

# WORLD

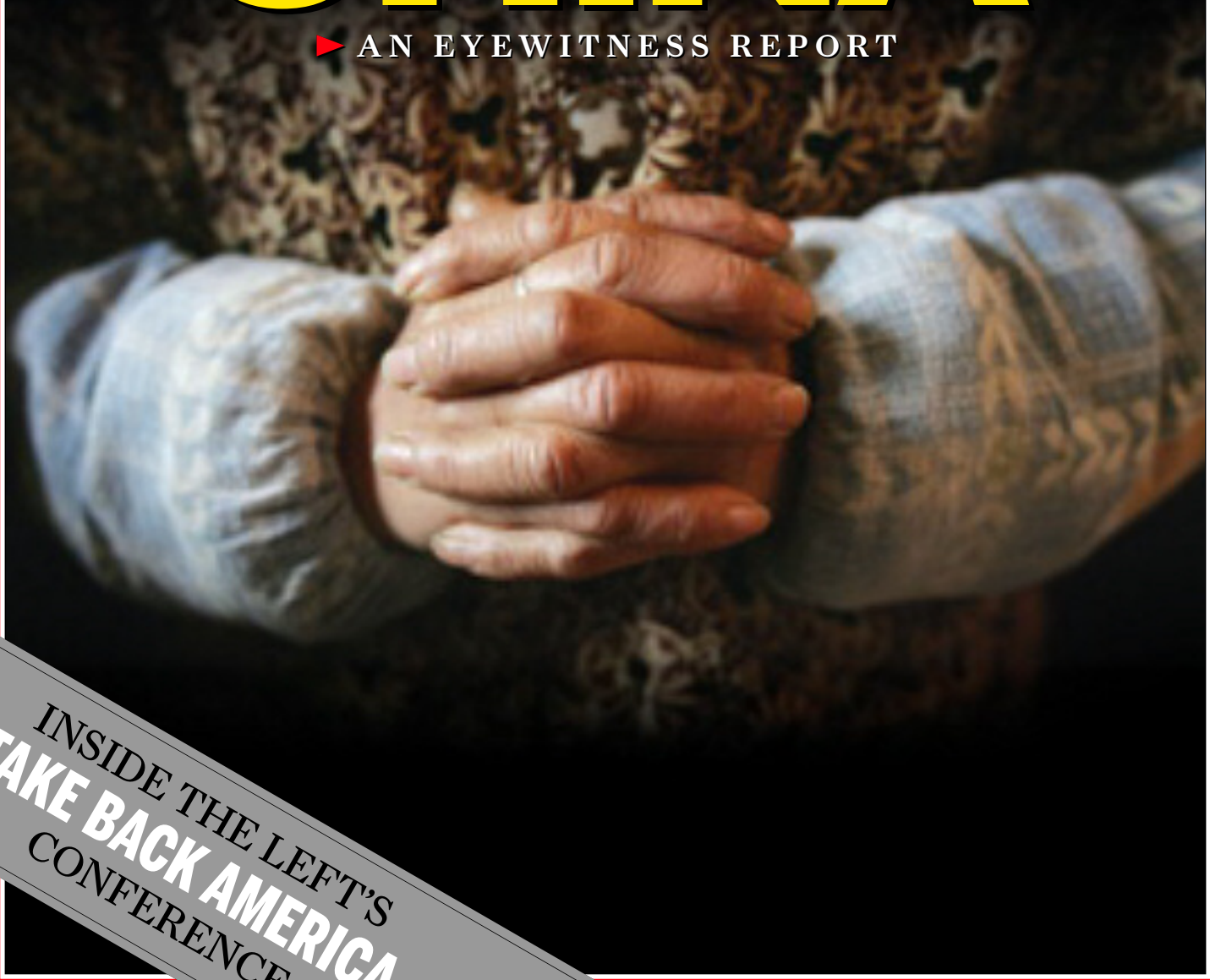
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HOW CHRISTIANITY IS CHANGING

