



China's Christian Millions

By Tony Lambert

Foreword

God has chosen China, the most populous nation on earth, as a canvas on which to portray his power and love in our generation. It is a huge and amazing portrait. As Tony Lambert observes,

"There is no need to sensationalise or exaggerate - the truth speaks for itself." It does indeed. Those who serve that extraordinary Church are constantly brought face to face with the evidence of the Lord Jesus and his work in our times.

It is the more extraordinary when one considers the background to these events. In the 1970s some scholars of the Church were convinced that it had perished under successive waves of persecution and abuse. Others attempted to rewrite their supposed "gospel" in Marxist terms, as though some new kingdom of God were to be revealed through Chairman Mao's now discredited "new man". But the reality is that God has used the weakness of men and women to reveal his power.

In the first chapter, when commenting on an area where 18 per cent of the population names the Name of Christ, Tony sums it up like this: "Who could have imagined in their wildest dreams that the seed originally sown by a one-legged Scotsman and a paralysed Chinese boy would over a century later bear such fruit?" Even as a Scotsman, I have to give the glory to God and not to my one-legged fellow Scot! But what joy that brings: God has done great things in this mighty nation of China in our day and age. And yet so few believers in the West, and even in the churches of other Asian nations, seem either to know what God has done in China or, even worse, to care whether or not they know. God has done something special in that land in recent years. We need to learn from it, and to serve his Church there.

Tony's book is a much-needed analysis of these events and with that, an inspiration to understand and embrace them. It covers all of China's provinces, and includes God's work in the official and the unofficial church. It thus offers us clear and factual evidence of this most extraordinary activity of God. For many years I have respected Tony Lambert for his courage, his scholarship and his zeal for the Lord. His courage because he stands on the truth of what the Lord shows him, and does not bend to more popular winds. His scholarship, because he can read Party documents (and other material) in their original characters, something that very few - including myself as a fluent Mandarin speaker - can do. His love for the Lord, because this is not a book about theory; it is a book about the Lord whom Tony loves, and about what he is saying and doing in our day.

Tony has researched his subject carefully and widely. Some of his positions might not be universally embraced - for example, where there is uncertainty about the number of believers, he has cautiously taken a lower figure than some sources suggest. But even where people might disagree with him, none who know him would ever question the depth and compelling quality of what he writes.

I hope that this book is widely read, so that the silent story of China's Church, masked behind official statements, might be more clearly heard. I

pray that it will create a wider interest in this great and special land. The most populous nation on earth and, arguably, the fastest-growing Church on earth, must receive more prayer and attention from the Church worldwide. I hope, too, that many in the West, who sincerely pray for revival in their own land, would research this excellent manual to see what revival has meant in China today.

"There is no need to sensationalise or exaggerate - the truth speaks for itself." It does, but only when it is heard and received. I pray that this might be the role of this book.

From the General Director of OMF International

China's Christian Millions by Tony Lambert is the fruit of three decades of research, reflection and writing. It is a work of love, reflecting the author's commitment to Christ and to the Chinese people.

On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, Tony Lambert was beginning his study of the Chinese language at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. There in 1965, as a new Christian, he was already reaching out to share the gospel with people from China. But *China's Christian Millions* is not his story; it is rather a penetrating account of God's sovereign work in China, "reviving his Church, deepening the spiritual life of his people and thrusting them out in sacrificial service and evangelism."

China's Christian Millions begins with a moving overview of the current situation - both in the State-approved church as well as in the house church movement. Here the reader discovers that the amazing revival taking place in China is not limited to one or the other. While at the close of the Cultural Revolution in 1978, there was not one single official church open, today there are over 13,000 as well as 35,000 registered meeting points and countless unregistered house churches. Officials now acknowledge that the Church has grown twelvefold in the space of twenty years. Church leaders told a visiting US delegation recently that 6.5 new churches and meeting points are being established every day throughout China! Tony Lambert reports how Zhejiang Province alone has seen an average annual growth rate of more than 60,000 new believers over the past thirteen years.

