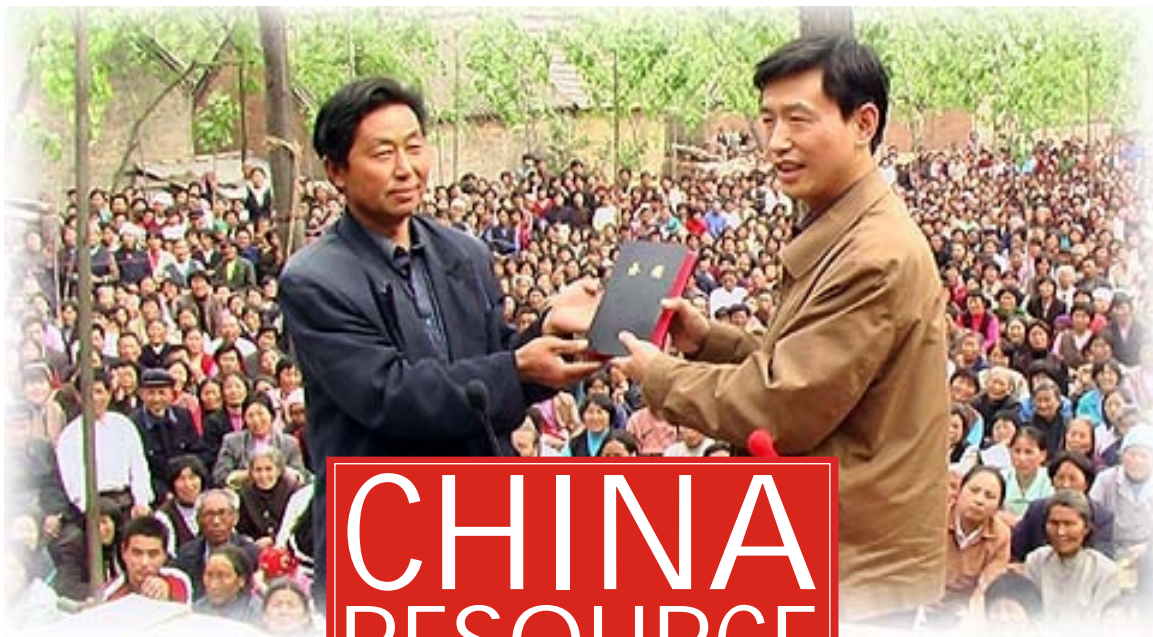
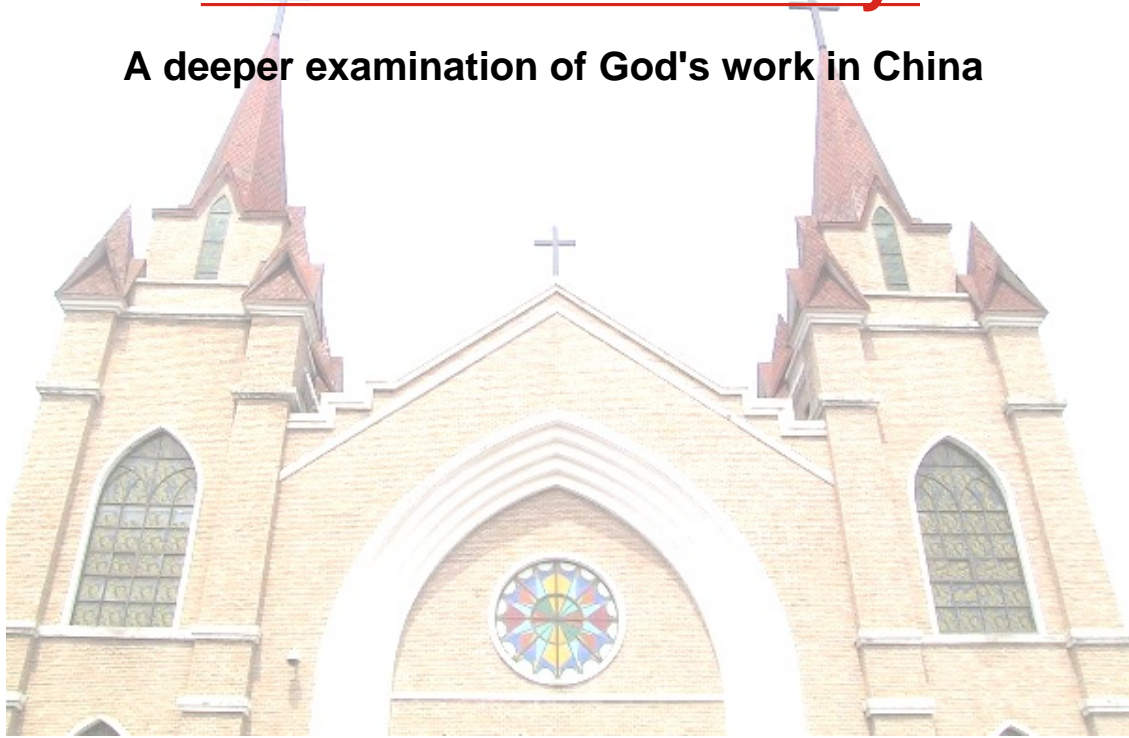


