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## Essays

### Christianity Comes to China's Cities

December 2006

by *Leslie Hook*

When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, just under 0.8% of Chinese were baptized Christians. Today, the government officially counts 21 million Catholics and Protestants combined, or 1.6% of the population. But this is a gross underestimate, since the majority of Christians do not attend official churches. An 85-year-old retired pastor in Beijing, who asked that his name not be used, claims that one in 10 Chinese are Christian. The 2003 book *Jesus in Beijing* by David Aikman cites another estimate of around 80 million Catholics and Protestants combined—6% of the population.



Even more significant than the fact that Christianity is spreading, is that it is making major inroads for the first time among the middle classes and intellectuals in towns and cities. "Before the year 2000, most believers were in the countryside," says Beijing writer Yu Jie, who converted in 2003. "After 2000, they started to move into urban centers, cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou—it started spreading among central intellectuals."

While most Chinese Christians see their faith as separate from politics, the phenomenon has huge implications for the country's political and social development. Conventional wisdom has it that Christianity fills a vacuum left by the loss of faith in communist ideology. But interpreting this shift as simply one faith replacing another underestimates its importance. Christianity is attracting educated Chinese who don't necessarily want an all-encompassing dogma to rule their lives, but rather a humanistic framework in which they have a large degree of intellectual freedom. Moreover, Christianity is providing an alternate system of societal values to address problems that have emerged since China began its transition to a free-market economy.

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The church is growing despite—or perhaps even because of—government attempts to control it over the last several decades. In the early 1950s, Protestant and Catholic leaders were forced to join the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Catholic Patriotic Association respectively—essentially state organs of the Bureau of Religious Affairs that were intended to ensure that Christianity stayed under control. Many were imprisoned because they refused to do so.

The 85-year-old pastor describes how the growth of the church in China, despite government restrictions, mirrors that of the early Christian church persecuted by Roman authorities. But the futility of that response is now evident. “Right now the response [of the Bureau of Religious Affairs] is *mei banfa*—they have no idea what to do,” he says. Although the government at first tried to constrict churches through arrests and harassment, he says that they have realized that approach only backfires. “If they arrested the head of one house church, the congregation would just split up, and might break into five, six, or even 10 new house churches.”

Over the last century Christianity remained most popular in the countryside, where Western missionaries had attracted poorer, less-educated converts. The elderly pastor describes how during the decades before 1949, people who were educated and well-off had no interest in Christianity. “The educated basically rejected these foreign things.”

What has changed today? Surprisingly, many urban Christians say the religion is a force contributing to China's development intellectually, economically and socially. In other words, although the faith of most is personal and not political, there is a strong belief that faith and progress are linked. Christianity, they believe, can help China to become great, to modernize, to develop further.

“Faith and politics are definitely connected,” says one well-known dissident, who asks not to be identified as he has been forbidden to talk to journalists. As we stroll around the lakes by the west gate of Peking University, he muses, “What would China be like if its leaders were Christian? If even 50% of its cops were Christian? You can't even imagine... It would change so many things.”

Even those who reject a direct connection between Christianity and politics talk about the potential benefits of Christianity for a democracy. “I think that democracy and Christianity have some things to say to each other. But you can't use one to get to the other,” says Mr. Yu, the writer and intellectual. He feels that people are mistaken to view democracy and Christianity as a united front of thought, but that faith could be beneficial to society. “A democratic society naturally has many problems,” he says. “But if more people were Christian then it would be good for society. People would love each other more.... A society without religion cannot be a good democracy.”

A recent trend of Chinese Christian lawyers who feel called by their faith to take on pro bono human-rights cases also demonstrates this. When Mr. Yu met with President George W. Bush in May, the two people accompanying him were Chinese Christian lawyers, Wang Yi and Li Baiguang—and both of them, like Mr. Yu, had converted during the last couple of years. Mr. Yu

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explains that this area of work is one of the unique aspects of the church he attends, Fangcheng, or the Ark Church, in Beijing. "Our church wants social equality," he begins, describing some of their social service programs. "And we happen to have a lot of lawyers, so they can provide free services to people who have suffered harm, whether or not they are Christian."

