

Touring for a song: Visits with Christians in China

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How free are churches in China? Are they subject to rigid government control? While these questions are much debated, people who have worked or studied in China know that it's difficult to generalize about Christian life in China. In conducting my own research in China, I've encountered a wide range of responses from local officials and have found that Chinese Christians are remarkably effective in dealing with the government's Religious Affairs Bureau. The variety and vibrancy of Christian life, as well as the graciousness of Chinese Christians to an outsider, were abundantly evident to me during a recent study trip.

I went to China because I wanted to hear the songs of China's Christian oral tradition--the songs that one can't find in print because they exist only in the singers' memories. Since major churches now favor a hymnal of music written by international and Chinese composers, visitors seldom encounter the thousands of local songs. In an effort to better understand everyday Chinese spirituality, I had begun to collect and translate some of these songs. But, as ethno-musicologists insist, one must record music when and where it is being used if one wants to learn its meaning. So I returned to China in hopes of hearing this kind of singing in worship.

On the first night of my trip I stayed with a Chinese friend who was pastoring a church in a booming county seat. She was preaching that night at a meeting point outside town and I went along. The lay couple who had recently started this meeting came by for us with two bicycles--one pulling a covered seat. The wife went ahead on her bicycle to get worship started--leaving her husband to pull two adults behind him. He pedaled with difficulty as my friend and I sat tight together. We traveled on a darkening dirt road, passing through village after village, until I thought we would never arrive. Then we began to hear singing.

After climbing up a steep flight of stairs, we walked into a room above a repair shop. Beds and cupboards had been pushed to the wall and about 30 people were sitting wherever they could, and singing loudly with their eyes closed. Between songs there were long prayers. Then my friend opened her Bible and preached for half an hour-- shorter than usual, because we had come late. At the end everyone stood and prayed their own prayers aloud at the same time. At last they closed by joining in the Lord's Prayer. Then they greeted us warmly and passed my microphone around and recorded their songs.

The next day we went to meet the pastor in the church office. Two other men arrived: a policeman in uniform to say that I must move to a hotel licensed for foreign guests, and a Religious Affairs Bureau representative to say that foreigners may not visit unregistered churches. They were courteous to me but blunt with the church staff (I don't think they realized that I understood them).

We had not anticipated this problem, but I packed my bag while my friend called a church member at the hotel for foreign guests and got a special rate. Both of us went off to sleep in the hotel room.

By this time the churchpeople had heard that I could not attend services. They rallied to welcome me to their apartments for meals and recorded over a hundred songs on tape. They even found a friend with a car to take me out to the county museum. On the way back we stopped to see an impressive new church building. Caretakers there complained that the town authorities had made them take down the cross from the steeple. But the gate marked the site as a Christian church.

I attended the registered church Sunday morning and again in the afternoon, when a young woman preacher led us alternately in prayer and singing. We stood for nearly an hour, then sat for her lively sermon. When I left town, the people who had helped me cooked a special meal. A church member who works for the railroad got me a rare ticket on a nonstop train. I know I was a disruption in their busy ministry to thousands, yet they threw themselves into my project without complaint, quickly adjusting to the limits set by the Religious Affairs Bureau.

My second stop was a central China city recommended by the foreign visitors office of the Chinese Christian Council because "everything is peaceful there." The local RAB seems glad for the churches to join in stimulating the economy however they can. Christians have been able to build churches, clinics and Bible schools and to

welcome foreign guests. I visited church services in the region with a delightful woman, a seminary graduate. When my shoes wore out from walking, we stopped at a street cobbler, who fixed them, but would not take money from a “Christian sister.”

We attended a rural church in a village home across the fields from a country bus stop. We went to storefront churches in the city where the young people are new Christians wearing blue jeans and bright shirts. They wrote their songs into notebooks.

The older women have stronger voices and always preface their songs with prayer. Services include testimonies from those who have been healed and preaching from verses throughout the Bible that people find and read aloud. People sit on low stools (piled to the ceiling when not in use) or on sawhorses or homemade benches with backs--whatever allows the most people to fit into the least space. Verses of scripture are often taped on the plastered walls.

One evening we climbed the unlighted stairs of an apartment building and found one person sitting on each step all the way up. A loudspeaker on the third floor broadcast the preaching. Although two stools had been saved for the teacher and the foreigner, we had to find a place to set them down--the four tiny rooms were filled with people. All were facing the central hall, where the local high school art teacher was preaching. Finally he began to pray and all joined in with their own prayers, adding to the din of voices. Then the teacher brought all the voices together in the Lord's Prayer and ended the worship.

