

Christians. These allegations are usually vague, and the charge of using sexual favors to lure pastors seems dubious, and probably reflects an effort to discredit the central role played by a woman. But the charges of bullying and of trying to hijack congregations are so common that they must at least reflect a fear among China's unregistered churches—a primordial unease, a feeling that believers' faith in the established churches is so shallow that their souls could be stolen.

Chengdu: Searching for Jesus

As Christmas arrived, it seemed that Wang Yi's church might not be able to hold a service. This was usually the high point of the year and a key chance to recruit followers; many Chinese are curious about the Western holiday but don't really understand it—who is the fat guy in the red suit, and what does it have to do with Jesus? The Christmas service was an opportunity for the congregation to invite friends to a fun evening, and maybe win over a few people. Usually these services were so popular that Early Rain rented out a ballroom. But this year, every time they booked a hotel's ballroom, they got a call an hour later from the manager apologetically backing out—clearly the result of government pressure. I began to wonder if it had all been too much: the seminary, the expansion plans, and linking up with other Reformed churches.

I visited Peng Qiang to ask him what he thought. He had his own church and had known Wang Yi for years. What did he think of these tensions between churches and the government? Was this a serious conflict? We sat in his chilly offices, like most buildings in southern China unheated in the winter. The damp Chengdu winter penetrated every room, every layer of clothing, but Peng was buoyant and laughed good-naturedly at my question.

"Let me answer your question by telling you about a dream I have. I have always wanted to make a movie about Christianity in China for my friends back in Los Angeles. People there just hear about the crackdowns and arrests, and they get worried for me. Some guy gets arrested a thousand miles from here and they call me up: Are you okay?"

"I remember back when we were celebrating out by the river—

you remember, back in 2005 when Early Rain was locked out. Do you know what it was like? Was it suffering? Yes, it was suffering. We didn't know what would happen. But mostly, it was fun! People were happy and enthusiastic. I always say that Christians and revolutionaries have one point really in common: when you go to face a problem, you have *joy, you have hope*," he said, emphasizing the last few words by speaking them in English. "A revolutionary is like that, right?! I'm locked up and I'm facing death alone, but I'm happy about it!

"So if I were writing a screenplay about these events, it would be like this.

"They'd see the police blocking their door, saying, 'Sorry, you can't go inside.' Some brothers and sisters, their hearts are angry, but others say, 'Forget it, let's go down to the Jinjiang River.' And they'd find a place in the park by the river. The sun is coming out. It is beautiful. And then they'd start to sing. And these mamas from the church, they'd see the people in the park in the morning and say, 'Hey, young people, you should believe in Jesus too because then you'll understand why you're living.'

"Chengdu is full of teahouses, and they'd split up and go to drink tea. Everyone's really happy. And the plain-clothes police are following them. But it doesn't matter. People are talking, sharing, and praying. They're excited; they're happy.

"Then they go and eat hot pot, and the plain-clothes police are still going with them. They don't know why, but they do. And they're the sad ones. They're just following. Their lives, these police, their lives are *ridiculous*. Because every profession, it has something in it that allows *dignity* to emerge. If you're a police officer, your dignity is you're arresting bad people. Your bravery comes out. But here, what are you doing?

"So this script, it's different from what you read. It is suffering, or at least it's inconvenient, but overall there is God's grace. If God doesn't exist, then it's meaningless. But if God exists, then it makes sense."

Peng had others reasons to be optimistic. Yes, he agreed that Xi Jinping's administration was making a concerted effort to strengthen state control over society by arresting dissidents and lawyers. It was also promoting Chinese traditional values and religions at the expense of Christianity. But Peng stayed positive, not out of naïveté,

but because he saw the longer-term problems in the government's hard-line approach. One is the cost of its "stability-maintenance" program, often known by its Chinese acronym, *weiwèn* (pronounced "way-when"). According to government figures, authorities spend more money on *weiwèn* than on national defense.

"*Weiwèn* is very expensive. If someone in a housing complex hears singing from an apartment, he might call the police, but who pays for it? Police have a lot of real problems, like crime and terrorism. The police have to call up all these departments: the religious affairs office, the local constabulary, the national security, the Ministry of Civil Affairs. All these departments have to pay gas for their cars, overtime, meals. The first thing they'll all say is, 'Who's paying?' So now unless the central government issues an order to close down something, the local government is not that willing."

Talking to Peng reminded me why it was important to get out of the capital. There, the government's power seemed limitless; here it was tamed by distance. It would be naïve to downplay the hard political power of an authoritarian leader like Xi but equally glib to ignore long-term trends beyond the government's control.

