

# Cultural Reviews

## Charting a Morally Just Course for China

**A Review of *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead*  
Bruce Gilley  
Columbia University Press, 2004  
288 pages, \$29.50**

BY BAOPU LIU



Since it is beyond the reach of even our best reasoning abilities to foresee the future of any society, believing in a bright democratic future for the People's Republic of China requires

faith. Many people have clung to such faith since the beginning of the last century. Bruce Gilley, a China scholar on the upswing in prominence, is among them, and his new book, *China's Democratic Future*, is an excellent presentation of this faith.

"I am less interested in staking my claim on why democratic transition will happen than on how." By this statement Gilley identifies himself as being unequivocally in line with Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" theorem. The rest follows: given the undisputed significance of how a quarter of humanity will be governed, and assuming the inevitability of a Chinese democracy (Fukuyama's Theorem), it makes sense to simulate the eventuality and contemplate the implications of each of the steps in the process. Potential participants in such a process, along with foreign governments and interest groups, could benefit from the knowledge gained in such an exercise.

Building a construct based on "possibilities derived from other possibilities" is by no means a norm in contemporary political writing, but the potential of such imaginings to provide insights and greater understanding should not be dismissed offhand. On the contrary, the method is quite familiar to political scientists and students from theorists as far back as Plato, who made a towering construction of an ideal city-state in his timeless masterpiece *The Republic*.

Gilley's Chinese democracy, like

Socrates' ideal city, is a visionary construct built on paper, its purpose being more about the exercise of imagining such a construct than the actual building of it. It envisions a China that establishes a set of democratic institutions as a result of some "breakthrough," and where democracy has become the Chinese people's way of life by a process of "consolidation." In concurrence with, if not surpassing, the wildest dreams of Chinese democrats, Gilley sees that it is possible, or at least "we should not rule out, nor rue, the possibility that China will pioneer a unique version of democracy," which could "become the dominant vision."

Here is how all this would happen: In the near future, most likely within the next two decades, Tocqueville's Paradox, the notion that "the very changes the regime undertakes to stave off its immediate overthrow ensure its eventual demise," will have proved itself true in China. The leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime find themselves "caught in the prison of their own making" and yet, from authoritarian habit, reluctant to accept a "voluntary withdrawal." They thus face a "metastatic crisis" (possibly an economic crisis) that takes the form of "popular mobilization."

At that critical moment, "the Party has now schooled its cadres in the idea that the use of force to crush unrest is no longer advisable" because "a strong reformist faction has emerged inside the CCP which believes in the inevitability of democratic change." The CCP is on the brink of collapse with its legitimacy once again under the public spotlight. "Give back our China" and "Step down, Hu Jintao" flutter on banners in Tiananmen Square.

What will the CCP do then? Since "the state remains powerful enough to force the revolutionary change to take place on the inside rather than the outside," an "extrication" led by CCP elites will take place instead of a complete overthrow. That is, elites within the Party will embrace a "normatively desirable system," a full democracy this time around. Although a high degree of continuity is expected with the old regime, the PRC as we know it will cease to exist. Competitive elections will be promised; a new approach to "general welfare" will be announced; "breakdown of state identity and ideology" will be symbol-

ized by "a formal political act that ushers in the demise of the PRC." The CCP's leadership complex, Zhongnanhai, will be vacated and transformed into a public park.

The immediate aftermath sees the establishment of a "caretaker government" (an entity that could inherit the power and resources of the old regime while cashing in on the legitimacy accruing from the promise of change). China will enter a period of "democratic consolidation." Though turbulent, the newly established Chinese democracy will not fall. A new way of life for the Chinese people will emerge.

What will this new way of life be like in the political arena? China's liberal political elites will stick "closely to the procedural norms of democracy," which will lead to the emergence of a new set of institutional arrangements. A new constitution will be written and the first national election held. The existing National People's Congress (NPC) will finally take its rightful place as the "highest authority of the State," with roughly 1,000 congressional representatives. Introduction of federalism will be accommodated by the establishment of a new "upper house of parliament," perhaps derived from the regional representatives that compose the existing Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the necessary redrawing of some provincial boundaries. Secession pressures in minority regions will be kept at bay to preserve the prospects of new democracy in China, despite democratic principles that suggest referendums for self-determination.

