

Christ in China

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Christianity is a sleeper in China. It has not expired since the massive antireligious campaign of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, any more than has the traditional body of Chinese beliefs, ranging from philosophical Buddhism to primitive superstition. The Chinese landscape still abounds with gods, ghosts, and heavenly omens. And the church lives cautiously, but intensely, underground. The evidence suggests that wherever Protestant or Catholic belief once took hold, the faith is practiced to some degree; secret prayer meetings take place and young people are converted. The fact that the Peking *Kuang Ming Daily* of September, 27, 1977, published an article proposing new "research" efforts directed toward the criticism and the eradication of all religions, including Christianity, is sign enough that the central propagandists still see themselves as battling a live adversary.

The persistence of a vital Christian minority in China is extraordinary. The question is, of course, what does it mean? Anyone who has studied the course of Christianity in the Soviet Union through sixty years of unremitting state atheism knows that "survival" is not an adequate word for it. It may be argued, however, that if you scratch the Soviet facade, you will still find Holy Russia—a nation with a thousand-year-old Christian heritage. In China, by contrast, Christianity has always been a minority religion, damagingly associated, moreover, with China's humiliation by Western imperialist powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It would seem to have been a pushover for the fanatic xenophobes who dominated China for the last eleven years.

Instead, it is Maoist theology that is now crumbling in China—not Christian faith.

The reasons for the strength and endurance of Christianity are neither new nor obscure, but some of them may be startling in an unfamiliar context.

In Hong Kong the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) prepares Gospel programs for broadcast to the China mainland. Our impression from spontaneous refugee reports is that the programs are effective and have regular listeners over a wide area, although it is impossible to estimate how many; and the number of letters

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received by the FEBC station is naturally very few. In a letter received on February 24, 1976, from a peasant in the Kwangtung countryside, the following paragraphs appear:

"Nowadays the work here is not too hard for me, but it's very hard compared with city work. Even when the weather is very cold, we have to take off our shoes and go into the fields and spread fertilizer. And we often have frost here. Even if the water in the paddies is freezing, we have to work—not like the city workers. They can wear shoes to work. And the north wind is very fierce in these parts.... Before long, we'll have to begin transplanting the rice shoots. Then we'll be so busy I hear we'll have to get up at midnight.

"So, you see, this kind of routine work—we eat after we work, and sleep after we eat—is meaningless. Now I've begun to feel the pain of mental emptiness. Physical suffering and hunger I can take, but not mental suffering and hunger. Besides, my mother is sick and my father is very old and has to work until late, even up to eight o'clock in the evening. I have only a brother, who's been working in the village thirty years now. When I think of my family situation, how can I work in peace? So after work, although I have rice, I don't want to cook and I don't want to eat. When I have nothing to do, I just sit there like a dolt. The paddy fields are right in front of my house, so I have nowhere to go. Often I can't sleep and lie awake until midnight with my eyes open. What a good thing it is to have a radio then! Because it lessens my mental suffering and loneliness. Although a radio program is a man-made thing, the program you broadcast is still better than ours. There is only a bed here, without a cotton quilt, in a house with a thatched roof. It's just an empty house.

"Although your radio program sometimes can't satisfy the needs of heart and soul, still it's better than nothing.

"'I am the way, the truth, and the life.' 'I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.' I heard these words so many times, but I couldn't understand exactly what they meant. Since you explained them I now know that we must believe in this God. At the same time, we have to rely on Him, come to Him and then our spirit will no longer be empty and lonely...."

In the summer of 1977 we interviewed a nineteen-year-old Christian girl from Canton, Miss Li, who had escaped four months earlier to

Hong Kong. (Her name, like all other personal names to follow, is pseudonymous.) Soon after the T'angshan earthquake in July, 1976, when Canton itself was placed on active alert, Miss Li gathered with former schoolmates to talk about the alarming events. All of them had one reaction in common: The series of earthquakes in China made them think of the "end of the world." The possible nearness of the end evoked the equally mysterious notion of a beginning—of "things hard to explain" like the creation of the world and of man. It also led to discussion of "one's attitude toward life."

"In China," Miss Li said, "people enjoy no freedom at all. Life is dull. You go to school, go back home, eat your meals—all this has become routine. So we asked ourselves—what is the purpose of life?"

The question was more than puerile musing for Miss Li. It had begun to preoccupy her especially in 1974-75 as her graduation from middle school approached and the future seemed empty and uncertain. There was little choice ahead—either a hand-to-mouth existence as a farm laborer or an indefinite period of drifting illegally, at her parents' expense, in Canton.