# CHINA

▶ AN EYEWITNESS REPORT

INSIDE THE LEFT'S  
**TAKE BACK AMERICA**  
CONFERENCE





**GROWING FAITH:** A woman prays  
in Sichuan Province, China.

CHINA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES



**COVER STORY**

# WILDFIRE

With small “house” churches multiplying in cities and influential executives coming to faith, Christianity is growing so fast in China that Communist officials are having a hard time keeping up **by MARVIN OLASKY** *in China*

**C**HINESE CEOs PREACHING CHRIST TO their employees and setting up Bible studies on company time. House churches, told by the police that they're getting too big for official comfort, splitting in half, then growing and splitting again. Bibles readily available in every city. Christian plaques sold openly in a local marketplace. † Americans are used to

thinking of Chinese Christians as people imprisoned and beaten for their faith, and word-of-mouth says that is still true in some rural areas. In the cities, a more nuanced struggle has emerged, with harassment replacing outright persecution and leaders negotiating with secret police at the local Starbucks.

Trees stand in perfectly straight rows alongside modern Chinese expressways, but little is straightforward in the relations between a decadent Communist Party and a surging Christianity that contributes to a growing economy. What follows are snapshots of one small slice of Chinese life, based on visits early this month to several Chinese cities, and intensive discussions (usually employing translators) with two dozen influential Chinese Christian urban professionals.

One group that works with such influencers provided introductions that allowed WORLD to enter this growing Christian network where caution is still essential. While interviewees regularly said that government officials were aware of their Christian work, quoting the Christians by name in a national U.S. magazine could cause the officials to lose face and feel a need to round up the usual suspects. This article, therefore, does not use real names and leaves out other specific detail, including the particular cities in which organizations are located.

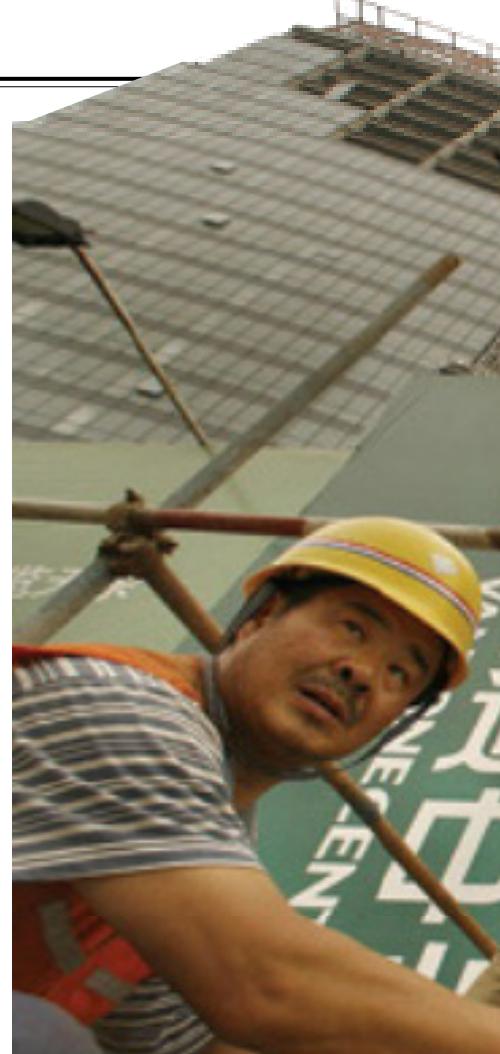
Let's start with the nuanced situation of at least 30 Christians who are CEOs of major Chinese companies. One 40-ish executive, Mr. Han, explained in his conference room that he came from a poor, rural family: His father died when he was 12 and he often went hungry. The future CEO "studied very hard to change the situation of my family," scored high on tests, entered Beijing University, and went on to garner a grand salary.