The "consolidation" process that Gilley described is best interpreted as a series of battles between democracy and all illiberal and undemocratic temptations and tendencies. Issues under debate will include the protection of individual rights, multi-party politics, realignment of central and local authorities, growth and development, social welfare, freedom of society in general, coping with history, diplomacy and a new self-perception of China's international role.

"The lack of serious treatment of regime change in China is puzzling given the importance of the country and the evidence of such change elsewhere," Gilley explains as his rationale for writing this book. One aspect of his own "serious treatment" of the topic, the most valuable for all concerned, is his inventory of issues,

resources, obstacles, possible players and contingencies of this regime change in China. The list is by no means exhaustive but reasonably encompassing. Though this book quotes extensively from the works of Chinese liberals and democracy activists, it is puzzling indeed that no Chinese intellectual or democracy activist has ever written on this topic quite as systematically, and with the consideration of broad international interests befitting the event, as Gilley has in this work.

One striking impression that Gilley's book leaves on the reader is that after so many of the issues, players, scenarios and contingencies have been carefully considered, the end result is both morally just and consistent. Each of the steps and scenarios given by the author stands at least some chance of actually happening, a credit to the author's broad knowledge of Chinese politics and social issues. We must, however, also consider the chance of failure in each one of these steps. Adding up all these chances of failures does not conclusively indicate the likelihood of Gilley's end result, but it does make one realize that Gilley's result requires a strong moral conviction that it is predestined. It is worth noting that this author is inspired by John Rawls, viewed by many as the most distinguished moral and political philosopher of the twentieth century for his "purity of heart." Gilley makes his moral convictions clear: "This is not to say that I have no ethical bias in favor of democracy. I most assuredly do."

The main weakness of the book's thesis lies in the ambivalence between moral advocacy and logical conclusion based on empirical analysis and facts. The moral persuasion that taps into people's natural feelings of goodness and decency does not always coincide with the logical reasoning that leads to knowledge and good judgment. Rather, reality often frustrates those who have faith in a better world, a lesson learned nowhere more painfully than in communist China. This indeed presents some problems for the overall persuasiveness of Gilley, who is just such a China visionary.

Some of the most important of this book's arguments are weakened as a result. On the issue of China's elite, Gilley first presents us with a meaningful and correct observation: "the direct and immediate

explanation for China's failure to achieve democratic orbit since the last emperor was chased out of the Forbidden City in 1911 is the behavior of elites." Yet, on the absolutely essential event of a "democratic breakthrough" (without which the entire book could never have been written), Gilley rests his hopes on the very same elites, contrary to his own observations of their past behavior. Despite the universal appeal of the spirit of liberal democracy, there is no evidence that Chinese elites have pervasively adopted it as a paramount social objective. Closer examination of even the noblest sentiments of the Chinese liberal elements in government and society that Gilley considers "resources" for his Chinese democracy suggests that many have deep-rooted beliefs in Chinese exceptionalism, while others are perfectly willing to sacrifice rights and freedom (though most likely other people's rights and freedom) for the restoration of Chinese "historical greatness."

The possibility of democracy and liberalism becoming conceptual norms for Chinese elites requires first asking the question: When some emergency crisis precipitates the clashing of varying views in China, will democracy automatically emerge as the only possible solution? A positive answer to this question assumes that the moral appeal of liberalism and democracy is strong enough to override all other sentiments and become pervasive in China. Gilley's own highly credible statement that "Those advocating democracy for idealistic reasons will be in the minority . . . the next time around" brings into serious question the contingency that Chinese elites will actually make the right moral choice.

Equally important is the prospect of the emergence of "strong pro-democracy forces" within the CCP. In order for the "democratic breakthrough" to happen (at least as fast as Gilley is predicting), the emergence of these forces must happen now or very soon. Gilley counts top senior cadres Ren Zhongyi and Zhu Rongji as "resources" for the "breakthrough." He considers other officials such as Li Ruhuan, Wan Li, Tian Jiyun and Qiao Shi to be pro-change "democrats," while current Premier Wen Jiabao, Party General Secretary Hu Jintao and even Jiang Zemin's protégé Zeng Qinghong are seen as "moderates." Absent from the list are the anti-change "conservatives." If things are

really this rosy, it begs the question: Why isn't China a democracy already?

