



CHINA VOICES

China is rapidly becoming the largest Christian country in the world. James Catford, a regular visitor to the country, tells us what he is hearing from the Chinese about the impact of Christianity and the place of the Bible in their society.



James Catford

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Like a scene from *Lost in Translation*, I sat in my hotel room channel hopping through the 19 options available, trying to find some news in English. State television had wall-to-wall coverage of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party, but the latest report was yet another repeat of the one I saw the previous night.

As events would have it, the opening of the party congress was just one of four defining moments that took place on exactly the same day, back in November last year. Rivalling the once-a-decade change in leadership in China was news that Barack Obama was back in the White House and that Justin Welby would be moving into Lambeth Palace.

Surprisingly, the fourth event happened right where I was in Nanjing; the printing of the 100 millionth Bible from the Amity Printing Company, which I serve as vice-chair, the largest provider of Bibles in the world. Who is to say which will have the most lasting impact on humanity?

I visit China twice a year and what follows are voices, or vantage points, within the nation which is home to one in five of the population of the planet. This is what I'm hearing.

The least known world church leader

'China does not welcome the smuggling of Bibles.'

The speaker is Elder Fu, Chairman of the National Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) of the Protestant Churches in China, who is reading his prepared speech from a platform flanked by the retired Bishop of Singapore, John Chew, and a woman representing the government in Beijing, Guo Wei.

Before we transfer to Nanjing for the bigger celebration, we are attending a more modest event hosted by the National TSPM and China Christian Council in their Shanghai headquarters, located in the old British concession of the city. Sixty million of the 100 million Bibles produced in China are for distribution in China. This is a big day. In true Chinese fashion, gifts are exchanged, speeches made, protocol is observed.

Elder Fu tells his audience things it is already well informed about. He reminds us that everyone in China can obtain a Bible quite freely, and that those that smuggle Bibles are not helping the nation and are not its friends. He thanks the representatives of 146 Bible Societies present for nearly three decades of exclusive partnership with the registered churches to provide affordable Bibles through 74 distribution centres and thousands of churches across the country.

I had met Elder Fu privately with colleagues the day before. Such is the level of difficulty over translation, it takes the Australian in our group to rephrase a question asked by a Scot, and then three Chinese speakers to put it to Elder Fu. The question is whether people outside the church recognise the social impact of the Bible? Many of the meetings I had during my two weeks in mainland China touched on this important topic of discussion.

After the ceremony ends, the party moves to a stylish restaurant on the river Huangpu. Lord Brian Mawhinney, one of our guests from the UK, is on my right, a former chairman of the Conservative party and long-term supporter of Bible Society. And on my left is a well-dressed woman from the State Administration for Religious Affairs in Beijing who is there to offer her

support. We exchange cards and talk about the health of the church in the UK.

Usually on my twice-yearly visits to China, I ask officials how many people they think are in the church these days. Official figures say there are about 30 million Protestants and Catholics. These are conservative figures and the numbers are rising rapidly. The general view from those that know China best suggests that the true picture is twice that figure. That would put the number at about five per cent of the total population. Less reliable and probably less plausible, others reports put the total Christian population as double even this level, perhaps even ten per cent of the population. I'm not convinced.

Either way, China is rapidly becoming the largest Christian country on earth. And one that is hungry for the Bible.

At home in the academy

I'm sitting in a well appointed seminary room at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS). Windowless and with no Chinese references in the decor, this could be anywhere in the world. We are at the end of an international symposium on the role of Christianity in China, entitled 'The Bible and the Harmonious Society'. The meeting is conducted in a very disciplined way.

Stephen Timms, former cabinet minister and chief secretary to the Treasury under Tony Blair, is giving a paper on the world economic crisis and the Bible. Less academic than his audience might have been accustomed to, he speaks from the heart about examples of the Bible influencing public policy in the UK. Drop the Debt, Jubilee 2000, fair trade and the Christian alliance called Churches Investment Group are cited as movements where Christians have been in the forefront of change. To his local audience, Timms is offering a very confident account of the social impact of the Bible in the public square.

In response, rather than open discussion, several professors have been listed as speaking for seven minutes each. They take at least ten, and one that has arrived late is still expected to contribute. He does do with gusto and dismisses a Christian contribution to world financial reform. 'Greece is a Christian country,' he says. 'But they are still on the eve of collapse.'

Dr Cristian Romocea, from Bible Society in this country, is wriggling in his seat wanting to jump in and respond. Later he tells me that he can't believe a political science professor is quoting Max Webber as an authority on the Protestant Church's contribution to capitalism in the West. 'He's so misunderstood,' Cristian says. Stephen responds well to another academic who argues that the issue isn't ethical values but law, and the answer is better legislation.

Another view comes from the deputy director of the Institute of Sociology at SASS. She impresses us by quoting Karl Marx on religion being the opium of the people. This sounded more like the communist country we in the West expect. The only problem was that she

dismissed the classic view that Marx was against religion and said he could also see its virtues.

In the face of her colleagues she recognised the benefits of Christianity for the people of China. First, it unites people in the face of the contemporary phenomena of atomising individuals as isolated numbers rather than a set of relationships. Secondly, it will see off liberalism because there is far more to it than merely 'charity'. 'Christianity impacts the way that people live the whole of their life,' she said. That's fighting talk in a secular academic setting. Her third point connects most closely with the issue that Stephen Timms raised. Christian faith and the Bible counter the loss of morality in the market system; they bring a stronger moral framework to the way that people actually deal with each other. Thank you, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, nicely put.

the Bible is China's most popular book; 60 million copies distributed in 25 years

China's most popular book

This is my eighth visit to China in as many years, this time invited by the National TSPM and China Christian Council, which oversee the single denomination Protestant church of 23 million. A parallel body exists for the six million Catholics, one of the country's five official religions. Here, at least, faith does not appear to be a result of upbringing.

