

Glimpsing the future: Dispatch from Hong Kong

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

While attending a conference in Hong Kong I spent a free afternoon looking for signs of the vibrant Asian Christianity that we've heard so much about recently. If writers such as Philip Jenkins (*The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*) and David Aikman (*Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Changing the Global Balance of Power*) are to be trusted, China holds the future of Christianity.

I didn't find much. Of course, Hong Kong isn't mainland China. The former British colony didn't experience the irreligious reign of Mao, and it has its own traditions (including a prominent place for the Anglican Church). Locals told me that the religion of Hong Kong is money. What I found was mostly weird: Christmas decorations everywhere, including a billboard-sized sign on the side of a department store announcing "Jesus Is Lord of Christmas" beside logos for Gucci and Armani. Much more obvious was the sacrament of the shark's fin: many shops were selling dried seafood for traditional Chinese medicine.

Finally I spied a non-Anglican church that clearly aimed its ministry at Chinese rather than at Westerners. When I stepped inside I was met by a praise band warming up for worship, replete with guitars, a noise muffler for the drum set and teenagers wearing skimpy clothes. They closed their eyes as they mouthed lyrics that, I felt sure, without knowing any Chinese, amounted to "Jesus is my boyfriend." I spied an enormous banner advertising Franklin Graham's upcoming visit. I needn't have left suburban America for this, I thought.

Westerners aren't the only ones interested in how China will change as it becomes more Christian. Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* printed an interview with a young student leader at Peking University, Yi Jun, who talked about his conversion to Jesus and what Christianity means for China's future.

Yi shows the energy that makes Jenkins's thesis about the coming face of Christendom believable: he rides his bike two miles every day to attend a 5:30 a.m.

prayer meeting. He runs three different Bible studies, each of which meets weekly for two or three hours. He spends another afternoon preparing for a prayer meeting and the weekend cooking up a sermon for Sunday. No wonder that he names as his biggest frustration “the sluggish ways of other followers.”

Yi is fastidious in his holiness and not hesitant to tell others (even a reporter) about it. He visited a Taoist temple right before his graduate exam for good luck, but he now sees that that decision only brought divine wrath: “God taught me a hard lesson; he cut exactly one point off my total score . . . and I failed to get enrolled. I deserved this harsh punishment.” He laments not turning the computer off fast enough when a pornographic image comes up. But he’s winning on this front: “I haven’t seen pornography in a year and a half.”

Yi’s real interest is in the simultaneous rise of Christianity in China and the explosion of China’s economy: “China’s rejuvenation is part of the rise of the gospel,” he said. “The booming economy, in God’s eyes, is only an engine to propel the gospel.” Sure enough, the fastest-growing missionary efforts in the world are based not in the West but in economically booming South Korea.

Yi is willing to put his boundless energy to work to stoke these engines of progress. He is not only a Christian but a member of the Communist Party and is thinking about entering politics. He wonders “if it is God’s will that I enter government to push forward China’s Christianizing process.”

A pro-growth, capitalist, communist Chinese Christian. It is a strange new world.