



Jesus in Beijing

By David Aikman

Introduction

I first became interested in this story while working in Hong Kong in the 1970s as a correspondent for *Time* magazine. It was difficult for Westerners to enter China at all in that period, though I made three visits to China during 1972-1976. But every reporter in Hong Kong on the China-watching beat tried hard to piece together what was going on in the country from the fragmentary information available. There were, of course, the official New China (or Xinhua) News Agency stories, carefully crafted to hew to the correct political line. Like Kremlinologists of yore, many of us in Hong Kong pored over stories of such epochal events as, say, a visit to Beijing by the foreign minister of San Marino, to see which Chinese officials showed up at the official banquet. But enticing tidbits of information were also leaking out of south China through the thousands of Hong Kong Chinese and overseas Chinese who were permitted to visit relatives in China.

Many of these visitors, especially those from Hong Kong, were churchgoing Chinese Christians who snatched at any information they could about the status of fellow believers in China as the nation staggered to pull itself together after the chaos of the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution. It was from such visitors that remarkable stories of an incipient Christian revival inside China began to emerge. Later, in the mid-1980s, I lived in China for nearly two years as the *Time* bureau chief in Beijing. Foreigners, especially foreign reporters, were watched carefully by the Chinese government at the time. It was possible to visit privately with ordinary Chinese, but at some risk to them. I used to show up unannounced in the dilapidated home of one Christian family in north Beijing after donning a thickly padded cotton Chinese military coat, a surgical face mask, and a large fur hat and bicycling through the city streets after dark. An elderly Chinese Christian physician loved to tell me stories of peasant evangelists from the countryside who dropped by to pick up Bibles or Christian literature. Her son, a Communist Party member, was also a believer.

I returned briefly to Beijing in June 1989, in time to witness firsthand the military crackdown on protesting students and citizens in the capital on June 4. I came back to China again several times during the 1990s, at first while still with *Time* and later as a freelance journalist. Each time I sought out long time contacts among China's Christian community or developed new ones.

The genesis of this book goes back to August 1998 when, with another reporter, Mark O'Keefe, then of *The Oregonian* newspaper, I was introduced by a Chinese contact to top leaders of China's largest networks of Christians in the "house churches," unregistered gatherings of Christians who wanted nothing to do with the government approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) or the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). The secret meeting in a safe house on the outskirts of Zhengzhou, capital city of Henan Province, required elaborate arrangements for Mark and me to attend without putting at risk any of the Chinese participants. It turned out to be the first occasion on which China's "house church" leaders, sometimes referred to outside China as "underground," had agreed not only to

meet with reporters from Western news organizations, but also to be photographed and openly identified by their own names as well. The participants compiled their first official collective statement of opinion for the benefit of both the Three-Self and China's government. We later published this in the United States (See Appendix A). The document was significant not just because it was the first deliberate effort of house church network leaders to reveal themselves, but also because it showed that China's underground Christians, despite decades of persecution, did not consider themselves *political* dissidents, and in fact took pride in proclaiming their Chinese patriotism. (Specifically, they opposed political independence for either Tibet or Taiwan.)

I returned to China again in 1999, arriving in Shanghai during the climax of China's celebrations of the first fifty years of Communist rule. Although I saw the fireworks, I spent much of the time furtively wandering the city looking up old house church contacts.

Finally, to gather the bulk of reporting for this book, I went back to China for three months in the summer of 2002. I travelled extensively around China (though not to Tibet, nor on this occasion to the far western region of Xinjiang), talking to as many people as I could, both inside and outside of China's Christian community, to try to peer into the situation. I was given remarkably free access, especially by senior leaders of China's various house church groups, most of whom I had met at the historical meeting in August 1998. (For more details about the reporting of this book, see Appendix D, the transcript of remarks to a Beijing audience in 2004.)

Chapter 1: Jesus comes to Beijing

The eighteen American tourists visiting China weren't expecting much from the evening's scheduled lecture. They were already exhausted from a day of touring in Beijing. But what the speaker had to say astonished them.

"One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world," he said. "We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity.

That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this. "

This was not coming from some ultra-conservative at a think tank in Orange County, California, or from Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. This was a scholar from China's premier academic research institute, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing, in 2002. Though CASS has had a reputation since its inception for gently pushing the envelope of acceptable areas of research in China, it is hardly a viper's nest of liberal dissent.

We'll call the speaker Dr. Wu - an urbane academic in his late thirties who spoke excellent English, specialized in the study of religion, / and was deeply knowledgeable about not just China but the history of the West in general and the United States in particular. During his presentation to the American visitors, he let them take notes and even record his voice, but he didn't want to be filmed or identified by name.

