

CHINA RESOURCE JOURNAL

Analysis of Current Trends in China



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An Analysis of Bibles & the Government in China

We all continue to hear the stories of the massive growth of the Church in China. Millions of Chinese Christians, many of them from rural areas, coming to know Christ. Some China analysts have called it 'The greatest evangelical movement the world has ever seen.' Our estimates indicate that there are now over 60 million Christians, and that the Christian Church in China is growing at 6% a year. With this growth, some may also wonder and worry about where all of these new Christians are able to get Bibles. In this issue of the China Resource Journal, we'd like to look at the situation of the Bible in China, analyzing the trends that make understanding Bible availability and distribution such a challenge.

It is our opinion that one of the hardest things for Christians in the West to 'wrap our minds around' when it comes to Christianity in China is the idea of having to get approval, or having to register. Registration of religious activities and organizations is a reality in China today. The Chinese government has put guidelines and boundaries of what is acceptable religious conduct and activities in China. There is no getting around this fact, but for many Westerners, this irritates us to no end. Our understanding in Western cultures is that 'freedom of religion and belief is a guarantee by a government for *freedom of belief* for individuals and *freedom of worship* for individuals and groups. It is considered by many to be a fundamental human right. Freedom of religion must also include the freedom to practice no religion or the belief that there exists no deity.'¹ Accordingly, in China they have always had the practice that government has had some regulatory measures over religious activities. But through the lens of dynastic succession throughout Chinese history, we see Emperors of China who felt they alone had the 'Mandate of Heaven' to rule China. With this Mandate, they had Heaven's blessing to rule China, and these Emperors were often called 'the Son of Heaven.' Likewise, if they ruled immorally, they could lose the Mandate, and several dynasties such as the Han (206 B.C. to 220 A.D) went to great lengths to preserve the Mandate. With this Mandate, the Emperor was the representative to God for the Chinese people, and he alone had the right to dictate the religious affairs of the Chinese people. This mindset, albeit in a different context, continues in some regard to the present day rulers of China. It has often been said that Chinese history is just a series of Chinese Dynasties, and if we are to be a blessing to the Chinese people today, we need to work within the boundaries set by the current dynasty.

Because the Chinese situation is so different to our own in

the West, there is an analogy that may be helpful for our understanding here. Imagine a huge domed stadium that had under it 100,000 professional soccer sized fields. This domed stadium would be one of the only man-made structures you can see from a spacecraft, looking back down at the earth. The government's position on religious affairs is much like that huge dome. There's a lot you can do within the dome. They are printing Bibles in large numbers within the dome. They are allowing 55,000 Christian Churches to operate openly and legally within the dome. Scores of Western Christians are allowed to come and work together with the Church in China in a varied number of projects. The dome in China is a really big place where they're allowing a lot to happen. And hundreds of thousands of Chinese are coming to know Christ under the dome. You could say in China, 'It's all good under the dome.' What happens if you go out of the dome? It's outside of the dome that the Chinese government has created where you read of Chinese Christians being arrested for printing Bibles, for meeting in unregistered places, etc. You go outside of the dome at your own risk. This analogy of the dome is important for us as Westerners because in understanding China. Within the sphere of what's allowed, there is a lot that we can do to be a blessing to the Chinese people. This is their country, and the governmental authorities feel it is their 'right' to put controls on religious affairs. The Bibles that are being printed in China today are one example of what is possible.

Two quick comments about the dome of Chinese governmental control: First, we at the China Resource Center are not applauding the Chinese government for the dome that they have created. We look forward to the day when the dome in China doesn't exist. But secondly, we are realists when it comes to God's call on our lives to serve the Church in China, and we choose to focus on what is possible within the context of governmental control instead of focusing on what is not possible. In addition to this, the reality of the situation in China is that within the government's control 'dome,' people are coming to know Christ at unprecedented levels. Those new Christians are having an impact on Chinese society as a whole, and as David Aikman states in his book *'Jesus in Beijing,'* that Christianity has '*reached far deeper into Chinese culture and society than most people outside China thought.*'² So while the government thinks it is controlling, really it has created an incubator for Christian growth by printing Bibles, allowing millions of Christian activities annually and by stimulating economic