The pattern of growth in the house church movement has been even more dramatic. The province of Henan has been described as a "Jesus Nest" by some officials. In one place revival began as a result of a Communist cadre's wife being healed through the prayers of caring Christians when all medical help had been exhausted. Meetings then started in the homes of these party officials. The number of believers just grew. When the missionaries made their reluctant exodus in the early 1950s there were only 120,000 Christians in the province of Henan. Today there are more than 5 million believers meeting in house churches in the rural areas.

In *China's Christian Millions*, Tony Lambert shares moving testimonies of Chinese Christians and their families. It is like the Book of Acts all over again. In Beijing you will meet Professor Wu, the seminary professor who kept the study of the Greek New Testament alive in China and Dr Feng, the nuclear physicist, who taught a Bible class for university students after the main service every Sunday. There is Pastor Lamb who emerged from more than twenty years of hard labour to start a house church in his home that sees 2,000 meeting for worship and Bible study every week. Then you will read the story of the Miao minority Christian pastor, Wang Zhiming, who was commemorated at a service in

Westminster Abbey as one of ten Christian martyrs of the twentieth century.

Although there are severe restrictions on the church engaging in children's and youth ministries, one begins to see how vitally important Christian education in the home has been. As in the case of Timothy, the Apostle Paul's co-worker, many believers in China today also trace their spiritual roots to the sincere faith of parents and grandparents.

Along with the explosive evangelism through personal witness and powerful testimony, the impact of gospel radio in evangelism, in discipling new believers and in leadership training has been profound. Had the book been longer, we might have read more about this as about the overseas Chinese, and the influence of Christian professionals from a host of countries.

We are indebted to Tony Lambert for the helpful analysis he provides of factors which have contributed to the revival that is taking place in China. They include:

God's Sovereignty. As he raised up Cyrus in Old Testament times and the Roman Empire in New Testament times to fulfil his purposes, so God has used political leaders in China to prepare for the spread of the gospel. Think of the unification of the country and language; the building of modern road, railway and telecommunication systems; and consider the attack on traditional religion, superstition and idolatry, as well as the attack on Confucianism, which is the traditional ideological foundation of China's intellectuals and civil servants.

China's Christian Millions describes how even the catastrophic political events have played their part in the process of preparation. Consider how Christians who were sent to the countryside in the 1950s and 1960s for hard labour took the gospel with them, and how, following Deng Xiaoping's Programme of economic reform, labourers from remote inland areas have found employment and found Christ in coastal areas with vibrant Christian churches, and have then carried their new-found faith back to their own unevangelised people. Tony Lambert speaks of the Cultural Revolution as "the defining moment which destroyed the utopian illusion of a whole generation and in its devastation of Chinese society and culture prepared the ground for the gospel". What a picture of our sovereign Lord at work!

God's Word. 180 years ago the first translation of the entire Bible in the Chinese language was completed by Robert Morrison. Thus the Protestant Church entered China with a clear affirmation of the Reformation's declaration that the Word of God is the rule for faith and life. The completion of the Union Version in 1919 gave the Chinese Church a Bible in the spoken language from which Christians have been nourished throughout ninety turbulent years of their nation's history. "In China," Tony Lambert writes, "we are confronted with an exciting phenomenon - a grass-roots Church that is orthodox, evangelical and eager to hear and obey God's Word." Though still very inadequate, it is amazing to learn that in March this year the Amity Press in Nanjing celebrated the printing of twenty million Bibles over the past thirteen years!

The Work of the Holy Spirit. Neither the individual nor society can save itself. The bankruptcy of ideology and inadequacy of idealism, the depravity of human nature and corruption of political process have created a spiritual hunger in China the likes of which has never been seen before. It was the Spirit of the Lord who led the prophet Ezekiel to the valley full of dry bones and showed him how by his power they would be reassembled, revived and rallied into a vast army. In no time in Church history have we seen a greater fulfilment of this vision than in China today. The author makes clear that not everything that claims to be Spirit-prompted is. Some leaders have led their followers into heresies or disastrous aberrations of the truth. However, they represent only a fanatic fringe while the larger picture of the Church reveals an authentic, powerful demonstration of the Holy Spirit at work in and through God's people.