The Americans were not typical of the 12 million foreign tourists who flock to China every year. Although they made the requisite stops at the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, and a large Peking duck restaurant during their eight-day excursion, their tour was called "A Christian Heritage Tour of China." The group was made up of twelve middle-class professionals - most of them Christian ministers - almost all from California or Texas, and six of their wives, and they were in China to see what was still left of the historic Christian legacy in China.

Though China's tourism authorities were happy enough to indulge a quaint American taste for ecclesiastical archaeology, the tourists were more likely expecting to hear the official old Communist dogma about religion being the opium of the people and missionaries being tools of Western imperialism, not this enthusiastic observation of Christianity by a member of China's academic elite.

Had Christianity reached far deeper into Chinese culture and society than most people inside or outside China hitherto thought? My own answer is, definitely yes, as this book, based upon decades of interest in the topic and extensive reporting in China in the summer and fall of 2002, will show. New reporting done for this edition, including an additional reporting trip to China in July 2004, further supported that conclusion.

HOW MANY CHRISTIANS IN CHINA?

Just how many Christians are there in China? The answer is not a simple one. As part of their tour, the Americans had visited several large churches that the Communist authorities had, beginning in the late 1970s, allowed to officially reopen, in Beijing as well as other parts of China. Some of these had been constructed decades earlier in the era of vigorous missionary activity in China. The visitors had been surprised to discover how packed these churches were, not just on Sundays but even during mid-week worship services or other occasions for teaching.

The only Protestant Chinese organization that is permitted by the Communist Party to function openly is the China Christian Council (CCC), a sort of organizational umbrella for China's government sanctioned Protestant churches. Its Catholic counterpart, the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), is the only official Catholic entity allowed to function. The CCC was formed in the early 1980s to provide China's Protestant Christian church hierarchy a small measure of distance from the government organization established by the Communist Party in the 1950s to take control of Chinese Protestantism. This organization was the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), an administrative entity whose job it was to ensure that all the activities of China's officially approved Protestant churches conformed to Beijing's political and social objectives. As we shall see, the relationship of the CCC and the Three-Self from the beginning has overlapped. The CCC routinely claims to have some 15 million baptized believers on its church rolls throughout China. The CPA says its churches have registered 6 million baptized Catholics.

But these figures are not considered credible even by China's own Public Security Bureau, the official police force, which in the past few years has indicated privately that there are at least 25 million Christians in China. Both Chinese within China and visiting observers generally believe that the numbers of Christians who attend churches not approved by the government - unofficial, so-called "house churches" - may exceed by a factor of three or four those under the various Chinese government-approved umbrellas.

In effect, the number of Christian believers in China, both Catholic and Protestant, may be closer to 80 million than the official combined Catholic-Protestant figure of 21 million. One Three-Self pastor privately estimated that Protestant Christians account for 1/10 of the population, and American visitors have also been told by some officials (though not ones from the Three-Self or any other religion-connected organization) that the number may exceed one hundred million. But, the reality is simply that no one knows for sure. All we do know is that Christianity has grown at a staggering speed since 1979, when China began to relax the fierce restrictions on religious activity that had been imposed in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution.

CHRISTIANS EVERYWHERE

It was already clear in the 1980s that Christians were beginning to show up, though almost never identified as such, within the Chinese Communist Party. But during the 1990s it became clear that something else was happening too. I began to meet intellectuals, academics, social scientists, businessmen, artists and musicians, some of them Party members, most of them not, who were unmistakably Christian believers, and who acknowledged this privately.

I also began to encounter increasing numbers of visitors to China, some of them ethnic Chinese, some of them Westerners, who had extraordinary tales of their own about visits with Christian contacts across the country. I was unprepared for the dimensions of what I learned.

In 2000, several leaders of the Fangcheng fellowship, one of China's largest house church networks, travelled to Guangzhou to meet with me in order to update me on their views of the current status of Christianity in China. By then, it had long since become clear to me that the progress of Christianity in China was not something that belonged just in the annual newsletter of some church missionary group in America's Bible Belt.

From the grassroots of the peasantry to high within China's establishment, the country was being seeded with believing Christians. In numerical terms they were still a small minority, perhaps 7 to 8 percent of the country's 1.2 billion population. But they were being noticed, and they kept turning up in the most unexpected places.

