

Church Life and Christianity in China as Seen through the Eyes of one Teacher in Chengdu

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I taught for two and a half years at the university in Chengdu, a town in the South-west of China, at the initial suggestion of the Church Missionary Society. The Chinese Embassy seemed satisfied with my credentials and I left for Peking in December 1980.

I thus had a long-term chance to observe life in China; but was obviously subject to some limitations. The other Western teachers and I were immediately noticeable as foreigners, and the centre of attention, and so our movements were considerably restricted. Going to one of the open churches was acceptable (though as we were not exactly welcome, it was not always enjoyable); going to or seeking out a house church would have been almost impossible and would have endangered those who were in an already precarious position, so I can verify no numbers and give no estimates. I should also emphasise the fact that my picture of the church is based on only one Chinese city, and that it is the result of my own personal observations.

It seemed to me at first that there was a much greater degree of religious freedom than in the Soviet Union. There were two churches in Chengdu, both open and able to be freely visited. It took me some time to realise that there are in fact strong similarities between the churches of the Three-Self Movement and the registered churches of Eastern Europe.

The Three-Self Movement began when foreign missionaries were in China and grew out of a desire to wean the Church away from foreign influence. The anxiety of the Chinese to establish their own brand of Christianity, to show that they could be independent of the West, is typical of a general Chinese attitude towards ideas and institutions brought in from abroad; but it is also understandable in broader terms. The message that Jesus came for every man and woman on the earth is often obscured if He is seen in the robes and with the colouring of our Western imagination, to be housed only in the grey stone buildings of medieval England and praised with songs of an old English tradition. At the time of the Liberation in 1949, the Three-Self Movement declared

that the Church would be self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing.

When the missionaries were active in China many sections of Christendom had found it very difficult to work together, had made their own converts and stuck to their own brand of Christianity with fierce stubbornness. One result of the activities of the Three-Self Movement was a happy one: the Chinese Protestants, knowing that there was strength in unity, shelved their differences and came together as seven denominations in one. This still holds, for persecution does show Christians what is important and what is not, and besides, the various groups did not have the long background of differences that the West is so aware of. There are of course some tensions. I met one Seventh-Day Adventist who felt she could no longer come to the church because worship was on “the wrong day” — Sunday — although one of the pastors, a woman herself, was an Adventist. Generally, however, I think that the former divided denominations are happy to worship together and sacrifice some of their own liturgy, ceremonies and so on for the strength of united worship.

The situation is of course different with the Catholic Church, divided internally and totally separate from the Protestant Churches. I at least found no contact between the two. My students and many others were not even clear as to which was Christianity. Because some concepts have been translated differently, it appears in Chinese that the Protestants worship Jesus Christ and the Catholics worship the Lord of Heaven. Obviously two different religions must be involved. It was hard to dispel these misconceptions and talk about the two being one when there was no evidence to support this.

The churches were open by the time I got to China in 1980, but recent history held many accounts of direct persecution and the Cultural Revolution had obviously been a horrific time for Christians, as it had been for intellectuals of all kinds. By now, however, the government had eased restrictions on Christians in an effort to gain cooperation from every possible quarter, seeing in the Christians a group with qualities such as high moral standards and a readiness for hard work, but also having realised that persecution of the Church often has the opposite effect to that which was intended, and leads to growth. The Protestant church in Chengdu had reopened in March 1980, some months before my arrival. I believe the Catholic church, which I visited only a couple of times, had been open a little longer.

Chengdu used to have many different church buildings and most have been converted to other uses. The building in which we in fact worshipped had previously been the Anglican church and was in the old Anglican compound in the centre of town, surrounded by former missionary housing, shabby but grandiose and including the Bishop's residence. The rest of the buildings in the compound were gradually

being returned to the church for offices and other functions when those who were now housed in them had been provided with somewhere else to live. Nevertheless everything was in a gloomy state of disrepair. The church, which seated about 300, was always packed full. Usually there were plenty of worshippers standing, and on Christmas Eve and Easter Day others were drawn out of curiosity and the numbers swelled to 400 or 500. It was decided in 1982 to build an extension to the church, and while it was being built we moved to the old YMCA compound in the main shopping street in Chengdu. This had been used as a Family Planning Clinic but was on its way back to church ownership. We went upstairs to the Upper Room which I found more conducive to worship, with its plain white walls and small size, than the rest of the building, passing on the way posters exhorting us still to keep to one child only, and to use eugenics to improve the quality of the population.