Mr. Han was an atheist who thought that "only rural grandmas believe in God." By the end of 1999 he "had enough money for my whole life" but was depressed: "I tried to make myself happy by traveling overseas, feasting at restaurants. . . . Still I had emptiness and suffering within me. I thought, maybe I'm not happy because I'm working for other people. I'll become happy by starting my own business."

Mr. Han did that and made even more money, but his depression became deeper. He tried burning incense at a Buddhist temple and felt a little better, but misery quickly returned. For six months he paid a top Taoist sage to give him a schedule each month with favorable and unfavorable blocks of time, and tried to arrange his meetings accordingly—only to find that some at the good times went poorly, and some he was forced to have at bad times went well.

In 2002 a classmate who had studied in the United States suggested that Mr. Han visit a church. He and his wife did, and she immediately became a believer in Christ, but he "tried to keep awake in the pew and could not." By August 2003, he was "very depressed. I needed help, but no person could help me. Only when I was cornered and understood that man's end is dust did I become serious about reading the Bible. Then I realized that my preconceptions were wrong, that belief in God is not unscientific, that by myself I don't know where I'm from and where I'm going . . . that happiness comes only from observing God's teaching."

Mr. Han was baptized on Easter, 2004. Now he provides job opportunities for Christian migrants from the countryside to his large city. He has voluntary Bible studies Wednesday evening at all four of his factories and offices, and a company-wide Bible study from 12:30 to 1:30 on Fridays, with



**SURGING ECONOMY:** Workers at a new housing project in Beijing; officials do not want to upset successful companies.

employees allowed to go home early that day in return for the lunchtime they give up. He says that many of his employees have become Christians.

Mr. Han's belief has changed his business practice in other ways as well: "As a company we pay our taxes strictly and honestly; we treat our employees with love and pay them in a timely fashion." Those practices are unusual in a China where the hot business books of the past three years have titles like *The Wolf Spirit of Enterprises* and *Think Like Wolves*. Mr. Han, however, gives local government officials Bibles: He says they accept them happily, with those who have visited Western countries often saying that they read the Bibles in hotel rooms and are glad to have their own.

Mr. Han also sees benefits among his employees: "Christians work well whether they are supervised or not. They tend to be optimistic, more tolerant of co-workers. They have more



integrity, more responsibility, and serve customers better”—and that is also impressing government officials.

A second CEO—call him **Mr. Wang**—recalled his experience as he walked around his factory: In 2003, prodded by a wife who had become a

Christian and the problems of a company with poor morale and cash flow, he “begged God, what shall I do? For the first time I prayed from the bottom of my

heart. I felt His love and devoted 2004 to spreading the gospel.” Now he provides Bible-based character training to his employees every morning from 7:30 to 8:30, and he says that most have become Christians.

Mr. Wang also has occasional hymn sings and testimony offerings during the day; at one, 125 employees in navy blue T-shirts stood and sweetly sang, with 10 more standing silently. He said that government officials have “had some

conversations with me. I tell officials we use Bible verses to train workers. It is up to each employee whether to believe or not, but each will be exposed to the gospel. The officials say I can teach anything within the company.”

One manager who once was a Communist Party member attests to the ways Mr. Wang’s company is different from state-owned ones and others where “bribery is common.” He says CEOs who become Christians have only one set of books and pay their taxes honestly; they no longer have mistresses or win contracts by proffering prostitutes to customers.

These Chinese executives see Christianity bringing immediate as well as long-term benefits, but they do not preach a prosperity gospel. Mr. Wang’s company lost a large order it needed for profitability because he refused to pay a bribe totaling 3 percent of the contract. Some of Mr. Wang’s financial backers think his ethical behavior is foolish. Some local officials are holding up the sale of his current property, a sale he needs to fund new construction at a site

where a foundation stone—proclaiming “Glory to the Lord, and the people will benefit”—is already laid.

**T**HE SEMI-LIBERTY THESE CEOs have—within certain defined rules that could be changed arbitrarily—parallels the semi-liberty that house churches now have in some major cities. (All churches are supposed to register with the government and place themselves under its authority, so “house church” means a non-registered church and not necessarily one that meets in a home. Most do, but some in the countryside meet in caves and some in cities meet in auditoriums.)