Christianity in China: The Rest of the Story!

A deeper examination of God's work in China



CHINA
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Lite Version

China Resource Center

The China Resource Center(CRC) exists to accomplish two main purposes:

1. We exist to serve the growth and development of the Church in China through theological training, Bible distribution, Church building and other partnership opportunities.
2. We exist to enhance the China ministry culture and clarify Western perceptions of Christianity in China through extensive research and education, thereby equipping China ministry leaders, workers and the Church in the West to more effectively advance the kingdom of God in China.

Our research is conducted by our office staff in the U.S. and through a network of Chinese Christians in China who are able to give us valuable information in China. Our main education tools include our quarterly Research Journal, our annual China Insight Seminars, our varied booklets, speaking in Churches about China and vision trips to China.

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Introduction

"For nearly five decades, a billion Chinese souls have been sealed off from the Gospel," the fundraising appeal starts off. *"Those who have received the Good News continue to be persecuted relentlessly in the latest crackdown from the Communist government. The secret police torture Christians with electric shock treatments, destroy house churches, and imprison pastors and their congregations."* A picture of a group of Chinese men wearing 1950's style clothing is captioned with, *"Your help is desperately needed to uplift persecuted Christians in China."* The words and pictures of this appeal sound so desperate and terrible that it is sure to raise money and feed the perception amongst Western Christians that most Christians in China are suffering relentlessly for their faith. It is carefully worded to communicate that if we don't financially partner on this project, millions of Christians in China will die for their faith. This picture of the plight of Christians in China and of the governments' position on Christianity in China dominates the Western world and is fed to us from a small number of organizations who are reporting on the situation in China. But what if it wasn't true? What if the picture was painted by a hired fundraising agency that has had no experience in China or China ministry? If the Chinese have been 'sealed off' from the Gospel for the past five decades, how did the Church in China grow from 700,000 Christians in 1949 to 50 million today? What if things in China had changed so much that most Christians in China were feeling increased freedoms in China? And what if Western Christians were increasingly able to work openly and legally within the country? One of the key answers to these questions is that wouldn't be good for those who feed us the doom and gloom of an awful Communist government looking to purposely hurt Christians.

It is these types of stories that raise money for those reporting on China. Regardless of their truthfulness, they are used to add to a ministry's coffers because these organizations know that Americans have an 'insatiable hunger' for persecution stories, and they need to raise their budget to continue operating. As one church missions leader told us recently, *"If you want to get the West excited, concerned, involved, donating, visiting, and praying for the saved and unsaved in China, stories about the persecution and hardship is what drives the movement. Unfortunately, people don't get excited at the same level about helping put students into seminary, helping developing churches or sending national missionaries into the field in countries where there is not persecution going on."* This response typifies the current state of American Evangelicals in relation to China. But as Christians we are called to not lie or slander, regardless of the financial aspects involved. We need to get excited about whatever God is doing, because it is God who is doing it. If God is reducing the persecution of Christians in China, we need to rejoice that our brothers and sisters in Christ are not being persecuted! The truth of the matter is the persecution plays a very small part of the overall picture of Christianity in China and we in the West need to adjust our ministry perspective and strategy to meet this emerging reality.

