*, Samuel Ling, editor, Institute for Chinese Studies. (See page 11 for ordering information.)

Dr. Brent Fulton is the Executive Director of ChinaSource and Editor of the ChinaSource journal.



Brent Fulton