

The Chinese at worship: Official and underground Christianity

by [Stuart C. Strother](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

In the 1950s, the communist government of China expelled all foreign missionaries. Many Americans have seen black-and-white photos of missionary families sitting next to piles of luggage on the wharves of Shanghai, waiting to sail home. We know much about this event because the missionaries came home and wrote books about their dedication and their unrealized harvest.

Another image that dominates the Western view of the Chinese church is of Mao Zedong's zealous Red Guards persecuting the church during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Bibles were burned, believers were jailed and the faithful could gather only in secret. Sometimes they would share a single tattered copy of the Bible and lip-synch hymns so as not to give away their "counterrevolutionary" activities.

Stories of the underground church and of discrimination and persecution against Christians remain common in many Christian circles. But as I found during a recent visit, the contemporary reality is much more varied and complex.

In Hong Kong I met a foreign missionary who lives there and keeps his Christian identity secret. Since China doesn't issue visas to foreign religious workers, many missionaries take on a secular job like teaching and do their ministry on the side. In his recent newsletter to supporters in the West, this missionary wrote of upcoming "business trips" to China—a code for meetings with the underground church. The code language is meant to protect his Chinese "customers" from government e-mail censors in Beijing while he drums up support from Christians in the West.

This missionary's work consists mostly of writing brief theological books and training leaders in China who in turn train other church leaders. He and his colleagues are writing original material relevant to the Chinese experience, rather than merely translating Western books. They are five years into a 20-year training program for unregistered churches in just about every corner of China. They have some big-

name partners in the West who fund their work in part by paying Chinese “gray market” printers willing to secretly print Christian material so long as they make a tidy profit.

When I asked why his partners choose to stay underground rather than join the official churches, the missionary explained that older Christians still remember the persecution during the Cultural Revolution and don’t trust the leaders of the official churches. Their main reason, however, is a practical one, he acknowledged: most of them are poor farmers for whom registration is pointless since they live in remote villages where there is no official church and almost no government presence.

In Shanghai, the most vibrant city in the country, where I had lived for two years, I visited a massive ivy-covered Gothic church on Hengshan Road that was built by missionaries in 1925. When the communists expelled the missionaries in the 1950s, the building was turned over to actors who used it as a practice hall for their political propaganda plays.

More recently, an English-language church service for foreigners started up there. On the day I visited, a paper sign on the giant wooden door read “foreign passport holders only,” but no one was checking passports. (At a similar church in Beijing you have to show your passport before you can enter.) Some say the locals are kept out because the government wants to prevent them from converting to a foreign religion, but others say the foreign-passport requirement is simply to keep the place from being overrun by locals who want to practice their English.

While shaking hands during the sharing of the peace, I noticed that about two-thirds of the worshipers in this “foreign” church service were ethnically Chinese. Everyone had a story of how they came to have a foreign passport. Many are from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore; their parents or grandparents had left the mainland long ago, but China’s booming economy had drawn them back to the motherland.

Later I met with an overseas Chinese businessperson in Shanghai whose wife announced, “We’re missionaries here to work with the underground church.” They invited me to one of their underground meetings. I wasn’t blindfolded, sworn to secrecy or taken down a back alley. Instead I was led into a high-rise apartment building with wall-to-wall marble floors. Domestic workers, called *ayis*, were everywhere.

The group's dozen or so members, mostly female, ethnically Chinese and holders of foreign passports, were in designer clothes and enjoying a buffet lunch prepared by *ayis*. After a time of food and fellowship I learned that they meet once a week for prayer and Bible study, mostly in the daytime while their husbands, who are captains of industry, are working at multinational firms.

Two foreign sisters in the group said that they hoped to expand it to include more locals. I asked, "Why not join one of the congregations of the official churches?" The room fell silent. One of the sisters explained to me that she thought foreign-passport holders couldn't attend a local church, but she was quickly corrected by one of the locals. Then a local Chinese woman told me she doesn't like the preaching in the official churches and feels the Spirit more in the contemporary style of worship at the house churches. So the difference between the unregistered churches and the official church seems to have more to do with homiletics than with politics.

The official church in China, the Three-Self Church, gets its name from its goals of being self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. The name lets it be known that the gunboat missionary work of the colonial powers is no longer welcome. The Three-Self movement began in the 1940s, before Mao's Communist Party gained power.

Three-Self churches are being built all around the country. In one extraordinary example, the government erected a beautiful modern cathedral in Shanghai's Biyun international neighborhood that is used by locals on Sunday mornings and foreigners in the afternoons. Seminaries are also being built after the model of Nanjing Theological Seminary, the only seminary that did not close its doors during the Cultural Revolution.

In a meeting with Three-Self Church leaders at their headquarters in Shanghai I asked about the unregistered churches. My host smiled and said, "We know who they are. Many are our friends. We consider them our brothers and sisters in Christ." He went on to explain that they aren't considered unregistered churches, but "churches that haven't registered yet."

Official ministry work in China can be done only by Chinese citizens, but foreigners are not forbidden from openly sharing their faith one-on-one with their friends and co-workers (if it's done tactfully). In light of the hardships the Chinese have endured at the hands of foreigners—during, for example, the Opium Wars and the Japanese

invasions—this level of caution is perhaps understandable.

In Beijing, I met with the director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, a cabinet-level ministry in charge of all religious affairs in China. She gave a brief speech about the increase in religious freedom in China. Churches, temples and mosques are being built across the country, she said, and the government now views religious freedom as a basic human right. However, she warned that anyone whose worship is a threat to the government can be prosecuted.

When I asked the director about the underground church, she said that the term *underground* is a label applied by the Western media. Government officials are well aware of many of the unregistered churches, and they allow them a measure of freedom so long as they pose no threat to the government.

It remains illegal to evangelize the masses by passing out literature, preaching in the streets or holding secret meetings—all basic rights in the West. But the bureaucrats who have controlled Chinese governments since the Zhou dynasty appear to be warming up to Christianity. Dozens of churches are open in every major Chinese city. Locals and foreigners can walk into a church, get baptized, sing hymns, hear sermons and pick up a Bible for just a few yuan on the way out.

While tales of persecution of the Chinese church in the past were generally accurate, these stories persist because they appeal to our appetite for sensational news more than because they reflect the truth. The story of the healthy Chinese church that peacefully coexists with the government is less sensational, but it's one that needs to be told.