Christians who take their faith seriously. This fact is expressed by men and

women who are serious about repentance, serious about the cross of Christ and walking in obedience to God's will, serious about worship in spirit and in truth, serious about prayer in its multifaceted dimensions of praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition, serious enough about their faith to accept suffering and death rather than abandon it, and serious about faith that is holistic, incarnational and full of the love of Jesus. Over and over again, Tony Lambert describes how it is the love of individual Christians that has overcome hostility, prejudice, anger and indifference.

China's Christian Millions will stir you to praise God for what he has been doing and to pray for what he will yet do. It will challenge you to consider dimensions of the unfinished task of evangelism in China and the world and the part the Lord wants you to have. But, above all, it will humble you as you review your own spiritual life and ponder what God can do with a life totally committed to him.

David Pickard

OMF International Headquarters, Singapore June 1999

Chapter 1: Transformations

Beijing in 2006, a city constantly reinventing itself. New ring roads snake round the inexorably advancing suburbs. The once ubiquitous cyclists are in danger of becoming an extinct species - the highways are clogged with traffic spewing gases into a leaden, polluted sky. Wangfujing is a fashionable pedestrian precinct with vast shopping malls where Starbucks and McDonald's stand next to chic foreign designer boutiques. The endless tourists gawp while Western businessmen hurry by in earnest conversation with Chinese counterparts. The mobile phone seems an apt symbol of this restless, self-confident, materialistic society, already bracing itself to welcome the world to its gleaming luxury hotels when in 2008 Beijing hosts the Olympics.

Beijing in 1976. A very different, drab, sad world of rundown back lanes with ancient courtyard homes (Thirty years later largely torn down by frenzied development). In Wangfujing a sea of people in khaki green or blue Mao jackets jostle outside the one frowzy department store. In corners of courtyards, piles of half-rotten cabbage are piled alongside coaldust briquettes to see the impoverished populace through the bitter winters. The endless phalanxes of cyclists pedal wearily past the huge red and white billboards of Mao Thought - "Take Class Struggle as the Key Link". Indeed, life is a constant struggle - just to survive. Eggs, meat and fresh vegetables are in short supply. Vicious political struggle at the top makes people wary. Zhou Enlai, the last hope of the moderates, has died of cancer. Brief riots in Tiananmen Square have been bloodily suppressed. The Gang of Four, including Mao's unpopular wife, are riding high. The Chairman himself is rumoured to be dying. Better to keep one's head down, and hope against hope for better times...

1976-2006 - in a brief three decades China has totally transformed itself. The economic reforms begun by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 have made China an economic superpower. For more than a decade the annual growth rate has been 9 per cent while Japan has been stagnant and Europe has aimed at 2 per cent. China has become the "workshop of the world", pouring forth from the factories of Shanghai and Shenzhen an endless variety of goods - firstly cheap textiles but now increasingly computers and electronics. In 2005 when Beijing revalued the RMB against the dollar (it is the dollar that is the weak currency) the world markets trembled. Washington blocked the Chinese takeover of an American company. Earlier, Spanish leather workers faced with the closure of their uncompetitive company rioted and burned down a Chinese shoe factory. Europe

and America are simply unable to compete with a seemingly endless supply of Chinese cheap labour, fuelled by the mass migration of peasants to the cities in search of work.

In China itself the private sector roars ahead while old State controlled firms rust into obsolescence. The new urban middle class fuels a growing consumerism. In the old Mao days a bicycle was everyone's dream. Now, foreign cars, expensive clothes and cosmetics are the must-have trinkets. Over 100 million Chinese are linked to the Internet and it goes without saying that virtually everyone in the cities has a mobile phone. In June 2005, peasants in Hebei protesting against the illegal confiscation of their village land for redevelopment filmed the pitched battle they fought against corrupt officials and developers on video and circulated it worldwide to the media.

The Communist Party remains dominant politically and Mao's portrait still hangs over the entrance to the Forbidden City. The one-Party Leninist State is about the only part of the Maoist heritage to which the Party fiercely clings. To maintain power it has cleverly reinvented itself. After the 1989 Democracy Movement, the Party saw the rise of the new entrepreneurs and middle class as a potentially threatening new power base. So it has opened the doors of Party membership to budding capitalists, slyly co-opting the very class that might have grown to oppose it. The fig leaf of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" covers a raw capitalism under which almost anything goes.