'During the Cultural Revolution years in China from 1966 to 1976,' says Kua Wee Seng, who leads Bible Society's China Partnership, 'all churches were closed and religious activity was banned. The Bible became a banned book. Bibles were confiscated, burned and destroyed by hordes of Red Guards who raided and ransacked churches and homes all over the country.'

Movingly, Wee Seng explained that sometimes the Bibles would be stacked in heaps in front of the church and the Christians could be forced to kneel in front of them as the Scriptures were set on fire. 'The Chinese pastors who survived the Cultural Revolution told me that seeing all the Bibles burned right before their eyes was one of the most painful experiences in their lives. They thought it would be the end of Christianity and the Bible in China,' he told me.

But it wasn't. Under the Reform Policy of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese Christians were allowed to worship in churches. But when they met they could not find any Bibles, except for some hidden by believers or hand copied during the dark years. They were severely deprived and totally unable to meet the growing demands of a rapidly growing church.

Acting as the United Bible Societies, in 1985 Bible Societies from around the world provided 100 metric tonnes of thin paper to the church in China for printing Bibles. This continued for ten years until China was able to provide its own high quality Bible paper. Since

then Bible Societies have donated funds to print Bibles and make them affordable for most Chinese Christians, especially the majority of poor believers from rural areas.

Meanwhile, leaders of the Chinese church requested help to establish a printing press in China to ensure the continued provision of Scriptures to meet the demands from the ever growing number of Christian followers. \$7.6 million was raised to help set up the Amity Printing Company in 1987. I joined the board in 2008 and became vice-chair the following year.

Moving on to Nanjing, I participated in even larger celebrations for 100 million Bibles printed by the Amity

the uncompromising words coming from the hard-pressed pastor responsible for several churches. At least they haven't experienced the decades of imprisonment that the older generations that I have met have told me about.

Could all this be preparing the tinder wood for a revival to sweep the church in China? Indeed, many believe it is underway in the church in China. I watch with eager anticipation.

Back in Shanghai, Elder Fu asked for help with resourcing local seminaries which, from what I have seen, share a modest collection of scholarly books little larger than those of a serious student in the UK. Rural pastors may have no reference books at all. He appeals for help with a visiting scholars' programme, something college students elsewhere in the world take for granted. Lunch with the leader of the 170 churches in Shanghai confirms the urgent need for more and better leadership training.

As sometimes happens, the local Chinese in our group forget to translate into English one very animated conversation and I assume they have wandered off the subject. They must be talking about football, such is the energy in their voices and hand movements. Actually they are talking about the relative virtues of e-books as against physical copies of the Bible. The vast majority of Christians can't afford or don't want the Bible any other way. Things will surely change, but not for a while.

Many faces, many voices

The leadership of the registered church, a high ranking academic seminar, 100 million Bibles, and life in a local church; just four of the faces that I have seen in China. Diverse, at times confusing, but always fresh and vibrant, this is contemporary China as I have witnessed it.

As for the future, ask the participants in the 18th National Party Congress, or the social scientists in Shanghai. Like many countries experiencing reform and growth, it's one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake. Few would doubt that China is on the move and faces both exciting opportunities and huge challenges in the years ahead.

The hunger for Bibles seems insatiable and through our unique work with the Church and Amity, Bible Society is well placed to meet the needs, as funds allow. Academically, interest in the Christian Scriptures is spreading. As for the government, it is recognising the social capital that the Bible has contributed to society. The care of the elderly and vulnerable is something that those in power are increasingly looking to the Church to provide.

Down the centuries China has been a driving force in world culture and affairs. It will be again within our lifetime. For those of us concerned about the church of Christ and the Kingdom of God, we will enthusiastically take an active interest in China.

Proverbs 11.11 says, 'By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown.' Please pray for China.

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Printing Company, a joint venture with the Amity Foundation, a non-profit welfare organisation run on Christian values. With 40 million for export, the chances are that a Bible near you has come from China, the largest provider of Scripture in the world.

Act global, think local

Where all these Bibles actually end up is an interesting question. Most times I am in China I attend local Sunday worship, often in a rural church. I'm met by smiling faces, even if the dental care of the hundreds of faithful who welcome me leaves a lot to be desired. Each and every time I visit, I witness the crush around the little bookshop next to the church building, itself full to capacity.

After my last experience of a local Chinese church, one experienced observer remarked that it reminded them of a Brethren congregation in Belfast circa 1950. Certainly there is a strong pietistic emphasis and each week a gospel is served up that is far less palatable than the West could most likely handle.

As we sing the chorus from the official Protestant hymn book, I am taken to another world. 'Now in faith believing, words of life receiving, beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.' I have a suspicion that this roughly sawn timber of local church life is close to that experienced prior to the Welsh revivals of the nineteenth century.

What impresses me is that, hard though the message is, people are still packing out the churches. Jin, a 70-year-old watermelon grower walked for three hours in sub-zero temperatures to get a copy of the Bible. Twenty-eight-year-old mother Zhang, who has been sharing her mother's Bible for years, recently received her own copy. These are not isolated stories.

I've watched in the bitter cold as hundreds sit though a programme of teaching that matches the austere wooden benches that they have to sit on. Some bring their own simple cushions, but little protects them from