Shortly before I left, Peng told me a story that summed up how life often played out in places like Chengdu. His daughter was six and a half years old and had started public school earlier that autumn. Neither Peng nor his wife wanted her to wear the red scarf of the Young Pioneers, the Communist youth group that almost all students join.

"We didn't expect it to come up so quickly, but after just three weeks she came home and said her teacher said they had to wear the scarf. We were upset."

Peng talked to her and tried to reason with her, saying she didn't have to, in fact that she shouldn't because it represented the Communist Party.

"I was too logical and she cried. She said every child will wear one. It's very colorful. It looks nice.

"But my wife is a counselor, and she used the right side of her brain to talk to her. She explained that you can be a good student without the red scarf. You are a child of God, and you don't want to wear something that isn't God's.

"So she said, 'Yes, I'm a child of God, and I don't want to wear the red scarf.' Then we prayed together."

Peng's wife went to school and thanked the teacher for being so good to the children but asked if the scarf was voluntary. The teacher said it was, so his wife told the teacher, "We're a Christian family and it's not in accordance with our faith. But our child respects her teacher and will work hard and be a good pupil.' The teacher was fine and said, 'No problem.'"

The couple then wrote a polite letter to the teacher so she would have a written explanation in case the principal asked why one child wasn't wearing the red scarf. The daughter carried the letter to school. That afternoon, Peng and his wife met their daughter at the school gate.

"She was so happy, and I asked her why. She told us that that morning when the Young Pioneers were lining up, everyone lined up except her. But she didn't feel bad, because the teacher's assistant yelled out to the class, 'She doesn't have to participate. She's got faith!'"

At noon on Christmas Eve, I was sure the service would be canceled. With just a few hours to go, no hotel had agreed to hold them. But then I got a call from my friend Zhang Guoqing, the church's point man on social issues. They had succeeded. The service would be held at the Greenland Business Hotel, a third-rate hotel in one of the side streets near the church. I thanked him, but after hanging up, I wondered how many people would show up on such short notice.

I arrived at a quarter to seven, forty-five minutes before the service was supposed to start, but Early Rain members were already streaming through the lobby and up the stairs to the hotel's second-floor ballroom. The entrance to the room was filled with poster boards prepared for the event. They were three feet wide by six feet high and explained tonight's theme: "Searching for Jesus in Chengdu."

The posters were a bold experiment in retelling the city's history. They explained not only that Chengdu had a Christian history—that itself was something one couldn't read in any guidebook to Chengdu, in any textbook, or on any official website in China—but also that Christianity had played a huge role in the city's modernization from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

One banner featured biographical sketches of the missionaries who reached Chengdu in the nineteenth century. Another, called "Precious Blood; We Cannot Forget," showed how these men and women had created from scratch all the modern medical infrastructure in the city: hospitals, clinics for pregnant women, and even an ambulance service. It stressed that anyone was served regardless of religious belief and that those working there did so out of belief, not for money. Another board showed how some of the city's most prestigious middle and high schools had been founded by missionaries. Maybe the most powerful poster showed a foundling hospital set up by missionaries and below it a picture of garbage bins in a neighboring province. There, in 2012, five babies had been dumped by a local orphanage. The contrast wasn't explained, but the message was obvious: Christianity saves lives; the state disregards them. At the bottom, in bold red letters, was a verse from the Gospel of John: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Reading the boards carefully, it was clear that the message wasn't that Western missionaries were good. It was that all missionaries were good—a direct challenge to the orthodox Communist version of history. It had always claimed that missionaries were bad—part of an imperialistic project to undermine China. But by the 1940s, the boards showed, many key missionaries were Chinese. A Bible study group in a university was led by a Chinese pastor. Chinese doctors took over the hospitals. The point was that Christianity was doing this; the fact that Westerners happened to have brought it to China was a historical accident.

After looking at the billboards, I walked into the ballroom. People were handing out brochures. One had a picture of the former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev with a quotation, "God knows I'm an atheist!" The pamphlet discussed the existence of God, noting that great scientists, such as Darwin and Einstein, had believed in God.

Another brochure attacked heresies. Eastern Lightning wasn't mentioned by name, but the flyer seemed like a clever move to show that Early Rain wasn't completely out of step with government policies. But as I flipped through the pamphlet, I realized that this wasn't the point. The back page of the brochure listed people in history who had overcome heresies. The last person on the list was Wang

Mingdao, the Christian leader who had defied Communist rule and spent twenty years in a labor camp. Implicitly, it was the government that was the heresy for having jailed Wang.