The Party struggles to ride the tiger of high-speed economic development. Alongside genuine improvement of the standard of living for the majority of the population, it has its downside. Some 200 million peasants are in the process of leaving permanent impoverishment in the countryside for a better life in the cities. When Mao took power 90 per cent of the Chinese people were rural; by 2020 (if not before) the ratio of rural to city dwellers will be 50 per cent to 50 per cent. The greatest mass migration from countryside to town in human history is under way. It dwarfs the British Industrial Revolution by ten to one. The latter took over a century - the Chinese version is squeezed into just 30 years. The authorities admitted that in 2004 there were over 70,000 protests - some of them violent - across the country. Ordinary people are incensed by official corruption and the greed of developers who land-grab, even demolishing entire villages.

The fallout from all this is growing social disorder. The gap between rich and poor, far from being narrowed, is becoming wider. The government is seriously concerned and from time to time launches anti-corruption campaigns. They seem largely ineffectual. Can a Party that has remained in power for over half a century and ruthlessly suppressed all opposition genuinely reform itself? It seems doubtful.

A new Five-Year Plan for 2006-2010 was approved in October 2005, focusing on improving people's livelihoods, not just breakneck growth, and on ensuring the benefits of growth are divided more equally. The government has already poured money into developing infrastructure in the poor western areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet. However, unrest simmers just beneath the surface. In the cities, many migrant peasants turn to begging, crime or prostitution in their desperation. Urban workers thrown out of inefficient State-run industries stand on street corners with pathetic pieces of cardboard stating "carpenter" or "labourer", desperately seeking work. And those lucky enough to find work on booming construction sites often are cheated of their wages. A world recession or an economic downturn in China itself could lead to serious political and social instability.

Economic insecurity is mirrored by increasing moral and spiritual confusion. The old Confucian moral order was largely swept away by Mao, and then the collapse of Maoism itself left a yawning moral void. The divorce rate is soaring and it is common for young people to sleep together before marriage. AIDS is on

the increase, as is drug-taking, not just in the Golden Triangle in the south-west but across the country.

People are looking for answers and seem willing to try anything. In 1999 the government was rocked to its core when 10,000 Falun Gong devotees demonstrated in central Beijing. Seemingly coming out of nowhere, and blocking the top Party leadership compound, Falun Gong was seen as the greatest rival to the Party, far surpassing any democratic stirrings that have been nipped in the bud. The movement, which had infiltrated senior Party circles, was quickly outlawed and ruthlessly suppressed. Falun Gong cleverly used modern technology such as videos and DVDs to spread its syncretist message - a mish-mash of Buddhism, Daoism and New Age with a benign exterior of physical exercises and a darker, demonic core. A whole array of other cults has sprung up, many of them pseudo-Christian. The most dangerous is currently Eastern Lightning, which preaches a Chinese, female Messiah and uses gangster methods to win and keep converts.

But genuine spiritual transformation is to be had. In fact, the spectacular growth of the Christian gospel is transforming China spiritually, and on a massive scale. In 1976 there were no churches open (apart from two for foreign diplomats and visitors). In 2006 there are over 50,000 registered Protestant churches and "meeting-points" - as well as a vast number of unregistered house churches. In 1949 when the Communists took power there were only 700,000 Protestants - today there are officially 17-20 million - over twentyfold growth. (The real figure which includes the house-church believers may well be over 60 million.) This means China is well on the way to having the largest evangelical Christian community of any country in the world, already rivalling that in the United States in terms of numbers.

In 1976 the church was a tiny, often frightened and persecuted minority. Today, Christians are open about their faith and vibrant in their evangelism. There has been a sea change in China in attitudes towards the faith. Thirty years ago many still believed the Maoist propaganda that Christianity was no more than a "tool of Western imperialism" and no self-respecting young person would have dreamed of darkening the doorstep of a church - even if any had been open. Today, public perceptions are very different. Ordinary people, themselves not believers, generally regard Christians as good people and Christianity as a "good thing". The loving witness of individual Christians - and increasingly of corporate action in social-service projects - has had a profound impact.