There were about five pastors from various denominations, who took turns to lead the worship and give the sermon. The way in which the congregation behaved was strictly supervised and church discipline seemed, for China, where manners are often relaxed, quite harsh. It was clear that the leaders were responsible to a higher power for the behaviour of their flock, and I do not refer to a heavenly one. The service took the form of what has sometimes been disrespectfully termed a "hymn sandwich". The service began, ended and was interspersed with hymns. The repertoire was small, perhaps some twenty-five melodies altogether, sung tunelessly and with gusto except when a special choir was present. A fitful harmonium puffed out the same breathy mistakes each week. The tunes were old familiars from the 1930s, "Whiter than Snow" and "What a Friend we have in Jesus" amongst them, sung of course in Chinese. The service included prayers and Bible-readings and the Lord's Prayer, but centred on the sermon, and this was for me the most difficult part of the service.

I was gradually convinced that although the sermon might not technically be censored, there was some supervision going on, presumably by a representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs attending the service. I listened to the sermons with the help of interpreters, some of whom would keep back more from me than others.

The basis of many of the sermons was political. The congregation were exhorted to do what the Party said they should, and often if a particular political line was being pursued throughout China at any time, it would be pressed home from the pulpit too. There rarely seemed to be any real Biblical teaching. I knew the name of Jesus in Chinese, and listened for it, sometimes without hearing it for a long time. Some preachers did undertake an exposition of a parable or of some of Jesus' teaching, but always went on to show how that teaching applied to being a good citizen in China: discipleship seemed to be equated with exhibiting good

communist virtues.

One sermon which obviously embarrassed my interpreter concerned foreigners. Most sermons in fact included some comment on the fact that foreigners were no longer able to dominate the Church in China; but one week the sermons were anti-American to an absurd extreme. The shocked congregation were told of starving tramps in the New York underground and pampered poodles in California, as if these were the norm, and the conclusion one was invited to come to was that China was a fairer and better place and that the West was evil and immoral. It was an over-simplified and distorted view that seemed to serve no purpose but to encourage feeling against foreigners.

On three occasions I attended the church there was a communion service, which proved rather a chaotic affair. Everyone pressed forwards to the rails until no one could move forward or back; everyone, including people who were not members of the church at all, was eager to see what was going on. The chief pastor's wife would storm and fume until some kind of order was restored. On another occasion, when the Baptist method of individual glasses was used, we remained seated and the problem of mass movement was diminished, but there was still a good deal of confusion. One sensed as well that each denomination favoured its own traditional method of taking communion, and a certain tension was evident on all these occasions.

The atmosphere of tension that I noted particularly at communion services was frequently present. A casual visitor might take away a happier impression than did those of us who went week after week. I realised gradually that the tension arose out of the need felt by the Church to keep the service running smoothly and to maintain a discipline which did not come naturally to the congregation. A Chinese audience of any kind is always noisy, chatting, spitting, coming and going, but at church the congregation were often told not to do these things, to behave well and respectfully. Even talking before the service was discouraged with what I felt was excessive severity considering the natural liveliness and chattiness of the people and their enjoyment of each other's company. There were few outbursts of joy, spontaneity was frowned upon, and any behaviour that was not quiet and submissive was quashed.

Another source of tension, however, was the regular presence of us foreigners in the services. Although everyone smiled to see us, there were no invitations to greater intimacy, which was unusual, for normally Chinese people would invite us home whenever they could. Obviously we were already too great a danger in that we came to church every week. The chief pastor spoke excellent English, but beyond exchanging greetings I cannot have spoken to him more than three or four times. This puzzled me, for the Chinese are such friendly people. One of the church leaders, a lady who had seemed friendly enough to me, once asked the

young man who often interpreted for me why he came to church so often. He explained that I had asked him to help, and it was then difficult for her to forbid him to come, but he was scared and said that perhaps he should not come again, although in the end he continued to do so. I think the church leader concerned was scared too: of more spies, of more evidence, more knowledge about the Church, of my understanding more of what was going on? I don't know, but an atmosphere of unease persisted. Foreigners who visited only once were welcome, however, and those who had formerly been missionaries were reassured about the constancy of the Church. It was evidently only those who were always coming and who were beginning to know more about the realities of church life who represented a threat.