It’s against government rules for Westerners to attend house churches, but several Christians gave WORLD entry into that sphere, as long as locations of meeting places remained unspecified and individual participants unnamed. One house church visited makes use of a generic conference room—chairs behind long white tables—in one of the thousands of buildings where foreign companies



have offices, so that the entrance of two Westerners does not alarm the government policeman at the door.

One service, conducted entirely in Mandarin Chinese, began promptly at 9:00, with 44 women and 16 men in attendance. First came a recitation of the Apostles' Creed and then a responsive reading of Psalm 53. The first half-hour included prayer, two hymns sung antiphonally (with some stanzas sung by men only and others by women only), and a congregational reading of Genesis 39. Everyone read from church-provided Bibles and sang from a booklet of hymns downloaded from internet sites in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and California.

The pastor arrived just before the service began after taking an overnight train from another Chinese province. He put on a fresh, short-sleeved white shirt in the car that rushed him to the meeting place and began preaching promptly at 9:30. He took off his watch, placed it on the lectern in front of him, and finished preaching exactly at 10:00. His sermon was the third of a five-part series on how Joseph progressed from multi-colored robe to servant's robe to prisoner's robe to prime minister's robe and finally to a robe as God's servant.

The pastor, with evident practical applications for his young church, told of how God transformed Joseph from a naïve and proud child to a mature,

After the sermon came more prayer, a locally written hymn, a congregational reading of the warning about taking communion found in 1 Corinthians 11, and the distribution of a flaky cracker and grape juice. Then all sat, reciting the Lord's Prayer and applauding a young woman who had just joined the church. Finally, members filled out prayer-request slips that were then collected and passed out at random to others, who were charged with praying throughout the week for that individual: "That's how we get to know each other's needs."

Overall, security was low: One church leader said nonchalantly that he assumed a government spy was among the attendees, but the government would have to switch him out quickly or he would convert. Nor were doors locked at a different house-church evening meeting in a large apartment, where 22 adults and 13 children talked, sang hymns, played, and eagerly asked questions about life in America. The only locked inner door witnessed over a week in various Chinese cities was one within a shop where bootleg DVDs were being sold.

This non-defensiveness probably contributes to rapid church growth: No one except God knows how many Christians there are in China, but 100 million (out of the total population of 1.3

Christianity's growth by limiting the size of house churches—Christians say over 50 participants brings a "you're getting too big" warning—but such restrictions have merely catalyzed church planting and produced even more rapid growth.

**C**HRISTIANS, MEANWHILE, have generally acted like smart baseball players who know that hot-dogging it around the bases after hitting a home run merely prods the pitcher to give them a fastball bruise the next time up. The battle between church and state in China is no game, but Christians lighting up the scoreboard see value in allowing authorities to save face.

For example, **Mr. Chang**, a leading conductor, said he had sought fame by excelling in music and had achieved his goal—yet "I hated my life." He searched in Taoism and Buddhism but eventually encountered Christians who displayed love and humility: "This touched me. I wanted to be one of them. Reading the Bible, I realized why I was so miserable—because I am a sinner."

Mr. Chang is now running a thriving school that trains music directors for house churches. Contributions have allowed him to move into a new facility with 18 pianos in soundproof practice rooms, a 200-seat concert hall, and a



**“I tell officials we use Bible verses to train workers. It is up to each employee whether to believe or not, but each will be exposed to the gospel. The officials say I can teach anything within the company.”**

faithful adult who learned, as church members should learn, to focus his mind on God's message rather than on political pressures, gossip, or revenge. The pastor explained that Chinese Christians should forgive their enemies, as Joseph did, and should realize that even when we are in prison our minds are free: From Joseph's life we know that even a godly man has many difficulties and suffering, but he also has peace of mind and the ability to overcome Satan's attacks.

billion) is a commonly offered guesstimate. The rapid, recent spread of Christianity among business leaders and other urban professionals poses a difficult problem for a government used to persecuting uneducated rural people.