Does the author believe that these pro-democracy forces are growing secretly (if not openly) within the CCP? Reality seems to suggest that the minds of CCP cadres are more preoccupied with rent-seeking scenarios than with day-dreaming about China's democratic future. Evidence also suggests that Deng Xiaoping has effectively trained the CCP leadership to sacrifice personal aspirations if necessary for the sake of preserving the autocratic system. Deng achieved this either by terrorizing his subordinates with the dire consequences of factional struggles, or by setting an unbreachable precedent with his own voluntary withdrawal from power, an example followed by Jiang Zemin's resignation as Chairman of the Central Military Commission at the 4th Plenum of 16th Party Congress. Immediately after becoming China's paramount leader, Hu reaffirmed the CCP view that "western style" governance is not suitable for China. Also for the record, Hu confirmed that the 1989 Tiananmen massacre would not be re-evaluated. If the rhetoric means anything, it can only suggest that the CCP has been successfully transformed into a breeding ground for the orderly emergence of authoritarian leaders.

Gilley's overtone of moral advocacy tends to undermine his otherwise carefully drawn and reasonably argued model of a manageable democratic transition. Suppose China were at the moment of "democratic breakthrough" or in its immediate aftermath; would the various interest groups (internal or external) be able to reach a consensus that their mutual interests would best be served by a successful democratic transition and willingly constrain their more selfish impulses? The author suggests that Taiwanese leaders might play a "role for supporting changes" in the mainland; Tibetan and Xinjiang communities would refrain from "immediate breakaways" even when "the window of opportunity" presented itself; the international community would be required to provide "political and economic support"; the United Nations would need to give "promises of financial aid and assurances that China's new government would retain its UN Security Council seat."

The scenario of the world holding its collective breath for a new democratic China,

as people do at the moment of a baby's birth, is unlikely. Any pro-democracy politician hinging his or her ultimate success upon such a scenario would be considered remiss or dim-witted. This, of course, by no means implies that a move to democratic transition will never happen.

In any case, Gilley's less-than-total persuasiveness by no means diminishes the overwhelmingly positive value of pointing out a morally just and possible course for China's democratic future. Ultimately, the work delivers what the author intends: "my aim is to provoke as well as inform."

## A Record for Every Victim

***A Review of Victims of the Cultural Revolution: An Investigative Account of Persecution, Imprisonment and Murder (Wen'ge shounanzhe)***

**Wang Youqin**

**Open Publishing (Hong Kong), 2004**

**564 p., HK\$110 (US\$14)**

BY HU PING



All dictators are self-taught masters of psychology. Hitler was, Stalin was, and Mao Zedong was, too.

Stalin said, "A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic."

The Russian Bolsheviks killed the Tsar and his family, and the people held this against them even after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, when President Yeltsin personally presided over a ceremony to bury the Tsar in state. Mao Zedong left the last emperor Pu Yi to serve as a living witness, and after Mao passed on and his crimes were no longer a secret, Pu Yi's story was still able to inspire an Italian director to produce an Oscar-winning film, "The Last Emperor." Audiences were preoccupied by Pu Yi's ideological transformation from emperor to citizen, and consciously or unconsciously gained the impression that the Chinese Communist Party was not as malicious to its political enemies as the Russian Communist Party had been. As to

the fact that the Chinese Communist Party murdered countless middle- and low-ranking officials of the former regime, since the stories of these anonymous people were not nearly as dramatic as that of the Last Emperor, no one bothered to write a book or produce a film about their experiences, and very few people would have wanted to read or watch any such book or film. As a result, the fates of these people have not left much of an impression.

In her book *Victims of the Cultural Revolution*, Chicago University Professor Wang Youqin writes, "The period around 1980 was a time of large-scale rehabilitation for victims of the Cultural Revolution. The names and stories of senior officials and celebrities among the victims appeared in newspapers at that time. The length and placement of these articles suggested a set of 'internal rules' on how to report the circumstances of the rehabilitated. Articles mourning Liu Shaoqi and Tao Zhu, for example, occupied a whole page. Articles about people whose ranks had been lower than theirs were relatively shorter, and were not as prominently placed. People whose ranks had been even lower were generally only referred to by name, without accompanying narratives. The names and stories of victims of even lower rank did not appear in the newspapers." Wang Youqin notes that *Beijing University Records (1898-1997)*, published in 1998, "published the names and dates of death of some people who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. However, it was limited to professors and high-ranking Party officials, and even assistant professors did not qualify for inclusion." Wang Youqin continues, "One of the results of applying this kind of 'rule' is the possibility of giving the inaccurate impression that the Cultural Revolution mainly persecuted senior officials and social notables."