The crux of the matter was, I feel, that the church could only stay open as long as it was carefully controlled, and as long as it did not grow and attract young people. I felt certain that I would not have been much attracted to it if I had not already believed, and so said the student whom I took along to interpret. Two American teachers who lived outside the town decided to call in on the church on a Saturday, and found they had stumbled on a meeting with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. They felt suspicious when they saw a number of black limousines parked outside, and then met one of the church leaders who implored them to go away quickly, saying it was not convenient for them to visit. The Church, then, is walking a tight-rope; to stay open at all it must behave impeccably and not anger the officials. It must not evangelise; its teeth are drawn. But can such a Church survive? Can a Church that cannot grow be a Church at all?

The picture seems rather black; and yet God is working even where so much seems sad and disappointing. The church *was* attracting people, and if they made contact with some of the older faithful Christians in the congregation, they could sense an atmosphere of warmth and steadfastness to be found nowhere else. There were two or three older people there who were always warm and welcoming to us. They did not speak English but they would smile and take our hands in fellowship and no words were needed. One man sat next to us and sometimes told us a little about the sermons in halting English learnt years before. Next to him sat a pretty young girl in her twenties, a factory worker. She had first come to sing in the occasional choir because she liked singing, but had stayed to talk to this Mr Li and had come again and again until she had, chiefly I think through him, come to know the Lord.

We were not able to visit the house churches, where I had been told the real growth was achieved. The Christians there were already in a precarious position. They were alternately denounced and tacitly condoned from the pulpit. It was never altogether clear what the official policy was towards them and it certainly changed. For instance, after a pronouncement from Bishop Ding, the implication was that they should be seen as

part of the whole communion. The usual message seemed to be that the members of these house groups should be encouraged to come to the open church. I inferred from the number of times they were talked about in the pulpit that there must be quite a number of them in Chengdu; and I found out through one of the other foreigners that some contacts were being made through the open church. One student she had taken to church for several weeks and who seemed interested in the gospel was approached by a member of the congregation who said: "You won't learn much about Jesus at these services; why don't you join our little group that meets in so-and-so's house?"

There were some who I feel were sympathetic to the church but who never came to it, who remained hidden Christians. Many of the intellectuals whom I met came into this category: they spoke warmly of their old missionary teachers and indicated that they had at least at one time gone to church. Some spoke of loss of faith since then, but many did not, and I wondered about their silence. Some may have felt that they could do more good by holding responsible jobs, while still praying in secret, reconciling opposites in their own way.

For all the openness of the churches, and for all that is said by Chinese Christian leaders when they talk about the Church, there was an atmosphere of at worst fear and at best extreme caution in the churches I visited. This is probably true of all groups of citizens who meet without the express sanction and approval of the Government. The Church gained certain freedoms in the new Chinese Constitution recently; at the same time it is uneasy, and unsure about how to behave.

The church in Chengdu affected only a very small proportion of the inhabitants. The town with its suburbs numbers some four million people, and the church reaches about 400 of them on a regular basis. Yet I feel sure that the number of Chinese citizens turning to Christianity will continue to grow, particularly amongst young people. The death of Mao left a gap, and people are looking for something to believe in.

Without any knowledge of the Church at all, students would ask me about my faith when they found out that I was a Christian, and were interested to hear about my beliefs. The older people, I found, had so often suffered enough and wanted to think and feel as little as possible; but the younger people, bright and bitter and uncertain about the future, were looking for answers. They eagerly demanded Bibles and questioned the fact that someone from the technological and scientific West could believe in "the God". These young students and intellectuals need prayer, as does the Church if it is to nurture them and remain strong in the faith. Direct persecution may be in abeyance, but the day-to-day struggle to keep out of trouble and the temptation to remain very quiet will continue, I feel sure. Chinese Christians need our prayers and our concern.