Recently the connection between Christianity and capitalism has also become a hot topic of discussion. One of the most high-profile believers in an explicit link is Zhao Xiao, a young economist who is currently a post-doctoral economics student at Peking University. Early this year, he published an 11-page essay in the Chinese edition of Esquire magazine entitled "God Is My CEO."

Mr. Zhao began by talking about the central role of the Christian faith in the U.S., and then laid out what he sees as some of the pros and cons of a market economy: "A market economy has the great benefit of teaching people not to be lazy. However, a market economy cannot teach people not to lie, or not to harm others. This is where the danger in a market economy lies."

Quoting Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he outlined how the presence of the church in a market economy can help people to trust each other, and give them a basis for mutual respect. Another benefit of the church in a market economy is that it can "guide the way that wealth is used, and alleviate the tensions between the rich and the poor" by encouraging tithing and charity work. Finally he profiled several successful Christian businessmen, including Richard Chang, CEO of Taiwan's Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation, Shi Dakun, president of Motorola China, and Chan Kei Thong, founder and CEO of Leadership Development International.

### **Multiple Avenues to Faith**

Since China began to open up in the 1980s the number of intellectuals who travel abroad for part of their education has steadily increased. As these students try to come to terms with their foreign surroundings, many of them get invited to attend church, where they find friendly faces and discover a sense of community. "Right now a lot of the Chinese abroad, especially in North America, are Christian," says Mr. Yu. "These people who convert abroad have been coming back in the last few years." Not only do these overseas Christians have an impact when they return to China, they also work to convert their families and friends while still abroad, or do evangelical work on the side when they come back to China for business trips.

China's internal migration also contributes to the spread of Christianity. Factory workers who leave their homes in the countryside to find work in the city sometimes find God along the way. Cities like Wenzhou, a famous manufacturing capital in Zhejiang province with a large and active Christian population, spread the gospel as they spread their trade. Christian factory owners often give their workers Sundays and church holidays off, a practice that contrasts with the 24/7 operations of many competitors.

People who move out of relatively Christian areas bring their Bibles with them wherever they go. One Christian woman from Wenzhou describes how she and her husband had helped the small church in Jishou, in western Hunan Province, that they joined when they moved four years ago to open a shop selling sweaters. "There aren't very many Christians in Jishou," she says disappointedly, explaining that a lot of the members of the church were from out of town. "Our church is short of pastors and teachers, so everyone takes turns helping out. My husband even preaches sometimes." In the past few years they and other immigrants have been instrumental in helping the church find a permanent room to rent—not just someone's home—and grow into a congregation of around 100 people.

China's different generations each experience Christianity in their own way. People in their 20s associate religious exploration with the freedom that comes from entering college. "In high school you study all day, but in college you have more freedom, you meet more people, and you become familiar with more aspects of society," says a 21-year-old medical student at Peking University Health Science Center, who asked that her name not be used. For her, college social life brought her to church. "You meet so many people in college," she explains, and "many people first come to church with friends when they are freshmen." For others, it is the intellectual life at college that draws them to explore religion. "For the first time in my life, I had time to read," a free-lance journalist recalls of his conversion to Christianity that began while he was a student at Beijing Communications University.

One Tsinghua University graduate explains that for him Christianity is an expression of intellectual freedom. Students who master the education system and succeed in attending university have had to jump through ideological hoops their whole lives in order to succeed, he continues. Even joining the Communist Party is one more step on this conventional path, however little one agrees with their ideas. So when the opportunity arises, choosing to become a Christian can signal something of a private rebellion.

Many college students and recent graduates, regardless of their religious beliefs, identify openness towards religious experimentation as a characteristic of their generation. "It's easier for my generation to accept new faith, because our world is always changing so much, especially compared to our parent's generation," said Raymond, who struck up a conversation as he was browsing through the religion section in a bookstore near Tsinghua. Though currently agnostic, he is planning to pursue a master's degree in Buddhist studies, and plans to choose a religion for himself after his studies. "Everyone needs a faith," he says. The medical student at Peking University agrees: "Society has developed so fast—we're just used to adapting."