Remnants of Maoist attitudes still linger in some Party circles and, ironically, in the higher echelons of the Protestant Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) itself. In 2003 Luo Guanzong, a former TSPM leader, published a long book on the "History of How Imperialism Used Christianity to Invade China". Such fossilised ideology is openly laughed to scorn by serious academics in Chinese universities. In fact, there are so many intellectuals seriously researching the influence of Christianity on Western culture and history that they have been dubbed "Culture Christians". Institutes for Religious Studies have sprung up in many universities and theology is openly studied and debated by students at Beijing University and many others. Seminars are eagerly attended by not just the "Culture Christians" but many committed Christian students from both the TSPM and house churches. Today, most universities and colleges have some form of Christian meeting for students or faculty, albeit low key, as religious meetings are still officially banned on campus.

In 2004-2005, as I visited packed TSPM churches in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Urumqi, Chongqing and elsewhere, it was hard to believe I was in the same country I had first lived in thirty years ago. Then, I had found churches either derelict and boarded up or turned into factories or warehouses. Today, Christians poured into huge churches for several

services on Sunday, often having to squeeze into overflow halls fitted with CCTV. Many already large urban churches have had to tear down their original premises to erect much larger edifices of five or six storeys. The church in Urumqi, the capital of the Uygur region of Xinjiang, is a good example. When I first visited in 1985 about 100 Christians were meeting in a poorly-lit shack. Returning 20 years later I discovered 3,000 meeting on Sundays in four halls on four different storeys of a large, modern church building.

The Christian revival in China is hard for jaded, post Christian Europeans to fathom or even accept. Certainly it is time that academia in the West seriously studied the phenomenon of Christian continuity and growth from before 1949 right through till the present day, rather than relegating Christianity in China to a 19th-century or early 20th-century missionary pigeonhole.

The visibility of the Christian church in China with its large congregations of thousands testifies to a deeper, spiritual transformation in changed lives. This was very apparent to me on a visit to a Beijing house church in late 2005. The young professional couple who invited me to their pleasant apartment had no qualms about inviting me to their home, as would have been the case years ago (and even now in some more tightly controlled areas). Indeed, I found that three other foreigners had been invited, along with about fifteen local believers.

The Chinese Christians shared their testimonies of how they had come to faith in Christ. One was a young professor of physics at a leading university. In stark contrast, a woman and her daughter were migrant workers who had been begging on the streets. Christians had come across them and given them food and money, and helped her find a job. As a result they had both believed in Jesus Christ. A little boy of nine or ten shyly told us how he, too, was a Christian. A middle-aged man shared his vision with passion to get proper Bible and cross-cultural training to go out and spread the gospel to remote minority tribal peoples in SW China. Looking at their shining faces I saw a microcosm of the church in China - eager, vibrant, positive and confident in God.

Christian faith in China has triumphed in the face of adversity. Although the savage, relentless persecution of the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution days (1966-76) is long gone, for some in the house churches and occasionally even those sheltering under the broad umbrella of the TSPM State church, arbitrary repression leading to arrest and even imprisonment is by no means past. Recently, in one city, a house-church leader told me how his elder brother had been sentenced to three years lire-education through labour". He was released only in 2004. It was still too dangerous to visit him directly. The older "patriarchs" of the house churches are still suspicious of government intentions, and virtually unanimous in rejecting the option of registering their meetings. This has again been dangled before them in new Religious Regulations promulgated in March 2005. By the end of the year my enquiries revealed that no house churches had registered. They fear being drawn under TSPM control. The only exceptions were one or two younger, educated leaders in Beijing who were considering registration (while remaining clear of the TSPM) as an avenue that might provide legal cover for the house churches to take part more openly in social-service projects at the neighbourhood level.

In the cities I visited in 2003-05 house churches were generally functioning half in the open with a new boldness in evangelism. It seems unlikely that in the remaining time of the run-up to the Olympics the government would risk alienating international opinion by any large-scale crackdown. But China is a

large place, and religious policy is implemented according to local conditions and often at the whim of local cadres. In November 2005 reports came out of a house-church pastor in Henan who was arrested while the police were searching for his son. The son bravely turned himself in to secure his father's release, but both were held under arrest. House-church historian Zhang Yinan was released at the same time, but cautioned by police as to what he could and could not say in future. Christian businessman Tong Qimiao was tortured by government agents and ended up in hospital with a broken chest bone. He was warned by them not to publicise the attack, but he plans to sue. His boldness is shared by other believers who are now not prepared to meekly suffer unjust persecution, but are willing to speak out and seek the limited legal redress open to them. This is a major difference in the situation from even ten years ago, when few persecuted Christians were prepared to speak out. Now, many detailed cases are freely circulated on the Internet.