However, Wang Youqin emphasizes, "The actual central landscape of the Cultural Revolution was the persecution to death of countless ordinary people . . . Deaths among the general populace have been concealed or neglected, distorting the larger picture of the Cultural Revolution. The pain and persecution experienced by the common people was long unrecorded, and as a result, the crimes of the Cultural Revolution have been understated in historical record." For that reason, over the past

twenty years Wang Youqin has set herself the task of doing her utmost to investigate the names and stories of common people victimized in the Cultural Revolution. In October 2000, she established a Web site called "Chinese Holocaust Memorial," and this past May she published her book entitled *Victims of the Cultural Revolution*.

What Wang Youqin did is something very few people have been willing or dared to do. The victims in her book include prominent officials and members of the social mainstream, but the vast majority are ordinary people whose names have been lost to history. Because of the difficulty of obtaining information, complete stories are available for only a handful of the ordinary victims. For most there is only a brief narrative consisting of as few as twenty words.

Wang Youqin says she initially contacted a university that has been paying considerable attention to the study of the Cultural Revolution and has published books on the subject. Wang Youqin hoped to obtain the university's support, but was turned down. The reason given was that a record of victims arranged in alphabetical order lacked readability.

This response is not unreasonable. But think about the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., which is inscribed with the names of every American soldier who died in the Vietnam War. Likewise, on the second anniversary of September 11 in New York City, the main ceremony was to call out each victim's name in alphabetical order. Are these kinds of memorials, or these kinds of ceremonies, really too monotonous, too lengthy, too dry? To everyone but the victims' relatives, friends and acquaintances, aren't those names just arrangements of letters or recitations of empty sounds? Perhaps many people think this way. All the same, I firmly believe that any person who stands before the Vietnam War Memorial or who witnesses the September 11 anniversary ceremony will feel a kind of shock. He will realize a truth, which is that every life is precious, and that every victim should be respected.

Of course, *Victims of the Cultural Revolution* could have been written in many ways; but writing it in any other way would not have allowed the inclusion of 659 victims, and those omitted would inevitably have been the anonymous, ordinary people. This is exactly what the author wanted to avoid.

Wang Youqin asks, "Why not record the stories of those who fell unnoticed?" Her answer is: there is no reason, "except for the adoption of a value system that considers the pain and death of common people to be of no importance, or the lack of willpower to do this kind of time and energy-consuming work." Wang Youqin writes, "What I made a point of learning, and what I was able to learn, was the stories of ordinary people. My thinking was that every one of the victims should be recorded. This is based on a very simple belief that if every life should be respected, every death should likewise be respected." No aspiration is more modest, and at the same time more ambitious than this. For a single individual such as Wang Youqin, taking on this task is like trying to fill the ocean, a mission that can never be fulfilled.

This thick, 500-page book records more than 600 victims. But how many victims were there during the Cultural Revolution? We lack reliable statistics, but even conservative estimates indicate more than 1.72 million. This is to say, if one book contains 600 people, we would need 3,000 books to record every victim of the Cultural Revolution!

Obviously, this is not a task that can be accomplished by Wang Youqin alone. But in actuality, it would not be difficult to carry out if every large work unit, every county and every district in China assigned one person to the task. If the Chinese Communist Party applied just one percent of the manpower and financial resources it uses to suppress civil movements, monitor and censor the Internet and persecute Falun Gong, this task could have been completed already. But the Communist Party will not do this, and it will also prevent others from doing it. After 38 years, most of the witnesses have entered their twilight years or have passed away, and the few remaining memories are fast being extinguished.

Here I would like to call on each and every one of us to pick up our pens and record the stories of the Cultural Revolution victims around us, whether they are relatives, neighbors, friends, teachers, classmates, colleagues or someone else we know. A complete narrative is of course most desirable, and if related documents and photos can be attached, that will be even better; but even one or two lines or the most meager trace of information is

still something. After recording the information, send it to Wang Youqin's online "Chinese Holocaust Memorial." In this way we can save memory, history and our souls at the same time.