"I tried to pray to see if God would help me," she said. However, she was uncertain even in prayer. As a child the Bible stories her Protestant parents had told her "seemed like any other stories. When my parents went deeper, I didn't understand. As for the prayers, I didn't know what they really meant....I was a Christian in name only."

In 1974 Miss Li began to tune in secretly to "Good Friend" Radio of FEBC, was intrigued, and then convinced. For the first time she understood "what Christianity really was."

During her conversations with friends, prompted by the T'angshan earthquake, she discovered that some of them also were secret Christians and concluded that there must be "many people in Canton who believe in Christ."

On the Chinese New Year in 1976 she had made a similar discovery during an outing for fun and sight-seeing with a group of former schoolmates. Finding crowds everywhere, they decided to go to the home of one of them to talk. The subject of religion came up. It turned out that four persons, including Miss Li, in the group of around nine confessed to being Christian believers. Another was Buddhist, and one—a boy belonging to an ethnic minority group—believed in Islam. The rest said they believed in nothing.

"But in my view," Miss Li laughed, "they probably believed in ghosts and demons!...Most young people have their own [private] beliefs. They may not believe in a particular religion—sometimes they only worship gods and demons. There are some students who are interested in philosophy—they want to explore the purpose of life. In short, they don't believe in materialism...because materialism is without [real] reason, or rather its reasoning is only superficial....In class it's taught in a mechanical way—I wonder whether the teachers know any philosophy or not. But when we were sent to the branch school in the countryside, we often met with peasants who talked about ghosts and things like that. As a result many students believed what they said....That is, they

believed in some supernatural power. I once heard one of my classmates say she had met a ghost in her village!"

Miss Li was a private Christian while in China. Through relatives in Fukien, to the north, she learned that secret prayer groups "definitely existed" in that province; and soon after her arrival in Hong Kong she saw a handwritten copy of a Bible and minutes of prayer meetings recently smuggled out of Fukien by a legal emigrant. But, although she had heard rumors of prayer groups in Canton, she had never been able to establish contact with any of them.

Unknown to Miss Li, during the same summer in Hong Kong we interviewed a young woman of twenty, Miss Han, who had attended numerous prayer meetings in Canton. Ironically, Miss Han was not a believer and might be considered one of the students described by Miss Li as "interested in philosophy." She was more than that. Astonishingly precocious and gifted, she had close ties in China with one of the conspiratorial groups of educated youth—mainly former university students—whose cultural revolutionary experience had turned them first against Mao and then against the Communist system. During the Seventies she had joined in their discussions and read many Chinese translations of foreign novels and books on Western philosophy circulating underground.

For one unsympathetic to Christianity Miss Han seemed strangely—as though fleeing the "hound of heaven"—to be constantly running into Christians everywhere. Her own parents, with whom she was not close, were Baptist and regularly attended secret prayer services in Canton during the Seventies. She herself joined them occasionally and tagged along with various friends to Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and other prayer meetings—out of curiosity, she said, and "for fun." As for formal Catholic services, she believed them to be rare, since the Catholic Church had formerly "been run mainly by foreign missionaries, who were not replaced after they left China."

The largest religious meeting Miss Han observed was a Baptist service on the outskirts of Canton, attended by thirty to forty persons. The minister conducted a simple service and the congregation sang hymns in low voice—to piano accompaniment, in this case. (Sometimes other, quieter instruments were used—a violin, guitar, or flute.) "Foolishness" was Miss Han's impression of all the services she watched.

Because of the danger of discovery and arrest by "workers' patrols"—a brutal auxiliary of the security police—the meetings were never held twice consecutively in the same place. Frequently they were held in the members' own homes. This was possible because most of the adult members of the religious groups known to Miss Han were highly placed intellectuals, provided with better and more private housing. At the end of each service the minister would announce the next meeting place. In case of later change, little boys were used as messengers to run from house to house, notifying all the members. Baptisms, simple marriage and funeral ceremonies were usually performed privately at home. The minister would merely make a special visit, just as he did

to comfort a sick person. "He was always very kind," said Miss Han.

Once, however, the entire Baptist group joined in a funeral service for one of its members, a woman who was beaten to death in 1970 during the "Strike-One Oppose-Three" Movement—a bloody purge following the Cultural Revolution. They also donated the money for the cremation fee, since her only survivor, a son, could not afford it. The son, also a member of the group, refused to attend the funeral service because, he said, if there really was a God, his mother would not now be dead.