Christianity in China Today

In China today, Christianity is split amongst some very clear lines. There are two main manifestations of the body of Christ in China, both of which may be familiar. The first manifestation is a church body that is overseen by the Chinese government, often referred to as the registered church, because they must register with a religious affairs division of the government to operate. The religious affairs body is called the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), a national governmental department that oversees religious affairs in China. The SARA is under the authority of the State Council. The State Council is the highest executive organ of State power, as well as the highest organ of State administration. The Chinese government has a division of the State Council called the United Front Works Department (UFWD) and it is through the UFWD that SARA operates in China. On both a national and local level, the SARA has five main divisions, one for each of the five state sponsored religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism. So in this system, under the Protestant SARA division, there are two main organs that oversee and execute Protestant activities in China. The first is the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), and the second is the China Christian Council (CCC). These two organizations are somewhat similar in function, but do have their differences. To summarize their differences, the TSPM serves to help the government implement its religious policies among Christian believers, and to regulate foreign Christians or organizations involvement in Christian work in China. The CCC has the role of assisting the local churches in its day to day operations. In addition to Sunday morning worship services and Sunday School, the CCC also oversees the 18 seminaries in China and conducts a certain amount of public relations with overseas Chinese and foreign Christian visitors. Within this framework, the SARA administers the Protestant Church in China.

In addition to the registered churches, there is a very large unregistered house church movement as well. Many of these house church leaders are from an older generation of Christian leaders in China who still remember much of the repression and trouble that the Chinese government caused Christians in the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's. It is because of these memories that they still today refuse to register with the TSPM. But there is quite a bit of good

news as well. In some areas of China, Christian believers in the official registered churches and unofficial unregistered churches live side by side without any problems. Some Christians are involved in both registered and house churches; others work together with believers from the other group. We continually hear stories of people who may attend a registered church service on Sunday morning, and during the week they will participate in an unregistered church Bible Study. And we also continue to hear stories about younger house churches leaders who are registering with the TSPM and find that it is a benefit for their Christian ministry. We continue to pray for the reconciliation of these church groups within China. The most wonderful part of this is that between these two church bodies, there are now over 50 million Christians in China today.

National Government is Changing

In addition, the national government has given local authorities the ability to administer the laws on religion in China. This makes for an uneven enforcement of the laws. So for the persecution that does exist, it exists in most cases because rural authorities may not have the oversight and information they need to evenly execute the laws of the land. China today, while making great progress in many areas of its society, is still not a country that is ruled by 'rule of law.' A generally understood definition of rule of law states that those in governmental authority make decisions based on the application of known principles or laws without the intervention of discretion in their application. In other words, when laws are on the books, you use them 100% of the time and in a consistent manner to determine whether someone has broken those laws. In order for a government to govern, it may only use the powers granted to it by certain laws (i.e. constitutional laws). Over the last 12 months, we've noticed a major shift within the government to shift China in becoming a 'rule of law' country. This is a monumental task because of China's huge bureaucracy and the personal governing styles of many of China's officials. In the past in China, we have had a situation where the national government had drafted a number of laws that relate to religious affairs in China and had given provincial and local officials the ability to administer those laws. Many times, those laws were then administered differently in different places. This is slowly changing, but in many places those changes will take years to fully take effect.

The Good News of God's Work in the Midst of that Template

In light of the government's situation in China, it is easy to see how stories of persecution in China could gain momentum and be spread easily. Especially to a Western public who looks at anything Communist as 'evil' or 'wrong.' We must get past those old stereotypes and see the true story of what is happening in China. The good news in the midst of that template is that God is mightily at work through some monumental changes that are happening in many areas of Chinese society. These changes and positive trends have led to one of the greatest movements of God that the World has ever seen. Not only is the Church in China exploding at a 6% annual growth rate, but these changes have led to one of the greatest changes that you're not hearing about in the West. God is allowing an increasing amount of Westerners to find opportunities to work together with governmental officials to accomplish God's work in China. Those who are taking this approach have to create new perspectives of who the Chinese government is. Rather than seeing the government as the 'communist enemy,' they are seeing the Chinese governmental officials with the respect afforded them by their position and by God's view of governmental authority (Romans 13:1-7). With this new perspective, new doors are being opened through opportunities like Bible distribution, humanitarian and social service, Christian counseling, teaching religion classes at top Universities and theological training at Bible training schools and seminaries. Then as these Christians work together in this way, additional doors open through contact with all the Chinese people that are affected by their service.

Major Changes in China Today

The expansion of market forces is increasing the scope of civic and political liberty even in the absence of political democratization. China's rapid economic development has significantly liberalized its political system. This is significant for us as Westerners to recognize as those who want to advance God's Kingdom in China. These changes signify new ministry opportunities that were not possible in China 20 years ago. Here's a brief look at some of these changes:

1. Less ability to control the Information sector

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese government tried to maintain a grip on the information sector and repeatedly launched campaigns against liberalization tendencies in the mass media. But these efforts have failed miserably. Although the government has been able to keep relatively strict controls on television and radio networks which it operates, it has effectively ceded control of much of the print media to the private sector. Today,

China has an efficient, privately controlled network of publishing companies, printing facilities, and retail distributors. In addition, the introduction of new information technology, including electronic mail, fax machines, satellite television transmission and video CD and DVD players has further reduced the state's capacity for social control. This all has led to new opportunities, not only for Bible printing, but also for Christian radio and television programming.