Translated by Akiko Kageyama

Wang Youqin's bilingual online Chinese Holocaust Memorial can be accessed at: <http://www.chinese-memorial.org/>.

Information can be sent by e-mail to: [memorial@chinese-memorial.org](mailto:memorial@chinese-memorial.org), or [ywang7@uchicago.edu](mailto:ywang7@uchicago.edu).

Hu Ping's original Chinese article was posted on the Web site of New Century Net at: <http://www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/da-KAY.asp?ID=59751&ad=9/26/2004>.

## Sufei's "Choice"

**A Review of *Better Ten Graves than One Extra Birth: China's Systemic Use of Coercion to Meet Population Quotas* The Laogai Research Foundation, 2004 190 p., price not stated**

BY STACY MOSHER



most private physiognomy, but also because of the basic instincts and emotions involved.

China is a country where governmental intrusion into reproductive rights arguably surpasses that of any other society. Couples are told when or if they can have children, women's menstrual cycles are monitored, and persecution for noncompliance ranges from fines, detention and the razing of homes to permanent sterilization and forcible termination of an unauthorized pregnancy, regardless of its stage of development.

*Better Ten Graves than One Extra Birth*

(the book's title is drawn from a 1994 family planning slogan in Henan Province) does not attempt an even-handed presentation of the moral outrages committed in the name of China's one-child policy, and one wonders if such a presentation is even possible or desirable. Yes, there may well be room to debate what measures are necessary for China to rein in its enormous population. But is there any population crisis of any proportion that could possibly justify a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy being forcibly induced into labor, and having to watch a doctor "euthanize" her fully-formed infant?

*Better Ten Graves* references a wide range of sources, from government documents to local newspaper reports to on-the-ground research. It provides a history of China's population policy (which not surprisingly originated with the Communist Party) from its first stage, when Mao, with typical hubris, encouraged more births, to the increasingly panic-stricken second and third stages that progressed from encouraging smaller families to banning large ones. Quoted figures and studies show there is still considerable variance in local implementation of family planning policy on the basis of geographical location and time-scale, which must cause all the more confusion for families in their compliance with or avoidance of family planning regulations.

The book's presentation is not always as polished as it might be, but then, no one would read this book for enjoyment—it is necessarily an almost unrelentingly unpleasant read from beginning to end. Most chilling is the testimony of Gao Xiaoduan, a former family planning official from Fujian Province who defected to the United States. In her capacity as a family planning cadre for 14 years from 1984 to 1998, Gao was responsible for overseeing 38 full- and part-time staff in enforcing policy for 22 villages with a total population of 66,000. Gao's testimony at a U.S. Congressional hearing in 1998, which is reproduced in *Better Ten Graves*, starts with a detached bureaucratic description of computer data banks of fertile women and the issuing of "birth permit certificates," and even the first mention of "abortion surgery" performed on out-of-plan pregnancies passes the eye rather smoothly. Gao notes that in January to September of 1996, her family planning unit carried out 256 sterilization

surgeries, 386 device insertion surgeries, 41 artificial abortions (under three months' gestation) and 71 induced deliveries (over three months' gestation).

When Gao moves into her own story, the emotional level of her testimony rises markedly. After having their first and only daughter in 1984, Gao and her husband adopted a boy in late 1993, but had to leave him with another family because even that adoption violated family planning policy. Gao observes that her implementation of that same policy, and witnessing its effects on others, increasingly gnawed at her conscience. "I myself did so many brutal things, but I thought I was conscientiously implementing the policy of our 'dear Party,' and that I was an exemplary citizen, a good cadre."

During one inspection, Gao found a woman nine months pregnant out of plan and took her in for an abortion. "In the operation room, I saw how the aborted child's lips were sucking, how its limbs were stretching. A physician injected poison into its skull and the child died. It was thrown into the trash can. To help a tyrant do evil was not what I wanted. I could not bear seeing all those mothers grief-stricken by induced delivery and sterilization. I could not live with this on my conscience. I, too, after all, am a mother."

Unable to continue living a dual life as a "monster in the daytime" and a loving mother at home, Gao fled her country. "Here, to all those injured women, to all those children who were killed, I want to repent and say sincerely that I'm sorry! I want to be a real human being."