At the heart of church growth and revival in China is personal transformation by the living Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. At root, the church, whether house church or TSPM-related, is firmly biblical. The authority of the Bible is taken for granted as a divinely given axiom. Bishop Ding of the TSPM has bemoaned the fact that the vast majority even within the State-supervised church are evangelical or even - to use a pejorative term - "fundamentalist". Destructive critical theology, which has devastated the Western church, is still largely unknown, or kept at bay, at the grass-roots level. It is true that since the infamous Jinan Conference in Shandong in 1998 Bishop Ding has headed a "theological construction" movement within the TSPM seminaries, the thinly disguised aim of which has been to cut the church's conservative evangelical moorings and guide it down a theological cul de sac. Ding's "new theology" is a turgid blend of Marxism, liberal Christianity and process theology. His cleverly cloaked denials of the sovereignty and holiness of God, the centrality of the atonement, the uniqueness of Christ and the importance of justification by faith are surprisingly close to dangerous trends such as the new "openness theology" threatening Western evangelicalism. It is ironic that the best theologically educated pastors and students within the TSPM churches are precisely those who have seen this new theology as bogus. Some Christian academics at Nanjing Seminary have paid for their outspoken opposition by being dismissed, as have a number of students and graduates. Few within China have been fooled. Indeed, many are grateful the controversy has come out into the open and that Ding and the top political TSPM leadership are finally revealed in their true colours. They find it hard to credit that some evangelical seminaries and leaders overseas still take it all at face value. They are spearheading a new movement of educated young church leaders bridging both the TSPM churches and the house churches, and seeking to develop an authentic evangelical and biblical theology which can deal with the pressing problems facing them in modern Chinese society. In many areas of China, pastors within the TSPM churches pay lip service to the new movement - which they view as a throwback to the political movements of the Mao era - but in reality carry on with the urgent work of pastoring and preaching the authentic gospel of Christ.

The sheer tenacity of the Chinese Church in holding to, and holding forth, the certainties of Christian faith are a challenge and a rebuke to a Western church ground down by secularism and a loss of nerve. The Chinese Church may lack academic sophistication (although a new, younger generation is showing a refreshing ability to wrestle with relevant theological and social issues). There can be no doubt about its robust faith in the Bible and in the centrality of the atonement, which is the basis for a deep spiritual experience open to the supernatural working of God.

A good example of this was when I unexpectedly came across a group of some 200 Wenzhou Christians holding their own fellowship meeting 1,000 miles away from home in a large TSPM church in Chongqing. While a group of young mothers sat with babies on their laps at the back of the church, the rest of the congregation had fallen to its knees in prayer. Two men led from the front. Their prayers centred on the efficacy of the shed blood of Jesus Christ for the full forgiveness of sins. The congregation all prayed simultaneously and loudly, many weeping and agonising in prayer. Unlike at some Western conferences, where emotions are worked up artificially from the front, I felt deeply humbled in the presence of raw, genuine emotion. Here were working people facing many family and social pressures. The cross of Christ was being lifted up as the only final answer to sin and self. Many were openly repenting and rededicating themselves to God.

It has been my steadily growing conviction over more than twenty years that we in the West need to learn from what God has done and is doing in China. In an era of superficial spirituality and spurious movements that have falsely claimed revival, it is vital that we learn lessons from God's people who have experienced genuine renewal. The vast growth of the last thirty years did not suddenly spring out of nowhere. The ways of God are mysterious - "behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face". Revival is rarely instant, still less can it be manufactured or called down by man. The gracious purposes of God for China have been fulfilled over many decades, even centuries. Seeds sown a century or more ago are only now bearing fruit. God is Lord of history and works through history. Spiritual principles have been at work - of seed-time, patient watering and harvest, and of a bitter winter of suffering before the bursting out of spring.