What keeps discontent from spreading is the economic boom, so if the government moves against business leaders who are creating it, China's economic safety valve might become stuck. Officials have tried to slow down

dormitory housing five to eight students per room; Mr. Chang says his school will be at its 100-student capacity next February. The government has canceled all his public concerts, but he fills his hall one Saturday per month with a concert publicized only by word-of-mouth: He says he lives an "illegal but reasonable existence" by not flaunting his independence.

Many Chinese Christians said that instead of criticizing the government

they piggyback on what government officials themselves are saying about the need for stronger moral values. For example, a divorce rate estimated at 30 percent to 60 percent (there are no reliable official figures) is creating havoc in Chinese families, so church-sponsored Marriage Encounter weekends and “water buffalo camps”—teaching men not to be so hard on wives—have won favor even from high-ranking officials who themselves have troubled marriages.

China is also facing an enormous migrant problem as the population quickly moves from 80-20 rural to 80-20 urban. Many newcomers to cities live in poverty as grinding as they faced in the countryside, but they have lost the dignity and community that previously sustained them. Marginalized, embittered, and angry, they can't crawl home, but their pent-up grievances could lead to a violent explosion unless Christians, like the British Methodists of the 18th century, pave the way to a peaceful transition to a fully industrialized society.

All Chinese seminaries need government permits to operate, but numerous illegal seminaries dedicated to teaching migrants have sprung up. At one, located in two run-down apartments with old bicycles and part of a kitchen sink outside, **Pastor Gao** and helpers teach theology, English, computers, and music to 26 students, some of them still teenagers, who squeeze into five small bedrooms. Mr. Gao has not been arrested over the past two years, but before that he was usually jailed once a year for several days each time.

Mr. Gao's familial and personal history reflects the history of Chinese Christianity and Communism. His grandfather when young was a disciple of famed missionary Hudson Taylor, who died in China in 1905. Mr. Gao became a Communist Party member and a pastor in the government's official church, sometimes preaching while drunk, but he listened to radio broadcasts from other countries and began to read the Bible seriously. He prayed to “the God of



my grandfather” and now disciples students who aspire to be missionaries to Pakistan or other Muslim countries. The past has become the future.

**S**OME CHINESE CHRISTIAN urban professionals, asked for their sense of China's future, believe the economy will continue to soar and corruption will diminish. Others expect an Enron-like crash, perhaps following the 2008 Olympics, since they say China's foundation is weak; some also forecast God's judgment against China for its emphasis on abortion and other evils. Many say they can't do much on a national scale so they concentrate their energies on local evangelism.

China's evangelism explosion means that in many churches the leaders have only two or three years of Christian experience—and that's rarely enough time to develop a consistent Christian worldview. Many interviewees spoke of discipleship as their churches' greatest need. The church gender gap, with more women than men attending, also receives scrutiny, with the common explanation an indictment of males for a self-centered pridefulness that sees admitting problems as signs of weakness.



**EVANGELISM EXPLOSION:** Christians feel more freedom to express their faith.

American Christians can help China's house churches by providing discipling resources such as internet seminary lectures and also publications that apply a Christian worldview to cultural and professional issues. (Materials need to stay away from anything that looks like foreign involvement in Chinese politics.) Bibles no longer need to be smuggled in, since state-approved religious organizations now print Bibles and happily raise money by selling them to house churches. (Real loosening here, of course, would be for the state to allow legal importation of all translations, so Christians would not necessarily have to put up with just the stodgy one that is printed.)

American Christians considering living in China should realize that their opportunity to worship alongside Chinese Christians is strictly limited, but the prospects of making contact by working in businesses or teaching English are nearly limitless. One small group leader within a house church said, “We are such young Christians. We look up to the U.S. for living examples of how to lead Christian lives.”

That's a scary thought. But, for American Christians, it's also a challenge and an opportunity. 🌐