But Christian students at universities also face some unique challenges. Bible studies and worship groups are restricted on many campuses, and Christian students often keep their faith to themselves for fear of recrimination if they were found out. "If the teachers knew that I was a Christian, that would be bad," says the medical student at Peking University. When asked to elaborate, she looks embarrassed and reveals that she has recently joined the Communist Party, which forbids its members from believing in

any religious doctrine.

Her Communist Party membership, she explains, is just a step on the path to having the life that God intended for her. "I have to live in China, and I want to achieve a good position in life, so it's best to be a Party member." She refers to *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren, a book popular in the United States, and explains how being a Party member will enable her to use her medical studies for the purpose God intended. "The purpose that God has chosen for me is to alleviate the suffering of others and to heal them, so becoming a party member is a step on this path."

Meeting Christians who are also party members is not uncommon, and many in Beijing bring up disillusionment with communism to explain the trend of Christian conversion among China's intellectuals. The 85-year-old pastor in Beijing says that doubts about communism started when people began to be able to go abroad. "The most typical example is Yuan Zhiming," he says. "[He and others like him] researched communism till they were blue in the face. He got his doctorate in Marx-Engels thought, and then he was a university professor teaching Marx-Engels thought. But when they got to the U.S. they saw that it wasn't like that. They looked for the truth and discovered, *aiya*, we've been cheated. Pursuing a faith would be beneficial." Mr. Yuan became a Christian after being exiled to the U.S. for his role in the Tiananmen demonstrations, and has made several famous documentary films, including *River Elegy*, and *The Cross*, which looks at China's underground churches.

Others bring up disillusionment with the democracy movement to explain how they've come to their faith. Mr. Yu says the recent trend of intellectuals converting stems from the failures of the Tiananmen democracy movement in 1989. "There was a big group of intellectuals and students who went to the West [after Tiananmen]... But the internal struggles of this movement made a lot of people disappointed and bitter." He explains that a weakened faith in democracy led some former activists who were abroad to search for something else, and some intellectuals still in China had followed suit. "They started to think that they needed something more—a religious faith—so many became Christian." He lists off of the leaders of Tiananmen who have since become Christian, including Mr. Yuan. "There are five or six leaders who are now Christian, which is quite a lot considering that's out of a pool of about 30." He continues, "When these guys [who were abroad] became Christian, the young intellectuals who were still in China began to pay attention. At that time a lot of them were feeling quite hopeless."

From Mr. Yu's perspective, Christianity is also attractive to the minority of intellectuals who have not "sold out"—become more conservative and less critical of Chinese government and society in exchange for higher income and more comfortable lives. "Starting in 1990, the government began to change its policies towards intellectuals," he explains. "Professors could have a higher salary, a better position... Only a small minority still persevere and speak the truth, but even if you speak the truth you might be ostracized—like Jiao Guobiao," he says, referring to a professor at Peking University who lost his job after publishing a vitriolic criticism of the Central Propaganda Department, and recently became a

Christian as well. "So the small minority that persevered felt very isolated, and they needed something more to turn to."

This trend of democracy advocates who have converted to Christianity highlights the uncomfortable association between religion and political activism. Uncomfortable because there are deep disagreements within the Christian camp between those who see Christianity as a necessary background for a democratic society in the future, and those who strongly oppose any such association.

In response to a direct question about the political implications of their Christian faith, most people say there aren't any. "Politics is very, very far away from the average Christian," says the Christian free-lance writer. "Rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's," he says, quoting Jesus' response when asked whether Christians should obey non-Christian government leaders.

Mr. Yu says the question of how Christianity and democracy are related has been a divisive issue in his church. "For me it's clear. First I am a Christian. Second I am a writer. I am not a politician. It doesn't matter to me whether China becomes a democracy. I'm an intellectual and so I criticize society, but I don't have a hidden agenda." He mentions one prominent human-rights lawyer—Gao Zhisheng, who became Christian in 2005 and is now under detention—who he felt was using Christianity as a tool to further his democracy agenda. "We found that he wasn't so interested in the church, but rather in using the church as an arena for his own beliefs."

### **Rural Emotions**

Two hundred and seventy kilometers from the birthplace of Mao Zedong, Tan Chuntao's eyes glisten as she describes the near-death experience that led her to decide to attend seminary for two years. "When they were doing surgery on me on the eighth floor of the hospital, I kept hearing this song inside my head. It's hymn number 250," and she starts singing. "I had never heard that song before, but I had it running through my head the whole time. So after that I taught the hymn to the congregation."