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growth that has benefited the Christian Church with money for new Churches, Training Centers, and increased ease of overseas Christians contact. We believe that this situation will serve to only continually weaken the Chinese people's dependence on the government as they continue to seek God's will for their lives. In addition to this, we firmly believe that by working within the 'dome' that the



Bibles coming off the Amity Presses

government has created, that we are demonstrating the credibility and relevance of Jesus Christ by our words and actions. Romans 13:1-7 clearly states that as we obey governmental authority, we are obeying God.³ In China, our credibility is earned as governmental authorities see us not as a threat, but as a partner and friend who are really positioning our message about Christ in reference to what the Chinese people are asking for. Relationships rule all interactions and activities in China.

Since 1988, the Amity Printing Company has been printing Bibles in Nanjing, China for the use of the Chinese Church. Last year alone, they printed just over 3.4 million Bibles for the Chinese Church. Amity Printing is a joint-venture between the Amity Foundation and the United Bible Societies (UBS). Amity Foundation is a Chinese-run social services non-profit organization, and UBS is the world fellowship for many of the Bible Societies world-wide such as the American Bible Society, Scottish Bible Society, etc. Their very purpose is for achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures and of helping people interact with the Word of God. So it makes sense that UBS would be involved in Bible printing in China. The UBS responsibility at Amity Press is to raise the money for the paper that the Bibles are printed on, which helps keep the cost of each Bible as low as possible. To receive approval to print Bibles, the China Christian Council (on the behalf of Amity Foundation) has to fill out an application to print a certain amount of Bibles at one time. This application is the same one needed to print any book in Nanjing. So, for example, let's say that they wanted to do a printing run of 700,000 Bibles. They fill out the paperwork to print that many Bibles, and they receive approval. One of the interesting things about this process is that there is no limit to how many applications that can fill out or get approved. If the need for Bibles was 7 million,

they could get approval for that many Bibles. Once the Bibles are printed, they go by rail car to 70 distribution points where they are sold at registered church Bible outlets and book stores. Amity Press has the capacity to print over 7 million Bibles a year, and they are starting construction on a new printing facility to host one new press that they've ordered from England, in addition to the presses they currently own. At full capacity, the new facility will be able to print up to 12 million Bibles a year. Amity Press prints a wide-variety of Bibles, including study Bibles, pocket Bibles, large-variety Bibles, and a variety of diglot versions with Chinese/English and Chinese/English/Hebrew/Greek.

There has been much speculation and criticism of the Amity Press Bibles, and we'd like to clarify some of what has been said, and present some big news coming out of Amity Press that will be wonderful for China. First, many people have said that the Amity Press Bibles are not full Bibles, but there is not any part of the Bible that is left out, and they are full and complete Bibles. We have copies of these Bibles on hand for anyone

who'd like to check it themselves. Also, there has been criticism that the Amity Bibles are only available at registered church bookstores. This is a valid



Our May 2006 Bible Distribution Event in rural Hebei

criticism to us because if you are going to make available Bibles in some places, why not make it available to a larger audience? During our May 2006 trip to Amity Press, we learned what is probably the biggest news story about Bibles in China in a number of years. It was confirmed to us that the Amity Printing Press has plans to print ISBN numbers in their Bibles in the future. It is unclear at this point when this may happen, but this signals a positive trend, because now in China the Bibles are printed under a category that does not require an ISBN since they are printed for a specific organization (the Church in China.) By adding ISBN's to the Bibles, it signals to us a trend that Bibles may be available to a larger audience. It is one more example to us what is possible 'in the dome.' We will keep you up to date as this situation develops. Let's also be praying for Amity, because certainly making Bibles available to more Chinese is a very positive thing, and by adding ISBN numbers to their Bibles, these Bibles would be then available for sale in more locations throughout China.

1. Wikipedia, <http://www.answers.com/topic/freedom-of-religion>

2. [Jesus in Beijing](#); David Aikman, p. 6. Regenery Publishing, Inc. Washington D.C.

3. For a complete treatment of this Romans 13 subject, please see our Romans 13 Statement Paper on our website under the Publications tab.

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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.

For more information about CRC, ways you can partner with us, or to inquire about our speaking schedule, please contact us at 303-332-8884 or Mike@ChinaResourceCenter.org