Consulate officers. I learned, for example, that at least three of the six Chinese consulates in the United States have Christian believers among their officers. The embassy in Tokyo has at least one. It is very probable that Christians are among the officers of Chinese embassies all over Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. I discovered that there are deputy provincial governors, judges, and lawyers in China who are Christians, and that legal experts were working hard behind the scenes to try to implement laws of religious freedom and the larger concept of the rule of law - not just for Christians to be able to worship without harassment, but for followers of all faiths.

Entrepreneurs. There are Christian entrepreneurs at every level of Chinese society, including some of the richest men in the country. Zhang Jian, forty-two, is the co-founder with his brother of Broad air conditioners, and the two were the first Chinese to own their own private aircrafts. Zhang became a Christian in January 2001 and is eager to link up with other Christian businessmen around the country. He is not alone. Groups of Christian CEO's now meet in cities including Beijing and Shanghai to discuss their potential role in modelling high business ethics in China.

Zhang Boli, a former student dissident who was on the police list of the twenty-one most-wanted student leaders of the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests, became a Christian while on the run in his own country before escaping in 1991. Now a pastor of two Chinese churches in the Washington, D.C., area, he estimates that as many as 20 percent of all Chinese at universities outside of China may by now have become Christian.

Political dissidents. Zhang Boli notes that he is one of at least two Christian clergy from the original twenty-one most-wanted student protest leaders, both now in the United States. The other is Xiong Yan, who was part of the Tiananmen hunger strike team and one of the student representatives who met, futilely, with leaders including then Premier Li Peng himself in an effort to defuse the tensions shortly before the June 4, 1989, crackdown. Xiong is now a chaplain in the U.S. Army, and completed a second tour in Iraq in March 2005.

Two other Tiananmen protest leaders are also Christian. One of them, Wu'er Kaixi, currently lives in Taiwan with his Taiwanese wife. Wu'er, a Uighur ethnic minority from the region of Xinjiang in far western China, was baptized in Taiwan by Zhang Boli in 2002. The other is Han Dongfang, the founder of the non-official labor union, the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation. Han actually walked into a police station in July 1989 to protest his inclusion on the most wanted lists, convinced that he had done nothing wrong during the student protests. He was promptly arrested and was thrown into a cell in the infectious diseases ward of a prison, where he contracted tuberculosis and nearly died in prison. Released and permitted to go to the United States in 1992 on medical grounds, he was converted in an overseas Chinese church in New Jersey in 1993. He now resides in Hong Kong, broadcasting to China about Chinese labor problems for the U.S.-government funded Radio Free Asia.

Some other Christian dissidents include Wang Xizhe, who helped pen a "big-character" protest poster in Guangzhou in 1974 and subsequently spent a total of seventeen years in prison before winning asylum in the United States. He was baptized as a Christian in California in Aug. 2000. Two other prominent dissidents who became Christians while in exile in the United States are Dr. Wang Bingzhang and Dr. Yang Jianli; both were arrested by Chinese police in 2002 (Wang was kidnapped in Vietnam and taken back to China, Yang had snuck into China on false travel documents) and are currently serving prison terms, Wang a life sentence and Yang five years.

THE IMPACT OF A CHRISTIANIZED CHINA

Clearly, Christianity is filtering into multiple layers of Chinese society. But what does this mean? During three months of reporting the situation of Christianity in China in 2002, I was startled to discover other aspects of the Christian growth that are of profound importance to how the world responds to Islamic-origin terrorism in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

A journal clandestinely published by Chinese Protestant house church Christians admitted that some Chinese had applauded the terrorist attacks on American civilians, but pointed out - quite accurately - that a number of Chinese (along with citizens from more than seventy other nations) had died in the New York World Trade Center attacks. Therefore, the magazine asserted, President George W. Bush's decision to declare war against the terrorists was to maintain justice, and so was Biblical in nature.

The vast majority of China's Protestant house church Christians, it turns out, are deeply pro-American and determined to evangelize the Muslim world,

something Americans generally have been hesitant to do with much boldness. Chinese Christians believe - indeed some of them refer to it as a divine calling - that Christian believers from China are to bring the Gospel to the Muslim nations of the world.

"Muslims prefer Chinese to Americans. They don't like Americans very much," one Chinese Christian said bluntly. He outlined several reasons why Chinese Christians can succeed where Westerners have failed. A major advantage is that the Chinese government supports the anti-American objectives of some political groups in the Middle East "so the Muslim nations support China." He added, "Besides, we have a lot of experience of persecution." Chinese Christians have learned through hard experience that "wherever we go, as soon as we arrive, we always look to see what the best escape route will be."

This Chinese Christian articulated the view that Chinese believers would play a major role in bringing back the teachings of Jesus to the Middle East. "We have the view that Chinese missionaries will be part of the mainstream on the highway back to Jerusalem. The Muslim religion is the biggest obstacle on the road back to Jerusalem," he said.

