Christians in China wary of government's effort to remold faith

by Matt Moir in the May 11, 2016 issue

On a hazy Sunday morning, the fourth floor of a dingy gray office building in Beijing is bursting with prayer.

In the Chinese capital, it's common for church services to be held in Soviet-era office buildings. But the cracked-concrete dankness of this particular location cannot dampen the congregation's enthusiasm. Several hundred Christians clap their hands and stomp their feet while a quartet at the front of the room belts out songs praising Yesu (*Jesus* in Mandarin).

Most of the men and women in attendance at the government-sanctioned Yizhuang Church are younger than 40, though several elderly Chinese women with their grandchildren are among those who pack the venue.

When the band is finished, the pastor, Du Jian Jun, takes the podium to deliver his sermon, and the crowd settles into blue folding chairs. Du, who speaks in Mandarin, preaches that while the lives we lead can be difficult, with the guidance of Yesu we have the tools to carry on.

The pastor's message is straightforward; the relationship between Christianity and the Chinese government is more complex.

In August 2014, a top-ranking official in the Chinese government informed the world that China was planning to nationalize Christianity. Wang Zuoan, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, told a forum in Shanghai that the "construction of Chinese Christian theology should adapt to China's condition and integrate with Chinese culture."

A pastor from Zhejiang Province in eastern China said the aim is "to reform and remold Christianity into a [Communist] Party-dominated tool that can be used in its service."

It's difficult, of course, for anyone to know exactly what that means. But what cannot be disputed is the friction between the state and Chinese Christians: over the past

two years, Chinese authorities—citing building code violations—have torn down more than 1,200 crosses from churches across the country, destroyed several churches, and arrested pastors and activists.

Chinese Christians in Zhejiang either rebuilt or replaced some of those crosses. And provincial branches of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, two of the three government-approved Christian organizations in China, sent letters to party leaders condemning the crackdown on Christian symbols.

In 1982 the Communist Party released a document stating that there were about 3 million Protestants in China; a 2010 Pew report estimated that there were 68 million. This growth is a source of alarm for Chinese authorities, according to Fenggang Yang, a professor of sociology at Purdue University and a scholar of religion in China.

Officials “want to find some way to maintain control, and sinicization is the latest effort to tame Christianity through a more systematic campaign,” Yang said.

Yang notes that the push to sinicize Christianity manifests itself in different ways, such as church buildings being constructed in a traditional Chinese style, the music in church services sounding more Chinese, and preachers using Chinese stories in their sermons.

But he believes the most important aspect of the current campaign is to make sure Christian churches are politically aligned with the government and are not spreading subversive ideas from outside China’s borders—an idea he finds preposterous.

“It’s ridiculous to still regard Christianity as a foreign religion,” he said. “For those Christians, they don’t see a foreign religion, but a Christian God they perceive to be real, powerful, and that’s helped in their lives.”

Xi Lian, professor of world Christianity at Duke Divinity School, suggests the tension between Chinese Christians and the Chinese government is a relatively new phenomenon.

“The tension has arisen because of the hostility of the state toward all forms of religion—not just Christianity—that do not subject themselves to government control and domination,” Lian said.

China has been accused by various human rights organizations of brutally repressing the Uighurs, a Muslim ethnic minority group in western China.

If Chinese authorities do, indeed, fear the rise of a robust, defiant Christianity in China, they should think carefully about the strategy they use to address it, Lian said.

“The harsher the state’s treatment of Christianity, the more vigorously and unpredictably it will grow,” he said.

Amy Huang, a 47-year-old preschool teacher in Beijing, doesn’t consider the government a threat to Christianity.

“People in China are lost,” she said. “They’re looking for something to believe in other than communism.”

After spending years exploring different religions, Huang was baptized in 2000. She has since converted her mother to Christianity, too.

“Christianity will continue to grow in China, and I don’t think the authorities can stop it because the appetite is there,” she said. “Communism lets too many people down.” —Religion News Service

This article was edited on April 26, 2016.