I gulped and pocketed the pamphlet. Guoqing came over, looking very nervous.

"Sit up front," he urged me. I asked if I might not be a bit more inconspicuous if I sat in the back, but he said no; he wanted me up front. "The *guobao* [state security] is here. I'm trying to manage it. It might be better if you're up front in a prominent position."

I didn't want to be part of their conflict with the state security, but I reasoned that if the government had wanted to close this down, it would have already. Barring some antigovernment propaganda during the service, it was going forward. So I sat in the front row. Before I settled into my seat, I looked behind me and counted twenty-five rows of twenty-five seats each. Almost all the seats were filled. This was easily double a normal service. Somehow, they had all come on such short notice and were gazing at the stage to see how the evening would unfold.

Wang Yi opened the service with a prayer that explained the topic of searching for Jesus in Chengdu.

"As Christians, as a congregation, as Chengduers, we don't have grounds not to know our history, to turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to the fact that missionaries helped build congregations here, as well as most of the schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations."

Another gauntlet thrown down to the state, I thought, although of course this wouldn't interest the agents at the back of the room. They were looking for something explicit that they could understand—an excuse to stop the meeting. And of course Wang Yi was too smart. He was aiming at the party's source of legitimacy—its monopoly over knowledge, especially its control of history—but this was too subtle for the agents.

"Saying this is just history is to defame the past. So we ask you, God, to let Chengdu become a city grateful to you and not let Chengdu people again be devoid of gratitude and reject the glad tidings."

Then came a one-act play called *Chengdu: This Evening We Won't Leave You Alone*, an allusion to the 2009 novel *Chengdu: This Evening Leave Me Alone* by a friend of Wang Yi's, the writer Murong Xuecan. The novel had been extremely popular a few years ago, recounting the stories of aimless, rootless friends who drink, gamble, and sleep their way through the city, with Murong describing the city like this:

Chengdu at night always looked gentle and soft. The colorful lanterns gave it a warm glow, and from all around came sounds of laughter and song. But I knew that for all its luster the city was slowly rotting. A tide of lust and greed surged from every corner, bubbling away, giving off a hot odor, like a stream of piss corroding every tile and every soul.

The play was Wang Yi's answer. It involved a young couple meeting outside Sichuan University, which was founded by missionaries as West China Union University. In the opening sequence, the couple were reading newspapers and commenting on all the problems in society: unsafe food, dangerous roads, unscrupulous doctors. Then they mentioned that they had been together for a decade but were on the verge of divorce. He calls her a nitpicker. She thinks he is an arrogant poseur. Their love seems gone.

At this point, a psychiatrist came onstage, a humorous woman in her late thirties who froze the characters and pointed out what made them tick. The man's love was analyzed as lust born of chemical reactions. The woman's worries were angst resulting from insecurity. All these problems and issues could be solved with the right drugs, she said. The young people regained consciousness, and the young woman asked the psychiatrist, "So I'm just a collection of chemical particles moving, multiplying, on northern latitude 30.67, eastern longitude 104.06 degrees?"

"Correct," said the psychiatrist.

"So what sort of meaning do people's lives have?"

"Excuse me," the psychiatrist said, "but 'meaning' is not a rigorous expression."

Then the couple's old university teacher entered and asked them if they were still Christians; they were, sort of, they said, but not

really practicing. When the teacher mentioned the school's Christian past, the play jumped back one hundred years to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which called for more democracy and science in society. Radicals came on stage and bemoaned their soon-to-fail revolution, with China still not democratizing. A young man shouted, "Oppose corruption!" and was arrested by the police—the Nationalist Party's police, of course, but the parallel to today was obvious. The radicals and the couple suddenly realized that without a spiritual revolution all these efforts at political change or improving their personal relations were pointless.

The play ended with the cast members recounting their real stories. The psychiatrist had been on medication before finding God. The teacher is a leader in the church. The couple really were close to divorce before rediscovering Jesus and going to Early Rain. They now had a child. His name was Shuya, a short form for Yeshuya, or Joshua. That was the real name of Wang Yi's son and the name that Wang Yi had adopted as a pen name for several years in an effort to bypass the censors' ban on his publishing. The boy had one line to speak in the play, the last six words of which are a citation of Psalm 33:

My name is Shuya, which is taken from "Joshua" in the Bible, because our family has been "chosen by Jehovah for his inheritance."

