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HENAN: HOME OF THE GOSPEL – AND OF CULTS (Part II)

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In this issue I shall continue to comment on Cheng Hiu-chun's excellent book on the growth of both the Gospel and cults in Henan. In our last issue I looked at her useful overview of Henan's relative social and economic backwardness, which provide the environment in which both the Gospel and cults have flourished over the last three decades. We now turn to the fascinating evidence for the rapid growth of Protestant Christianity in Henan, making it by any count the province with the largest number of Christians in the entire country.

Church Growth in Henan – The Official Statistics

Miss Cheng gives a table of Protestant church growth in Henan between 1911-2004 as follows, based on early mission statistics and post-1949 government or TSPM figures:

1911	20,636
1949	70,000 (or 120,000)
1965	100,000
1988	830,000
1995	1,200,000
2004	2,380,000

My own researches, which were published in the appendices to *China's Christian Millions* (2006 edition) are as follows:

1949	70,000 (or 120,000)
1965	78,000
1990	800,000
1996	3,500,000 (inc. 2 million 'seekers')
1998	3-5 million
2004	4,585,000 (Amity News Service based on TSPM)

What are we to make of these discrepancies (we are here looking at figures based on TSPM sources)?

Firstly, the figures for 1949 (70,000-120,000) appear to be based on either strict figures of communicants, or ones which also take into account the wider Christian community. If we take a figure of 100,000 for the total number of Protestants in Henan in 1949 we are probably not far wrong. Secondly, for 1965 I tracked down a precise figure of 78,000 in the Chinese

academic journal 'Zongjiao' ('Religion') (Issue 3-4 of 1995). This suggests that the number of Christians in Henan on the eve of the Cultural Revolution had either remained static or dipped somewhat severely, which is what one would expect after all the persecution of the 1950s. This suggests Ms Cheng's figure of 100,000 for 1965 should be revised downward.

Ms Cheng's figure of 830,000 in 1988 is exact, from an official TSPM source, and was quoted, rounded down, in a government source in 1990. This is thus a precise bench mark, and shows that the number of Protestants in Henan in 1988 was about 8 times (!) the 1949 figure - which, of course, relates only to those counted by the TSPM as baptized members and does not include the large number in the house-churches. The 1995 and 2004 figures given by Ms Cheng are conservative figures, also issued officially by the TSPM in Henan.

My own figures are higher, although they also

come from TSPM sources. In 1996 a leading TSPM pastor gave a total of 3.5 million, of whom only 1.5 million were baptised - the remaining 2 million were 'seekers' (mudaozhe). This figure was published by Amity News Service in June 1996. Similarly, in 1998 a TSPM leader told a Western visitor that there were '3-5 million' Protestants in Henan. Then in 2004 Amity again estimated the total number of Protestants associated with TSPM churches and meeting points as 4,585,000.

All this shows that statistics of Christians in China, even when emanating from TSPM sources, is not an exact science! I must say that the TSPM-based figures of 3-5 million over the last decade or so seem closer to the reality than the 2.38 million figure quoted by Ms Cheng. However, even if this latter figure is true, then it means Protestants have multiplied some 23-fold since 1949. If the higher estimates of 3-5 million are taken, then church growth has been a staggering 30-50-fold over the same period!

Local Statistics (County and City level)

Ms Cheng also gives some interesting local statistics for church growth in Henan.

Dengfeng County: 20,000+ (Women = 16,000 = 80%)

Xinyang Prefecture: 10 counties each have over 10,000 Protestants. (2004)

Pigdingshan Prefecture: 150,000 Protestants (3.1% of total pop. 2005)

Yuzhou City: 83,000 Protestants, 6 pastors, 341 churches and meeting-points. (2004)



I have given a much longer list in *China's Christian Millions* as follows:

ZHENGZHOU REGION	100,000	(1993)
Incl. DENG FENG COUNTY	30,000	
LUOYANG PREFECTURE	140,000	
Incl. YICHUAN COUNTY	20,000	
YIYANG COUNTY	16,000	
LUSHAN COUNTY	100,000	(house-church estimate)
YE COUNTY	55,000	(house-church estimate)
JIAOZUO PREFECTURE	87,500	
PUYANG COUNTY	20,000	(house-church source)
LINGBAO COUNTY	40,000	(house-church source)
MIANCHI COUNTY	50,000	(house-church source)
WUYANG COUNTY	50,000	
YANLING COUNTY	10,000	
SHANGQIU PREFECTURE	100,000	
Incl. YUCHENG COUNTY	10,000	
ZHOUKOU PREFECTURE	160,000	