2. Improvements in Chinese Law

One of the most direct effects of China's economic reforms on its politics and its laws has been the subtle but significant change in normal political behavior. The rise of public opinion and the everyday citizen's exposure to the West has led to a couple of key changes within the country.

Rule of Law, Governmental Officials held accountable

As common citizens understand more about how the world works, and how other countries are operating, they increasingly want more accountability of its governmental officials. They also want the laws in China to be administered more evenly. In the past, Chinese governmental officials saw themselves above the law, which led to widespread abuse of their power. As a recent Washington Post article exclaimed, *"a momentous struggle underway in China between a ruling party that sees the law as an instrument of control and a society that increasingly believes it should be used for something else: a check on the power of government officials and a guardian of individual rights. How this conflict unfolds could transform the country's authoritarian political system."* This need to govern more responsibly is on the radar screen of all governmental officials. At their September 2004 annual planning session, National government leaders said that "the life and death of the party" rests on "improving governance." This growth in consciousness towards officials conduct and performance is a wonderful trend that we can encourage as we engage with governmental officials in China. We can directly influence them and aid in the decrease both in the level and scope of political repression in China, in addition to reaching them with the Gospel.

Also encouraging is the trend towards Chinese citizens turning to the court system to find legal justice. About 4.4 million civil cases were filed in the last year alone, more than double of the total a decade ago. This surge in legal activity is coming from the belief that everyone, even party officials, can be held accountable under the law, a belief promoted by a new generation of lawyers, judges and legal scholars. The party appears torn by this rising legal consciousness. It recognizes the value of an impartial judicial system to resolve disputes in a country with growing social tensions and an emerging capitalist economy, and it sees the potential of citizen lawsuits to curb corruption and improve governance. But this also means continued changes to the way that they operate. They are being forced to change their operations to fit the way that the country is changing.

3. Loosening of control over religion

With the loosening of governmental control at almost all levels, the government also has to rethink their repressive attitude towards religion in China. As recently as February 2004, there have been confirmed reports that the UFWD and SARA are not agreeing on how to administer religion in China. There are many within the UFWD who are willing to take a much more liberal approach to religion in China and to respect the rights of religious believers. Specifically, the UFWD is willing now to allow Chinese Christian house churches to register directly with their local government, therefore bypassing the TSPM. This is a very encouraging trend, especially when taken within the context of the potential of unregistered house churches situation. If the house churches see the TSPM only as a governmental religious puppet (which we don't think it is), being able to bypass them would be a good thing. And if it lends to more house churches becoming 'legal' and able to operate without the fear of persecution, then we would favor this type of registration. In traveling to China, we've also heard confirmed reports that unregistered house churches are able to register directly with the local city or municipal governments, and then continue to operate in the same manner they were before registration.

Opportunities for Westerners in China Today

1. Bible Distribution

A widely held belief about China is that there is an intense need for Westerners to smuggle in Bibles to meet the need of Chinese Christians. While that may have been true 20 years ago, today there is no need to smuggle in Bibles because there is a Chinese organization that is printing Bibles with the cooperation of Chinese governmental officials. The Chinese organization is called the Amity Printing Company (APC), and is a cooperative effort between the China Christian Council and the United Bible Societies. APC's printing facility is located just outside of Nanjing, a city in the central part of Eastern China. In 2004, 5.43 million copies of the Bible

were printed in China openly and legally and 70% of those printed were for Mainland China distribution. The Bible that is printed at APC is the standard Chinese translation of the Bible, called the Union Version and is a complete Bible. One of the great things about APC's Bibles is that they are legally recognized by the government. As New Zealander Peter Dean, the assistant to the General Manager says, **"No recipient in China will ever get into trouble by having an Amity Bible."** As the Bibles are produced, they then go from Nanjing to 70 distribution points by railcar to be distributed throughout the country. APC then has Bible distribution vans that distribute the Bibles from each of the distribution points to rural and urban areas alike. For those areas that are very rural and are not in the distribution radius of these points, there is an opportunity for us as Westerners to serve the Chinese Church get these Bibles to these people who need them most. Each Bible is bought from Amity, then shipped to the remote location. Once the shipments have arrived, they have staff on-site to ensure that the Bibles get in the hands of those who cannot afford Bibles. 3,000 to 5,000 Bibles are distributed, for free, at each location. This is a wonderfully simple ministry that any Church in America could get involved in. It is easy to communicate the strategicness of this ministry to church members, because you can never go wrong with getting Bibles into the hands of those who want them, but can't afford them. And at \$2.50 U.S. a copy, you certainly get a lot of 'bang for your buck.'