Wang Yi began his sermon by talking about what it had been like growing up as a little boy in the Sichuan countryside. Like most of the people in the audience—even many of the young ones just out of college, with white-collar jobs and the latest mobile phones—his family had been so poor that he had had no toys to play with. Instead, he played with ants, spending hours watching them crawl around, building their kingdoms and empires. One day, a storm cut off a group of ants from their home.

"It was like the Red Sea obstructing their way. They didn't know what to do. They had no way back. I took pity on them and wanted to help them because I could help them. I picked up every ant, there must have been one hundred of them, and put them in a bowl. Then I took it to the other side of the water, and I released them. Do you

know what I felt like? I felt I was their savior," he said, and the audience laughed.

"I was only seven years old but felt I had done something really meaningful. I had delivered them. I had spent about an hour helping them, but to them it might have been five thousand years," and again the audience laughed at his reference to the five thousand years of Chinese culture—a point of pride among Chinese around the world that he was skewering as insignificant.

"Maybe one of them was really smart and later wrote a book. Maybe in it he wrote, 'The Dao that can be seen is not the true Dao / 'The name that can be named is not the true name.'"

These were the opening lines of Laozi's *Daodejing*, the Daoist classic—in Wang Yi's world, the work of ants who didn't understand the world around them.

"Thirty years later I began to read the Bible seriously. I came into contact with Christians. And I realized I hadn't been the ants' savior. If I had really loved those ants, and if I really had had the power, I wouldn't have been just a superhero. If I were God, I would have been like God's son, Jesus, who when humans had lost their way, when they were on their way to devastation, I would have given up my human form and gone to them in their midst as an ant. And not to become a king of the ants, or a flying or superstrong ant, but to become one of their most common members, one of the weak, someone vulnerable, and to give my best advice on how to cross the great sea, how to find the road home. And when it was accomplished, I might be killed by some of them."

He moved on to the passage from the Bible that they had read earlier that evening. It had been the story of the three kings' visiting Jesus after his birth. It was a fitting reading for Christmas, but also a clever choice for Wang Yi's purposes because it was one of the best-known stories from the Bible and the wise men came from the East, making them seem less foreign to his Chinese audience. That story of their quest allowed Wang Yi to segue to the theme of searching for Jesus. The kings had been searching for Jesus, and the Western missionaries, too, had been searching.

"The first Protestant missionary came to China about two hundred years ago, and he was named Robert Morrison, and he came to this country, looking in the Great Qing Empire to see if there were

ordinary people who belonged to God, if there were people who knew that Jesus died on the cross for their salvation.

"About the year 1868, the first Protestant missionary entered Sichuan. He was from the London Missionary Society and was named Griffith John. He came to Sichuan. He came to this city. He came searching for sheep in the flock belonging to Jesus Christ.

"Around the year 1881, the first to rent a home in Chengdu and begin spreading the word of the Gospel, this blue-eyed, blond-haired man, he came from the China Inland Mission and his name was Samuel R. Clarke, and he came here seeking people who were seeking.

"This evening, we are also seeking. Here in this city Jesus Christ is seeking me, he's seeking you, he has been seeking people for two thousand years, for two hundred years, for one hundred years.

"In this city, there are so many traces of this. The great missionary schools are now our most famous high schools. The Huaxi Hospital is now our best hospital. West China Union University is now Sichuan University. So many street names, like Foundling Hospital Road, or Peace Bridge, they come from this history. There are so many traces of what the missionaries did here, right in our midst.

"I want you to know that Christians are in Chengdu. They are your colleagues, your classmates, your friends. They are the people next to you. And if you're willing today to accept Jesus, or even just come back to this church, if you're willing, if someone gives you a Bible, if you're willing, then please open it and read, read the word of God."

He then asked the Christians in the audience to stand up. Wang Yi spread out his arms and said, "Jesus is in our midst because Christians are in our midst."

And then he asked those standing if they would turn to those still seated. "Ask them, say, 'May I pray for you? Are you willing that I pray for you?'"

Wang Yi bit his lip and looked out. Had he connected? I followed his gaze back behind me to the five hundred people sitting in the ballroom. About half were standing and half were seated. And those standing were holding the hands of those seated, their heads bowed together. Slowly, a murmur of prayers filled the ballroom, drowning out Zhang Guoqing as he successfully convinced the secret police that they shouldn't intervene, drowning out the city

outside—a cacophony of hopes and desires that could have come from any continent, any age.

"Please let me open the Bible and understand what is inside."

"Lord, I am a sinner and need your help."

"Lord, help me find peace."

"Save me."