This remark of Gao's gets to the crux of the matter, which is that a society in which such brutal measures can be taken is a society that does not recognize basic humanity. China's family planning policy not only destroys countless lives, both of the unborn and of their families, but also reduces the individual life to something that is expendable and without value. It contributes to phenomena such as the discarding of girl infants and revolting practices such as the cooking of aborted fetuses into medicinal stews. The list of family planning slogans provided in one of the book's appendices makes for a particularly depressing read (an example: "Fewer Children, More Trees; Fewer Children, More Pig Farms!").

With China's National Population and Family Planning Commission recently estimating that the country's population will continue to increase by about 10 million a year before peaking at 1.46 billion in 30 years, it seems unlikely that official policy will change much in the near future. In the meantime, foreign countries have to decide their own means of dealing with the ramifications of the policy. What do governments do about people claiming asylum on the basis of coercive family planning? (Australia revised its policy after an incident in 1999 when a Chinese woman who was eight-and-a-half months pregnant was denied asylum, and was forced to have an abortion upon her return to China.)

An ongoing controversy is U.S. funding of the United Nations Population Fund, which supports China's population and family planning programs in 32 counties that are free of coercion and birth quotas and where abortion is not promoted as a method of family planning. Various administrations, most recently that of George W. Bush, have withheld funding from the UNPF on the basis of questions raised over whether the counties are genuinely coercion-free. Is it better to fund a program dedicated to non-coercive practices if its success might lead to more enlightened policies elsewhere in China, even if a degree of coercion continues to exist where it operates? Or is it better to send a strong message of repugnance toward the oppressive human cost of China's one-child policy, and to insist that the UNPF more convincingly monitor the actual situation in the counties it assists? This is a question the current administration will probably not ponder, but which will probably still exist when the subject becomes debatable again sometime in the future.

In any case, the coercive implementation of China's one-child policy must remain a cause for concern. *Better Ten Graves than One Extra Birth* serves as a comprehensive primer for those wishing to better understand an issue over which even America's pro-choice and pro-life factions can unite.

## A Balm in Henan

### A Review of Yuan Zhiming's Documentary *The Cross: Jesus in China*

BY TSOI WING-MUI

*A new documentary by Yuan Zhiming, a dissident who converted to Christianity while in exile, explores the explosive growth of China's underground house church movement, which is now estimated to number tens of millions of members.*



In 1994, *Open Magazine* published an issue devoted to the Christian revival in China, which provided readers with a general introduction to the astonishing growth of Chinese Protestantism and Catholicism since the Cultural Revolution. I contributed an article in which I quoted an estimate that there were probably more than a hundred million Christians in China. The truth is that at the time I had my doubts about this figure, because like most people in China and abroad, I had difficulty believing that such an enormous Christian community existed in China. Where did these hundred million Christians come from?

A more recent issue of *Open Magazine* published an article recounting the great effort Yuan Zhiming put into filming his documentary *The Cross: Jesus in China*. After reading this article, I bought a copy of this four-hour documentary on VCD at the Hong Kong Christian Short Term Mission Training Centre. I meant to watch only the first episode, but once I started *The Cross*, I was riveted and stayed up until 4 a.m. to watch it through to the end. I was deeply moved by what I saw and heard.

### An army of believers

Yuan Zhiming's documentary explains that after the Communist takeover of power in 1949, there were more than 700,000 Christians in China. It wasn't until after the Cultural Revolution that Christians began to recover from the ruthless persecution of the Maoist period. In recent years, the number of Protestant Christians in China has grown a hundredfold, and now stands at

more than 70 million. In June 1992, China's State Statistical Bureau conducted an unpublished census of religions in China that revealed that there were 12 million Catholics in the country. A recent news report quoted a Vatican source that put the number of Catholics in China at 20 million. These statistics indicate that the combined number of Protestants and Catholics in China may well be as high as 100 million. Without a doubt, China has become one of the world's great Christian nations.

For many people, it is very difficult to imagine that there is such a huge number of Christians in China, because these Christians worship in secret to avoid persecution from the Communist regime. Underground Protestant churches refuse to cooperate with the government, are not registered with the government-controlled "Three-Self Church," and ignore government regulations that bar them from spreading the gospel (similarly, the underground Catholic Church is persecuted because of its steadfast loyalty to Roman Catholicism). Except for brief news reports about the Communist government's continuous destruction of underground churches and the arrest and beating of evangelists and priests, we rarely catch a glimpse of the huge Christian community that exists beyond the government's control. Yuan Zhiming's *The Cross* has lifted the veil of mystery surrounding China's vast underground house church movement. The film documents the spontaneous Christian revival that has spread like a prairie fire throughout the country, and particularly in the countryside (so far without support from abroad).