2. Theological Training

With the explosion of Christianity in China, there has been an intense need for training qualified leaders to lead the Chinese church into the 21st Century. We think that this is the greatest need in China today, and one of the most important things that we have to offer the Church in China. By recruiting Western pastors to go to China for 1 to 2-week trips and training leaders, we are giving the Church in China practical information that they can pass on to others within the Church.

3. Humanitarian and Social Service

Whether your interest is serving in China's orphanages, providing Christian counseling, or working with governmental officials in areas like humanitarian aid, drought relief or medical assistance, Chinese governmental officials are increasingly willing to partner with us. As with any partnership, going to China first to build relationships and listen to what their needs are is a good first step. One encouraging example of this is a story we heard recently about an American who lived in Beijing, and after getting to know the Vice Mayor of Beijing, saw an opportunity open up to provide counseling for those who had been traumatized by the SARS virus of a couple of years ago. These opportunities are available both on a short term and long term basis. We have a lot of key contacts to help anyone who may be interested in these opportunities.

Conclusion: Putting it All Together

Many today in the West continue to have mental images of the China of 50 years ago. Many still think of China in terms of red guards, Mao Zedong, Cultural Revolution, and little red books. China today is so far removed from those images of yesteryear. These images would be akin to thinking of America today in terms of poodle skirts, Hopalong Cassidy, the music of the Big Bopper, and school segregation. The cities of China today are glimmering with new buildings, BMW's and Starbucks coffee shops. The economic and political changes in China have benefited everyone in society, including those of religious faith. China's rapid economic development has significantly liberalized its political system. This liberalization of the political system in China has also benefited Christians, many of whom are freer to practice their faith than at any other time in Chinese history. In addition to this, CRC has seen innumerable cases where unregistered and registered Christians, especially among the younger generations, are intermingling with each other, and are looking to find ways to work together. We want to encourage this intermingling, and feel that because of our influence on the Chinese church, we in the West can set a positive tone for the reconciliation of the Church in China. On the heels of these changes, God is also providing an unprecedented amount of opportunities for us as Westerners to work in cooperation with governmental officials at all levels. Our approach is that as long as God is providing these types of opportunities, we should always strive to work openly and legally in China. Those Westerners who take a secretive approach to ministry in China must realize that secretive means small and that goes against Christ's command for us to be a 'City on a hill.' In addition to this, God is continuing to open doors that were previously closed and is reducing the amount of persecution that Christians are experiencing. Does this mean that we just close up shop since persecution is on the decrease? No Way! It means we continue to find out where God is at work and where we can serve and help the existing Church in China. We've already detailed a number of ways we can do that, and we are sure there are many others yet to be discovered. Our definition of the goal of missions is this: To plant a church among an indigenous people that is self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. We are seeing that the Church in China is coming close to accomplishing all three of those goals. As the Chinese Church continues to strive to accomplish those goals, we in the West have two options. We either help them become a self governing, propagating and supporting church, or we continue to control them for our own benefit. We should

be working ourselves out of a job to the point where we will be no longer needed at all in China. Persecution in China is decreasing. What is our response? Are we manipulating them for our own benefit, or are we coming along side them in the situation where they are, to be a benefit to them. What they need right now is Westerners who follow the advice of a Beijing house church pastor. Luis Palau made a trip to China in April 2004 and interviewed a Beijing house church pastor who oversees eight house churches. During the interview, the pastor told Luis, "*Christians in America need to get over their insatiable hunger for persecution stories, and we in the house churches must get over our persecution complex. Yes, there has been persecution in this city's past, but our greatest need is not eliminating persecution but building up mature fellowship and developing unity among Christians.*" Read carefully what the Church in China is telling us: 'Get over your incredible desire of persecution stories. That's not the main thing to focus on in China. What we want as a Church is to build up and disciple mature believers who will be unifiers of the Church in China.' That is why CRC exists: To serve the growth and development of the Church in China in ways they most need help.