A Christianized China is poised to change the face not just of Christendom worldwide, but potentially of the world of Islam.

AN OPPORTUNE TIME FOR CHRISTIANITY

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE "OPEN DOOR"

China has never been as intellectually and philosophically open to the outside world as it is today. Deng Xiaoping, who came to power in 1978, opened China up both to its own latent internal creative energies and to the outside world with his famous "open door" policy. To unleash the considerable energy and creative talents of China's entrepreneurs and workers, the regime took a conscious decision to loosen many of the clamps that had been fastened in place on Chinese social and civil life for decades.

For example, until the 1980s, every Chinese was at the mercy of his or her work unit, the *danwei*, a control system that determined residence location, job description, often even whether marriage was permissible or not. As the demand for flexible labor deployment grew, the *danwei* system, though still in place in much of the country, began to break down.

As China came to require a much deeper knowledge than hitherto allowed of the outside world in order to compete economically in the global marketplace, it became possible for ordinary Chinese to have contact with foreigners, then to travel overseas, and more recently, to have access to foreign-source information - including much information about China - through the Internet. Though the Chinese Communist Party blocks key Internet sites, in some cases with the cooperation of the foreign owners of Internet search engines, overall, China's authorities have permitted their people unprecedented freedom of intellectual investigation and social activity at the *private* level for most of the past decade.

An inquisitive Chinese in China today would have no difficulty finding out the name of the prime minister of Montenegro, the total size of the U.S. defense budget, or for that matter, what the Christian theological issues at stake were in the fourth-century dispute between Arius and Athanasius. A Chinese interested in religion can attend, without fear of the consequences, any officially approved Protestant or Catholic church, can purchase books that explain, even sympathetically, the nature of Christian belief, can buy a Bible (but only at a Three-Self or CPA church, not in any ordinary bookstore), and can openly question a pastor or

priest about the differences between, say, Premillennialist Dispensational eschatology and that of the Protestant Reformed tradition.

Foreign capital, technological expertise, and management skills have flowed into the country. From 1979 until the late 1990s, China's GDP grew at an annual rate of 9.5 percent, in some years reaching into the superheated zone of 14 percent. Things have slowed down somewhat since then, but not by much. The official annual growth rate for 2005 was still 9.8 percent.

Yet, the headlong growth of the economy has brought along plenty of downsides, including company collapses, stock market volatility, and dangerously widening income gaps between China's rich coastal cities and the impoverished inland provinces. The migration from countryside to city has led to a "floating population" of millions of illegal squatters in Beijing and other major cities and has depressed industrial wages in many parts of the country. Working conditions in many of China's urban factories may well be worse today than at any time in China's Communist history. Corruption in China is broadly acknowledged, and regularly deplored, at the very highest level of political leadership. Virtually every American business executive who has had anything to do with China can rattle off personal encounters with corruption. Beyond the occasional high-profile arrests and executions, little is done to fix the problems.

In China you can do anything you like if you have money. The only thing you can't do is what you can't think up to do," said a Chinese who lives in the United States but visits his home country several times each year. One of his good friends, a senior judge in an inland province, told him that, for 30,000-50,000 yuan (approximately \$3,750-6,250), even a man on death row could buy his freedom. Furthermore, if the sentence were commuted to fifteen years in prison, not even that would have to be served. Many Chinese, the judge said, will actually do the prison time for you if you pay them, say, \$30 a month.

China's Communist regime still ruthlessly represses people for any explicit display of political protest, as practitioners of the Falungong meditation practice discovered to their painful cost during 1998-2001. At the local level, sadistic provincial officials also can, and do, take the law into their own hands for arbitrary purposes. Christians who choose to meet together without formal authorization or registration of their organization can be, and have been, right up through 2006, arrested, beaten, and tortured without compunction by local officials of the Public Security Bureau.²

But compared with the blanket of desolate socialist totalitarianism that smothered the creative springs of China's culture and thought-life from the late 1950s until about 1978, today's civic freedom is a heady breath of intellectual liberty.

These factors - economic growth, increasing access to information, added civic freedoms, and the need for a consciousness to combat the social ills of prosperity - combine to create an opportune atmosphere for the growth of Christianity in China both as a movement and as an ideology.

FILLING AN IDEOLOGICAL VACUUM

It is significant that Christianity is emerging in China at a time when there is a massive ideological vacuum left in society by the nationwide collapse of belief in Marxism-Leninism.

