

Book Review

The Chinese Puzzle: Putting the Pieces Together for a Deeper Understanding of China and her Church

By Mike Falkenstine

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**Reviewed by G. Wright Doyle,
Ph.D.**

Though certain to stir up controversy, this book contains a message which should be pondered by Western, especially American, Christians with a burden for China.

Falkenstine seeks to “clarify perceptions of China and her church,” so that Western Christians may understand the current situation and serve more effectively. He believes that much misinformation, based upon an outdated paradigm perpetuated by people who profit from what he labels the “persecution myth,” hampers contemporary efforts to serve our brothers and sisters in China.

Chapter One “presents a history of Christianity in China and the missionary past,” in which we are reminded of the support some missionaries expressed, or even lent, in the imperialist aggression against China—a sad legacy that haunts Christians in China even today. Though perhaps a bit exaggerated, and based on limited sources, the presentation does reflect the view of many Chinese, especially those fed on communist propaganda, and is essential knowledge for outsiders who are largely ignorant of this ugly side of the missionary enterprise.

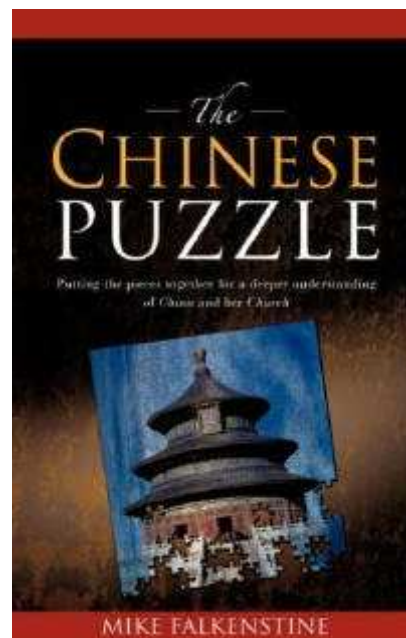
Chapter Two canvasses “the current trends that are changing China, from the inside out.” Here we are told, by Chinese house church leaders themselves, that “China is not a strict place.... If your relations with the Government Officials are good, you can do whatever you like, as long as there’s no trouble.” Falkenstine cites evidence for his claims that the government is looking ever more favorably upon religion in China; is building a society of laws; allows multiple open religious activities; and cannot control the flow of information.

The church, too, defies established stereotypes. Falkenstine describes the complex mosaic that includes registered and unregistered churches, the state-sponsored China Christian Council, rural Christian groups and “Cultural” Christians.

Chapter Three pleads for Westerners to take time to learn the Chinese language and culture, some of the salient features of which he briefly highlights. We are reminded of differences in relationship building, communication, leadership styles and interpretations of the “law.” He urges Christians from the outside to obey the laws of the land and to cherish an “immigrant,” rather than “imperialist” mentality.

Chapter Four tries heroically to explode the “persecution myth” that persists among American Christians today. Falkenstine believes that “persecution plays a small part of the overall role in Christianity in China,” and tries to support that contention with statistics from no less a source than China Aid, which specializes in “reporting Chinese persecution stories.”

He advocates careful and precise reporting and concludes with a brief



“theology of persecution,” in which he calls into question whether combating what little persecution does take place in China today should be a major goal for Western believers. Perhaps they ought rather to allow God to work out his purposes through suffering, which has often proven beneficial to church growth.

Like a good rhetorician, he has placed his most controversial material in the middle of the book. In the light of the recent crackdown on Christian activity, both Chinese and foreign, one wonders how this section of the book will stand the test of time. Some readers will object to the restriction of the definition of “persecution” to “outright arrest and detention.” What about the constant surveillance; time-consuming visits by the PSB to house-church leaders; the closing down of meetings and general discrimination against Christians? Others might question how Chinese Christians will react to a “theology of persecution” coming from a Westerner (though it is certainly a timely reminder for us!).

Chapter Five constitutes a summons for “Constructive Engagement in China,” as the author offers his own involvement as Exhibit A. His experience has convinced him that working openly with Chinese government officials, with no attempt to hide his Christian affiliation, produces long-lasting results. Guiding us through the Ethical Foundations for China Service, promulgated by his organization and others in 2006, he offers the counterpart of “best practices” guidelines for foreign Christians working in China.

This section shows how we can work with the existing structures and laws to benefit the growth of the church in China. Falkenstine proves this by the opportunities that his China Resource Center has been given, along with that of Evergreen China Service, which he highly admires.

Qualifications might be in order here: many evangelical organizations from the West *do* collaborate openly with Chinese counterparts, but not necessarily with the TSPM or government officials with whom Falkenstine enjoys such cordial relations. Other groups have found the government less cooperative than he has.

This reviewer especially appreciated the stress upon long-term commitment and a learner’s attitude for Westerners in China. His warning “not to put your own agenda before that of the local Chinese agencies,” remembering that “the Chinese are always the experts in their local areas,” should be carefully pondered by enthusiastic “helpers.”

In Chapter Six, the author cites surveys concluding that “the general population is not clamoring for democracy, and they are generally

happy with their quality of life.” In other words, they are not as obsessed with the lack of “human rights” as are outsiders. On the other hand, he is aware of the “endemic” corruption of the party-state and the de-stabilizing nature of the growing income disparity that worries the government so much.

There seems to be a bit of tension here which the author obviously recognizes but does not want to highlight. There is no strong movement towards democracy in China at the moment, but the current regime is encountering rising resentment which frequently explodes into violent protests as happened recently in Guizhou. Other observers paint the scene with darker hues than he does.

Falkenstine takes hope in the zeal and joy of rural Chinese Christians with whom he spends much of his time when in China.

The final chapter introduces the work of China Resource Center which grew out of his own experiences ministering to Chinese in Alabama, studying Mandarin in China, and then seeking to meet needs in cooperation with local church and government leaders.

His discovery that much ministry to the Chinese through the English language is greatly hampered by lack of comprehension merits careful consideration, especially by some very large organizations that base their entire strategy upon this method. Exceptions abound, of course, and should probably be attributed to the faith and humble love of the Westerners involved, as well as to the power of God’s Spirit working through his Word. Perhaps the author does not give adequate credit to the undeniable effectiveness of the life and witness of English teachers, for example.

Falkenstine writes clearly and concisely, often summarizing a great deal of information in a brief and readable compass.

Readers from the United Kingdom, or those with rather more experience in China, may find his breezy self-confidence off-putting. In my view, he exemplifies the quintessential American attitude of can-do optimism coupled with certitude that one knows the problem and the solution and possesses the resources and ability to accomplish the project with a minimum of difficulty. The pronoun “I” occurs frequently which might create the impression of pride unless you have met Mike personally.

Other examples of his sunny approach would be the conviction that there are enough Bibles already available in China and his minimizing of the very real gaps separating unregistered and official church groups. Though registered and unregistered groups do work together in many places, the legacy of TSPM sponsored persecution dies hard in others. Intractable theological differences will impede full cooperation until the TSPM abandons Bishop Ding’s “Theological Reconstruction” campaign.

Certain portions of the book appear to reflect inadequate editing; these will presumably be corrected in future editions.

G. Wright Doyle, Ph.D. is the director of the Global China Center. The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and should not be attributed to Global China Center.