With her crisp green Mao jacket, her warm face, straight posture, the fervor in her features, Ms. Tan could be a character in a propaganda film if it weren't for the fact that she were singing a hymn. We are in the sleepy township of Xinqiao, in northern Hunan province, and Ms. Tan is the local party secretary's wife. Around us are gardens with leafy greens and rice paddies lying fallow for the winter. With two paved streets and a two-storey school building, Xinqiaozhen is well-off compared to much of China's countryside. Even more impressive is the village's brand new church, just completed in April with funding from a congregation in the U.S.

Hunan is not particularly known as a hotbed of Christianity—that honor goes to provinces like Henan, Zhejiang, Hubei and Anhui—but Ms. Tan says all the churches in the area are growing. "Christianity has developed very quickly in Xinqiao," she says, counting four official churches and two house churches in the township, and estimating around 1,000 Christians out of a

population of 90,000. Most of the Christians here are women, a trend that holds true across China but particularly in the countryside.

In the nearby town of Zhangjiatie, the gender divide is stark. The town's church—a stately pink-and-cream stone building built in 1905 by a Finnish missionary—holds around 600 people. But even though the pews are overflowing on Sunday morning, only a handful of men are visible, and the average age of the congregation is pushing 70. This demographic profile is not uncommon in rural areas, where Christianity has thrived since before the Communist Party came to power, but it is in sharp contrast with urban churches where men and women, old and young, seem to be in equal proportion. This demographic divide is one reason for the deep ideological divide between China's rural and urban churches.

Urban believers might cringe or sigh at experiences like those describes by Ms. Tan, which they perceive as overly emotional and pseudo-superstitious. Mr. Yu sums up some of the ideological differences: “Believing in Christ should be balanced between reason and emotion. But in the countryside [faith] leans more towards the emotional side. On Sundays, they might yell loudly, or cry. Sometimes it goes too far.... They think they don't need to go to the hospital to heal themselves—like Falun Gong. That really worries me.”

But love it or hate it, urbanites don't deny that Christianity's current boom in the cities is largely due to the religion's strong rural roots. With few exceptions, Christians I met in Beijing had a relative or two in the countryside who converted before they did. One example is the Beijing dissident who recently became a Christian—in fact almost all of his family, who live in the countryside in Henan province, are Christian. He says having Christianity in the countryside is a “good foundation” for Christianity to spread in the cities. Yet he hesitates slightly when asked if his faith is the same as that of his relatives. “There is a big difference in how you worship on Sunday, but not in the basic beliefs.”

Nevertheless, the importance of Christianity in the countryside is impossible to overestimate. A college student in Beijing says that for students, having a grandmother back home who is a Christian and can “talk to them about things like this,” makes them much more likely to explore Christianity when they go to college. And the 85-year-old pastor reflects that every single true missionary he knows is from a poor, rural background.

So what does this demographic shift mean for the future of Christianity in China? Many in Beijing were optimistic that the presence of more, better-educated Christians in China would only smooth the way for greater religious freedom in the future. “We are not far from an era of religious freedom in China,” says one Christian intellectual as we sit in a pagoda on the campus of Peking University. “Before, the peasants used rough, wild methods [to express their faith]. But now there are more educated Christians, so it will easier for there to be more freedom.”

Although this may be an oversimplification, he is probably not wrong. A few days later and thousands of kilometers away, I end

up sharing a sleeper car with three middle-aged cadres from various parts of Hunan. As an icebreaker, they ask rather earnestly what my opinion of Chairman Mao is. Yet when I told them I was working on a story about Christianity they were almost encouraging. "Well, if you're a party member like we are you can't believe in another religion, because communism is your faith," said Mr. Peng, a balding 33-year-old high school principal. "But religion is just fine for non-Party members." In fact a small church had just been built in his town, he said. The three of them took turns explaining to me that religion could actually be a good thing, because it could help build a more "harmonious society"—echoing the catchphrase of President Hu Jintao.

*Ms. Hook is a recent graduate of Princeton University and a Princeton in Asia fellow at the REVIEW.*

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