Chairman Mao's catastrophic Cultural Revolution had "cured" almost all Chinese of any belief in the veracity of Communist theory. It is hard to find anyone in China today who truly believes in the theoretical truth of China's official political ideology, ponderously called "Marxist-Leninist, Mao Zedong Thought". Marxism

was tried in the) extreme form during Mao's nearly two decades of utopian economic and social tinkering (1958-1976) and it was found to be irremediably destructive.

The Communist Party has managed to maintain power for more than a decade-and-a-half after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, despite predictions that it would probably fade from power quite soon, for two reasons: sheer inertia and the fear among most ordinary Chinese of *luan*, or chaos, that destructive anarchic condition that many foreigners thought was China's natural condition in the past two centuries. Fewer than four years after the 1989 crackdown, in 1993, I spoke to Chinese intellectuals at several of the nation's universities. The consensus was clear: democracy, yes, but please not next week. They did not want to see any political change come *quickly* to China.

When Deng launched his "open door" policies of internal reforms and access to China of foreign capital and expertise, Chinese quickly grasped that, from an economic point of view, capitalism was now becoming the system of choice to make China strong. With straight faced chicanery, the regime called the new system "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

This phrase obscured a more important point: what way of looking at life in general should Chinese now adopt? Marxism-Leninism itself was a dead letter. Confucianism, the ethical and moral system that China's ruling dynasties and ordinary people had sought to emulate for millennia, was certainly admired for its emphasis on family cohesion and mutual responsibility, but most Chinese considered it an unwieldy philosophy, incapable of the social change, capitalistic creativity, and entrepreneurial success needed in the newly globalized world of economic competition.

Many Chinese wondered: Is capitalism just a way of doing business, or did it come with concrete ethical and philosophical foundations? Many Chinese sociologists note that, in the coastal city of Wenzhou, in Zhejiang province, south of Shanghai, Christianity in the 1980s seemed to surge proportionately to the success of Wenzhou retailers in making money. In fact, more than a decade ago, some Chinese, thinking about capitalism, Christianity, and Wenzhou, were making the intellectual connection between religion and the rise of capitalism, the central thesis of R. H. Tawney in his influential book with the same name, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.³

Perhaps, some Chinese began to think, Christianity itself, which had been such a powerful, if not fully understood, ingredient in the global pre-eminence of Western civilization, may be a world view, even a metaphysic, that could guide China's pathway into the twenty-first century. Perhaps it could even provide a lens for Chinese to understand their own history with greater insight than ever before.

A NEW WORLDVIEW FOR THE CHINESE?

By the early 1990s, a new kind of Chinese had come into existence at Chinese universities and research institutions: "cultural Christians". Many reject the name, as we shall see later, and prefer to use the ponderous phrase "Chinese scholars interested in Christianity". But the phenomenon was real enough: highly educated Chinese who were not satisfied that either the Marxist interpretation of religion or the standard Western Darwinian understanding of life adequately explained the human condition in general and the Chinese condition in particular.

Nor was it among just Western-trained academics or Shanghai yuppies that

these ideas began to be discussed. Early in 2002, China's then-president and Communist Party leader, Jiang Zemin, attended a dinner party in the private home of another senior Chinese political figure in the heart of Beijing. The conversation turned to the Party's upcoming Sixteenth Congress, a momentous, once-every-five-years gathering then scheduled for the late autumn of 2002 (the Congress convened November 7-15, 2002).

The company was relaxed, the mood ebullient. "Comrade Jiang," a guest asked, "if, before leaving office, you could make one decree that you knew would be obeyed in China, what would it be?" Jiang put on a broad smile and looked around the room. "I would make:

Christianity the official religion of China," he replied.' Jiang, of course, formally relinquished the reins of power at the Sixteenth Party Congress to his successor as party general secretary, Hu Jintao, and even if he wanted to implement that wish, is no longer in a position to do so. But even if he were being merely playful with his fellow guests,.. his whimsical comment was telling.

In 1949, the world's most populous nation adopted the materialist philosophy of a nineteenth-century German and a twentieth-century Russian in its search for wealth and power after a century of foreign encroachments on its government and culture. That philosophy turned out to be bankrupt, and China is almost self-consciously casting around for something to replace it. Christianity has not yet been embraced as that replacement by the Chinese people, but today it is in a very good position to do so.

Foreigners, and especially foreign Christians, have for centuries yearned for China to change in a direction they considered desirable ' for both Chinese and themselves. Often, their hopes and aspirations have been illusory or just plain naive. But China, whether it becomes Christian or goes in another direction, *is* changing right before our eyes. It is the Christian component of that change, and the remarkable potential contained therein, that this book is about.