On the basis of her own experience it seemed to Miss Han that Christianity was a religion mainly of "educated upper-class" Chinese. They know how to pray," she said. "Even I can recite prayers." She divided prayer group members into three categories: "The old generation who really believe in Christianity; those like my parents who have a sense of insecurity in their lives and seek comfort in religion; and the younger generation, who go for the thrill, because this sort of meeting is dangerous."

Nevertheless there were usually more young than old people at the prayer meetings.

A remarkable example of the "first category" of true believers was Dr. Wu, an evangelical Protestant whom Miss Han met in Peking during the Seventies. Branded a "deep-rooted rightist" because of his proselytizing, he was severely "struggled" by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution and later dismissed from a respected, high-salaried post. These misfortunes did not seem to dispirit him; he continued to speak his mind, and his home was regularly open to meetings of an underground prayer group. After the decline of early cultural-revolutionary zeal, when disillusioned and dissident students sought him out to "ask his views on socialism," he would not answer directly but tried instead to interest them in Christianity. He evidently put up patiently with the slip of a girl, Miss Han, who argued endlessly and brazenly with him.

"He thought that everything in the Cultural Revolution was wrong [said Miss Han]...that revolution itself was wrong. It was wrong to fight violence with violence. This was incompatible with Christian teaching. In some ways he considered that Marxism was compatible with Christianity...[such as the idea] that everyone was equal...and that in a Communist society people would receive according to their needs. This was in the spirit of the lines from the Gospel: 'Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap.... Yet your heavenly Father feedeth them....' He thought that men should live this way and not ask for more than their share.

"I told him this was absolutely wrong because it negated social progress. If people could live in accordance with such primitive requirements, why didn't he go live in the mountains and enjoy the sun and the moon, giving up electricity, trains, and tap water? He said that all [these things] were part of the miracles bestowed upon us.... In my opinion all this was not God-given but the product of human initiative....

"To me bloodshed was inevitable in revolution.... But

he thought that people should follow the way of Christ, who died in order to awaken love in people's hearts—that is, they should sacrifice themselves to save others....

"I put it this way: Man...was superior to the beast because he possessed *jen ch'ing* [human compassion]...but man was still also an animal.... And that is why, very often, there's a struggle between *jen ch'ing* and the beast within man. Those in whom *jen ch'ing* always gains the upper hand can be regarded as true human beings, like Christ.... Those whose beastly nature usually gains the upper hand but who still have *jen ch'ing* within them can still be saved. They can still be moved by the Christian way [advocated by Dr. Wu].... The problem was that China was now controlled by those who had only the beast within them and could neither be moved nor saved. Therefore his method was absurd. Those [rulers] deserved to be killed, because killing them would be like killing a wolf if it attacks you. When you kill this wolf, do you still have the Christian feeling of mercy?

"He said that our generation had been taught evil by the Communist party. There was only hate in us and we knew only how to kill. That was why [my counter-revolutionary friends] wanted to take violent action against the government, unconcerned that many innocent people would be killed in the process. Moreover, this would not do any good. The new system, won through bloodshed and violence, would likewise be cruel.... In his mind the desirable sort of revolution was the peaceful one that had taken place in England. He thought the English system ideal....

"I said China was different from England.... The English people had a higher educational level, so that one could use words to persuade people and reason with them. But the general educational level of Chinese was comparatively low, and so they didn't know how to think.... They wanted to see action and results, not the theory behind them....

"Dr. Wu agreed with my view...that Communist educational policy was to turn the former slaves of the landlords...into slaves of the Communist party...to stop people from thinking on their own. The question was how to get rid of this educational system and find another that would allow for liberation of the individual personality. I believed...that force had to be used...because the Chinese were that stubborn. There was no other way.

"But Dr. Wu thought that all this could be solved by his Christian spirit.... He himself was following this path. He was ready to have the government kill him...in order to awaken people and make them feel revulsion against bloodshed. But I told him that, even if the government did kill him, people wouldn't react as he expected.... And if he went about preaching his idea to people accustomed to communism, telling them that he was going to die in order to save them, people would think he was an idiot or insane and might keep him locked up. If another Christ were to appear in China, he also would be crucified or shot dead!"

At the time of this argument between youth and age in Peking a highly intelligent

young university graduate in Shanghai was seriously accepting Christianity after a personal crisis. Mr. Kung was in his late twenties when we interviewed him in August, 1977, after his escape to Hong Kong.

As a student in Shanghai he had been impressed with the "beauty" of Communist theory, which contrasted with his experience of actual conditions. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, therefore, he became an ardent follower of Mao, who he hoped "could lead us to change the social reality in China." Disillusionment set in toward the end of the movement, in which he had played a conspicuously active role. Like countless others, he suddenly saw that he had been "the victim of a power struggle," deceived and used by Mao for his own ends and then "kicked out when no longer useful." The discovery led to a "tremendous mental transformation."