Incl. LUYI COUNTY	30,000	(house-church source)
DANCHENG COUNTY	50,000	(house-church source)
ZHUMADIAN PREFECTURE	200,000	
Incl. ZHUMADIAN CITY	30,000	(house-church estimate)
PINGYU COUNTY	10,000	
XINYANG PREFECTURE	150,000	
Incl. GUSHI COUNTY	50,000	
HUAIBIN COUNTY	15,600	
NANYANG PREFECTURE	130,000	
Incl. TANGHE COUNTY	200,000	(house-church estimate)
FANGCHENG COUNTY	160-300,000	(house-church estimate)
DENG COUNTY	50,000	
ZHENPING COUNTY	9,000	

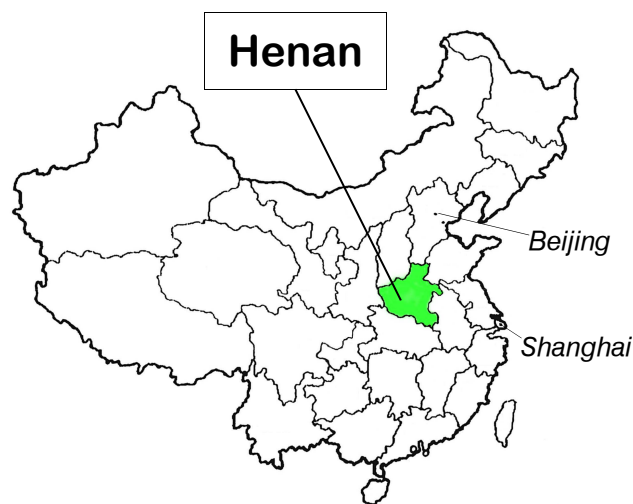
(All figures from TSPM sources, unless house-church sources specifically cited.)

House-church statistics are difficult to come by, and Ms Cheng does not include any in her book. I have given house-church estimates for 9 rural counties.

This leads on to the notoriously difficult question: How many house-church Christians are there in Henan? Anecdotally, some people report a ratio of 10:1 house-church:TSPM in some rural areas. This is perfectly possible, as the remit of the TSPM/Christian Council is strongest in urban centres and may not operate effectively in some rural areas. However, it is dangerous to extrapolate this across the entire province. Ms Cheng shows that in several areas the number of Protestant Christians now far surpasses the official statistics for other religions (Buddhist, Catholic, Islam, Daoist), becoming the dominant religion. (Although this does not prove that 'folk religion' is still not endemic in the rural population.)

The statistics available for Nanyang Prefecture are suggestive of the likely reality that house-church Christians far outnumber those in the TSPM churches there. In 1997 the TSPM reported 130,000 for the entire prefecture consisting of 10 counties and one city. However, house church sources reported much earlier that just two counties (Lushan and Tanghe) conservatively had 360,000 believers. It seems possible that in Nanyang, which is a known hot-bed of unofficial house-church activity, the ratio of house-church to TSPM believers could well be 5:1.

A much more recent official source for Protestants in Zhoukou Prefecture is also instructive. In early 2007 the total number of registered Protestants is given as 251,643. This is a huge increase



from the total of 160,000 given out by the TSPM - in fact, an increase of 91,000 over exactly a decade, or 57%. However, what is even more interesting is that the same source said in 2007: "Protestants have 913 registered places of worship (712 churches and 201 meeting-points). But if house-churches unregistered with the government are included in the calculations then there are more than 1,200 churches and meeting points in the prefecture and the total number of Protestants is 600,000." This is a clear admission that in Zhoukou Prefecture there are 350,000 house-church believers compared to 250,000 in TSPM-related meetings - a ratio of 7:5. This is a much lower ratio than that suggested by the admittedly very incomplete statistics for Nanyang.

However, if a similar conservative ratio is applied across the entire province using the 3-5 mil-

lion TSPM figures given above as a base figure, and adding the house-church believers, then the total number of Protestants in Henan may be around 7-12 million.

Another computation based on the above mixed TSPM and house-church statistics for 22 administrative regions (counties and cities) gives an average of 51,000 believers per administrative region. If this is then extrapolated across all of Henan's 159 administrative regions, it suggests a total Christian population of 8.2 million. Some

years ago Rev Jonathan Chao suggested the total number of believers in the province was around 10 million. It is interesting all these possible totals fall within the range of 7-12 million.

None of this is an exact science, and there are many factors to be taken into account. The role of cults on the fringes of the church cannot be ignored. As Ms Cheng shows in her book, pseudo-Christian cults are particularly active in Henan. To this we shall turn (d.v.) in a future issue.

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