I believe that this documentary will not only make people understand Christianity in China today, but will also give them new insights into the life of China's peasants.

The film crew traveled the length and breadth of China for more than a year, filming several hundred house-church services and Bible-study meetings, and interviewing dozens of church leaders and hundreds of evangelists.

I had already heard of one of the people interviewed by the filmmakers: Peter Xu Yongze, the legendary leader of an underground house church in Henan Province in the 1970s. He is reported to have evangelized in several thousand house churches, and to have spread the gospel to people

who are now found throughout China. Xu has been arrested many times by the government. In 1998, the international news media reported that he was arrested in Beijing while trying to meet the American evangelist Billy Graham during his visit to China.

### **An evangelistic legion**

Most of the evangelists interviewed by the filmmakers are sons and daughters of the soil with calloused hands and feet. Those who are middle-aged or older typically come from families that were Christian before the Cultural Revolution, while the younger ones, often village girls, converted during the more recent revival. All of them present intensely moving personal stories.

One middle-aged evangelist interviewed in the film is an orphan who converted to Christianity when he was 14 after being taken in by a house church. When the Public Security Bureau heard that this boy had become a Christian, police set out to arrest him. He escaped by hiding in a cellar for seven days and nights. When he turned 19, he became an evangelist and began to travel far and wide spreading the gospel.

These evangelists lead a precarious existence wandering from village to village, often very far from home, constantly evading Public Security police. All of them have at one time or another been arrested and savagely beaten by the police, some of them dozens of times. Being thrown in jail is routine for them. One young girl interviewed in the film was arrested by police and thrown off a rooftop, and is now disabled. A man from Henan Province was arrested eight times for spreading the gospel. On one occasion he and a young female believer were handcuffed together around a pillar. Their feet weren't allowed to touch the ground at the same time. They were made to hang like that for four hours until their hands turned black and blue.

No matter how much these Christians are persecuted, their passion for spreading the gospel is not extinguished. One evangelist from Henan Province recounts: "I feel great joy in my heart, because I know that the work I'm doing has great value. I have never allowed the humiliations, persecution, poverty and imprisonment I have suffered to remain in my heart."

It is precisely these ordinary rural folk who, driven by their faith, have traveled from village to village secretly spreading the

gospel and establishing house churches. When one house church grows too large, its members split into two houses churches, and when those grow too large, they split into four, and so forth until the gospel is spread over a vast territory. The Daqing Oil Fields in Shandong Province, developed as a model commune during the Maoist period, are a case in point. In the past ten years, an illiterate evangelist has founded 150 house churches with an average of 30 members in each of the more than 20 districts in and around Daqing. More than 100,000 Christians now attend house churches in Daqing.

The film explains how ordinary peasants such as these lead tens of thousands of house churches forming a community of millions of Christians. The film does not state exactly how many independent Chinese missionaries and evangelists there are, but it is certain that an ever-growing number of secret house churches are scattered throughout rural China. According to an internal government report issued in 1991, there were 770 self-styled evangelists in Zhejiang, Anhui and eleven other provinces and autonomous regions. The report was issued more than a decade ago and did not estimate the number of evangelists in other provinces. Today, it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of house-church evangelists throughout the country, with an even greater army of believers behind them. The documentary also explains that these house churches have established several hundred non-governmental seminaries to train young people. The young seminarians interviewed in the film proclaim that they have been called by God and have resolved to devote their lives to serve him.

### **A lightened yoke**

*The Cross* documents many deeply moving church meetings held in caves and humble cottages, and on fields, beaches and river banks in the Chinese countryside. The meetings are attended by ordinary peasants, most of them young men and women, who praise God with tambourines, singing "Love is here, peace is here." They also raise their hands with tears in their eyes, praying "Lord, take pity on us. We thank you for choosing us."

The deep faith expressed by these Christians is both moving and puzzling. In China's rural areas, Christians often weep

and sob while praying. To some overseas Chinese Christians, this verges on heresy.