The owner announced twice that everyone should leave and many left, but the rooms were still crowded. Several older men sang psalms known by heart. Their cries to God were deep and slow; their thanks to God was high and joyful. The music often does not repeat itself from beginning to end of a psalm, and only five tones in the octave are used, as in traditional Chinese music. One woman knew some chants that added interesting twists to a gospel story told in couplets. She recited in a slow but tight rhythm, keeping time with a bamboo clacker, and then began to pick up speed until--to everyone's enjoyment--she suddenly finished with two repeated lines.

In this city the RAB representative appeared only for state occasions, and never with police escort. At my arrival, he came to a welcoming ceremony in a house church, but slipped out when people began to worship. Another day he appeared for a

review of a rural church health clinic and for an elegant restaurant meal honoring a visiting pastor from Taiwan. This pastor talked with the Christian leaders much more than with the RAB representative, and it was clear that church plans depended on the pastors and elders who make up the local China Christian Council (CCC). In most places the members of the CCC also constitute the local Three-Self Committee which is organized to defend the churches' self-government, self-support and self-propagation in the wider society.

In this region, unlike some others I have heard about, the senior pastors seem to be fostering rather than frustrating the leadership of lay elders and young pastors, and Christians do not play off their RAB connections against one another. The churches grow, and registered churches establish other meeting points in the region, then help these new groups to find permanent locations, programs and leaders, and to raise the fee required for registration. In this setting I could attend unregistered gatherings. (In these cases the CCC made special arrangements.)

I made a stop in a provincial town to see a young couple who had befriended me years before when they were seminary students. He directs a small CCC Bible school in the back of a city church. It is so crowded that the students eat outside, sitting on a patio wall. We took a three-hour bus ride into the country to stay overnight with his mother-in-law, and I met their one-year-old daughter, who will live with her grandmother until she is old enough for city day care.

The mother-in-law, a vigorous woman in her 40s, pastors the village church. Her husband manages the village wine factory. Together they started the church in their house with one other believer six years ago. They now have a church building, and the five meeting points they began in nearby villages also have buildings. The singing I heard at her church was all from the hymnbook, with the literate young adults teaching their elders the words by singing line after line. But on Wednesday nights, testimonies alternate with "songs everyone knows." Thursdays they support each other's prayers, and on Fridays the youth share their interpretations of the text that was preached the previous Sunday. Here there was no sign of the RAB, which may be more prominent in the city.

My final stop was at a major Yangtze River city where I stayed at the seminary hostel while making arrangements to hear songs in outlying churches. Some students were going to a service after supper and I asked if I could go. We went off on bicycles through the city--not easy at rush hour in a sea of bikes, trucks and

buses. In a ground-floor apartment, 200 people were packed in rows around a central table. Two unassuming “brothers” led the service from a pamphlet everyone held. They sang one printed song over and over, then read printed scripture verses and echoed “Amen” to the leaders’ prayers to Jesus.

When the testimonies began, two dozen men and women thanked God at length for help in specific situations. They did not tell the healing stories so common in Chinese churches. The women members all wore dark berets; most of the worshipers were young people. I was told that this group was started in the 1920s. It has no clergy and meets Sundays in park theaters. Although it does not support Three-Self, the group considers itself to be a revival movement for the whole church rather than a denomination.

While I waited for permission to make some rural visits (I had applied in the wrong way, which caused some conflicts) other opportunities arose. One Sunday a seminary professor’s wife and I took several buses to reach the place where she preaches. I listened as older women talked with each other about the difficulties they face as professional women with marginal jobs, and about the far greater trials they survived in the ten years when religion was suppressed.

Then, in one last visit, I drove to Soup Mountain, a hot springs where a new church had just been completed. We were met by the mayor and the RAB representative. There were speeches and toasts, and the church served us a banquet in the church hall. The Christian leaders insisted that as the first foreign guest I must write a greeting in Chinese characters for the church wall. They laughed when they saw my calligraphy.

Everyone trooped into the sanctuary for a worship service that included a humorous musical play, “A Family of Four Goes to Church,” performed by young adults. A formal group photo was taken in front of the church. Best of all, after the town officials left, the women who had served the meal began to sing their own local songs.