"At first I was still full of hatred and defiance directed against those [factional opponents in the movement] who had beaten me up and persecuted me....The concept of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would truly be the most easily accepted part of the Bible for most young Chinese!...But later my mind changed. I realized that they also had been victims of the Communist system. So my hatred shifted toward Mao and the Communist system itself....At the same time, I understood that individual effort was too feeble to overthrow the whole system. So I was in despair and felt inwardly empty. I even attempted suicide."

In this despondent state Mr. Kung began to tune in aimlessly at night to forbidden foreign broadcasts, especially to the "more objective" and popular Voice of America and British Broadcasting Company. Reception, however, was frequently poor because of jamming. He came accidentally upon an FEBC program and listened only because the reception was clear. He continued to listen regularly both in Shanghai and in the Kwangtung countryside, where he was later sent to work—at night, concealed under mosquito netting.

During one of the first programs he heard, called "Meditate on the Way of the Lord," on which biblical passages were read very slowly (at dictation speed), one line struck deep—"I am the way, the truth, and the life." His immediate reaction was: "Who dares talk like that?!" The words roused his interest and marked the beginning of his conversion.

Mr. Kung began to discuss the broadcasts among small groups of friends—all city youth—some of whom also became listeners. Their reactions varied. His impression was that the youngest among them were not interested in Christianity.

"But people like me who were older [in the mid-twenties], who had gone through a different sort of experience and who had known persecution, were interested. We felt new hope, as though we were in contact with a new world....The Bible gave us an answer to the question about life that couldn't be found in Mao's works....From the Marxist viewpoint the human being is a kind of tool. Marxism does not explain life's meaning. Thus when people suffer various setbacks, they often ask themselves, 'What is the meaning of life?'"

Mr. Kung's friends developed a sympathy toward

Christianity through the broadcasts, although they could sometimes grasp only the general meaning of certain biblical passages. Having no copy of the Bible to read, they were often confused by the homonyms that abound in spoken Chinese and by the grammar of the archaic Chinese translation.

There were other, more fundamental obstacles, in Mr. Kung's view, to an acceptance of Christianity by many Chinese. These had nothing to do with Maoist influence but with old thoughtways and beliefs. Thus the pervasive idea from Mencius that "man is born originally good"—like a piece of silk, which then turns the color of the dye into which it is dipped—interfered with the Christian conception of original sin.

There was also the basic question of conscience and good and evil—which Mr. Kung explored with former Red Guard friends, many of whom had done "terrible things" during the Cultural Revolution, only to endure subsequent cruel blows themselves and final exile in the alien countryside. They had no understanding of conscience in the Christian sense. Mr. Kung's description of their typical attitudes reveals, instead, a preoccupation with their own unhappy fate. One typical group, influenced by the Buddhist notion of "reaping what you sow" (*yin kuo pao ying*), thinks that they are now being duly punished for their bad acts. Another blames the Communist system as the ultimate cause of their plight. A third believes that they are suffering for the sins of their ancestors.

Like Chinese youth generally, according to Mr. Kung, they are without God or Mao. They feel powerless to change social conditions and yet are unwilling to live in subjugation. In their anxiety about their own fate they may visit fortune-tellers or seek help from gods. They seem to want "some magic force to do away with the present social reality."

Christianity, Mr. Kung believed, found acceptance primarily among educated Chinese, who sought "meaning" in life.

"But China is a poor country," he said, "and people generally think only about how to survive....In recent years there have been poor harvests, frequent natural disasters, and much sickness. In April last year [1976] a rumor spread through Kwangtung Province. Some peasants said that they had seen a fairy goddess descend from heaven, who advised them to boil seven kinds of beans in order to ward off natural disaster and sickness. The villagers, being stupid, did cook these beans. Finally the authorities had to hold meetings to explain that this was only a rumor and people shouldn't believe it."

Nevertheless, in Mr. Kung's view, "the Chinese people are ready for Christianity."

"Mao himself created the conditions for this," he said. "His works were regarded as a bible; and the morning and evening rituals [of bowing and reporting to Mao's portrait] were, in fact, a form of religious service—all provided by Mao himself. Thus after people's minds are emptied, after they suffer in many ways, they will surely be accepting of Christianity."

Mao Tse-tung, the "red, red sun" of the New China, is dead and "gone to see Marx." Are we now hearing "rumors of God" through the locked door?