To my mind, Chinese Christians in rural areas express so much sorrow when they worship because their life is so full of suffering. Judging by the documentary, Christians in urban house churches and in the official churches do not express such strong emotion.

China's countryside is a land marked by suffering. Poverty, food shortages, official persecution, exorbitant taxes and levies, discrimination and isolation from the cities and the indifference of society as a whole have turned the peasantry into China's lowest underclass. The Chinese people have endured their fill of hardship, but Chinese peasants have suffered the greatest injustice and hardship without any freedom of speech to express their suffering. People need to express their suffering to overcome it, and that is precisely what Christian prayer meetings provide: a channel for oppressed Chinese peasants to give voice to their suffering. That is the reason they express so much grief in their prayers.

A fundamental Chinese characteristic is a class bias toward the peasantry, who are generally regarded as spiritually numb and having low aspirations. Their highest goals are supposedly a wife, a son and a warm bed to go home to, being warmly dressed and well-fed, and enjoying the fruits of their labor. They are not supposed to have any appreciation of higher spiritual pursuits. Chinese writers and artists portray peasants collectively as wooden, taciturn, slow and simple.

Watching Yuan Zhiming's documentary, I was deeply moved to learn that the peasants who work the land in China are also engaged in a spiritual quest and care deeply about ultimate questions. Because the reality of their lives gives them very little reason for hope, they seek the meaning of life all the more fervently. Living lives of hardship and deprivation, Chinese peasants embrace the Christian gospel with ardent passion, unlike the upper strata of society who by cultural tradition are predisposed to reject Christianity as a foreign import, or at best to accept it in a passive way. These peasants find in the gospels the warmth, love, dignity and meaning of life that society denies them. The film shows these lowly people praising God with a hymn that says, "You raise us from the dust."

The growth of the house-church movement in China's countryside today is very similar to the spread of primitive Christianity in the Roman Empire. Then as now, Christians from the lowest rungs of society worshipped together in secret meetings. Then as now, Christians were brutally persecuted by those in power. And then as now, the more they were persecuted, the more they grew in strength. Though 2,000 years apart, both groups of believers have seen the gospel as a gospel of the oppressed. That is why Christianity has grown from strength to strength in China's countryside.

#### **A peasant hymnist**

The filmmakers are puzzled by the fact that ordinary peasant evangelists have succeeded in launching a Christian revival of this magnitude. I have already suggested the answer to this mystery.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that people have far greater potential than they display in ordinary life. Chinese peasants are no exception in this respect. In fact, every one these "ordinary" evangelists had a latent talent that had been repressed until it was galvanized by faith. In the film, we see these men and women lead large congregations with the bearing of mighty generals. They show great skill in preaching and singing hymns, and in organizing and managing churches, prayer groups and seminaries. One can't help thinking that Jesus' apostles, who also came from the lowest rungs of society, must have spread the gospel like these peasant evangelists.

The most remarkable person in the documentary is Xiao Min, a peasant girl who has written more than a thousand Christian hymns even though she never graduated from junior high school, has not studied music and cannot read musical notation. The hymns she sings off the top of her head have spread to house churches and official Three-Self churches all over China. Every hymn in *The Cross* was written by Xiao Min (and performed as background music by the famous musician Huang Anlun). In the documentary, conductor Su Wenxin recounts what happened when he recorded Xiao Min's hymns with the choir and musicians of the Chinese Ballet Opera. Su says that when they finished recording, everyone applauded, assuming that the hymns had

been written by a great master. They couldn't believe it when Su told them that all these hymns were written by a peasant girl who hadn't even finished junior high school.

In the film, Xiao Min comes across as an extremely intelligent young woman. She clearly has a great musical gift. If she had had the privilege of musical education and training from childhood, she may well have become a prodigy like Li Yundi. Although she was born in the countryside, her faith gave her the inspiration to create a steady stream of truly wonderful hymns.

Society is beginning to show interest in the plight of China's 800 million peasants. Yuan Zhimin's film provides us with a glimpse into what is gradually becoming the spiritual center in the life of China's peasants. It is an important contribution to our understanding of rural China and China's future.

Translated by Paul Frank

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The DVD of *The Cross: Jesus in China* can be ordered online through Voice of the Martyrs: <http://www.persecution.com/bookstore/index.cfm?action=itemDtl&baseItemID=181>.