

## Chengdu: Good Friday

A couple of days after spending Qingming in Shanxi, I was driving through the streets of Chengdu with Zhang Guoqing, a conference planner by trade and leading member of the Early Rain church. In China, many companies organize outings in the spring-time for their staff, and Guoqing's job was to arrange their meals, concerts, and team-building exercises. After years of struggling, he was now established in his profession and looked the role of the successful urban professional: jeans, an open-collar dress shirt, and a tan blazer. But he wasn't out to meet a client; today was Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified, and Guoqing was up early, visiting some of the unluckiest people in Chengdu.

Guoqing was the church's liaison to society's margins. He had participated in the 1989 antigovernment protests in Hangzhou, where he had graduated from Zhejiang University two years earlier. Students had gotten off fairly lightly, a nod to their youth, inexperience, and privileged position in Chinese society. But protesters with jobs were supposed to know better. Guoqing had just demonstrated a few times, but he was held three months. Later he had moved to Chengdu and eventually shifted his energies from politics to religion. But he maintained his contacts with marginal parts of society, helping advise Wang Yi's church on how to stay socially engaged. Today was a day to take stock of several projects, starting with a homeless mission that the church supported with donations of \$14,000 a year.

We drove west toward the Third Ring Road, but it wasn't yet finished, and our interchange was several mounds of dirt on either side of the highway. We drove up over a small dirt hill, his Citroën's

bottom scraping. Next to us were snaking bridges and ramps, now empty but soon to be clogged with traffic. We bounced along an unpaved road and finally rejoined the highway and headed south.

"The Communist Party only likes to invest in big projects like this," he said of the elaborate flyover. "It's not interested in the people's livelihood."

"Isn't this good for the people?"

"To a degree, yes, but all these projects—the roads, the high-speed rail, and so on—are all given to state firms. There's no way for anyone else to benefit from this. Private companies are cut out. I hear that a lot from my clients."

As if on cue, a large red banner appeared over a bridge: "The Eleventh Department of the China National Rail Corporation Extends Its Regards to the People of Chengdu."

Greetings, Earthlings, from Planet State.

Our destination was Sansheng Village, a small hilly area with teahouses and restaurants in a rustic setting. It was once some of the area's richest farmland, but Chengdu's appetite for land had turned the orchards and vegetable plots into suburban housing developments, equestrian centers, and plots of land for the well-to-do to play at farming. After a bit of searching, we found the shelter, which was housed in a former two-story concrete farmhouse with an eight-foot brick wall and a rusty sheet-metal gate.

Guoqing got out of his car and walked up to the gate. It was chained shut. He pulled at it and yelled through the crack, "Brother Zhang, open up!"

Zhang Bin rushed out to open the gate. It was 9:00 a.m. already, and it probably should have been open; Guoqing looked annoyed. I knew Zhang Bin from the church. He was a trim forty-nine-year-old, ingratiating but somewhat detached and vague, dressed as always in his simple-but-respectable poor-man clothes: scuffed loafers, creased polyester dress slacks, blue flannel shirt, and tattered houndstooth blazer. He was the shelter's manager, just a step up from the men he helped.

The farmhouse was clean but worn. Inside the yard were two ginkgo trees and two peach trees. The whitewashed walls were decorated with dozens of stenciled verses from the Bible, such as "But

when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Zhang Bin lived here with a dozen men. We wandered through the rooms while Guoqing quizzed him on the numbers and Zhang Bin stumbled through his poorly rehearsed answers.

"Chengdu's homeless people are just men passing through," Zhang Bin said. "We take in about two hundred a year. They mostly just stay a little while, and I encourage them to find work."

"If they're able-bodied, they have to work," Guoqing said in agreement. "The church won't support it otherwise."

"Well, we can't be big anyway, even if we wanted to. The government doesn't want too many people here, so we can't have a big center. They're afraid we'll start something. Anytime we get more than a few," he said nodding to a few residents who had followed us in, "the police come by and make trouble."

The men in the shelter had stories of misfortune and troubles.

Liu Jianyun was a forty-nine-year-old stroke victim whose family kicked him out of his home. "When we found him, he was eating out of a garbage bin," Zhang Bin said. "He could only walk with a cane, but through the power of prayer he now doesn't need it. His hand is also better."

Next to him stood Yu Chenyuan, a sixty-year-old with one eye colored a milky gray. He used to work as a repairman for a company in a provincial town. He had been standing on a ladder fixing a light when a piece of glass broke and went into his eye. His boss refused to compensate him, and the family sued. The boss sent ruffians around to threaten the family, and they killed his wife. Mr. Yu fled in terror and had been homeless for five years.

Two years ago he was taken in by the mission and is now its cook.

"It's had an effect on his mental health," Zhang Bin said. Mr. Yu looked down and smiled. "He's seen so much suffering that he's not able to really hold a job, but he can cook."

The only man with a job prospect was Zhen Changnong. He was thirty-six years old, and very short, well under five feet, with grayish teeth and oily hair, yet smart and well-spoken. When he was a boy, his stepfather beat him constantly, so he ran away from home. He was soon kidnapped by a gang that took him to work as a slave. He

escaped and ended up in a village in Hebei Province near Beijing, tending the fields of a corn farmer. He had recently held a job cleaning tables at a restaurant until he and his boss had a falling-out over a trivial matter. From Zhen's own account, it seemed his temper was largely to blame.

Last year, Zhang Bin took Zhen home, and he reconciled with his mother, who was ill. His stepfather was already dead.

"I'm really glad I did it, but I need to find another job. I have to work, and I want to go back and see her."

Zhang Bin looked on proudly as Zhen's story came to its conclusion.

"When I first came here two years ago, I didn't want to be baptized. I left here often and sometimes didn't come back."

"We could see that his heart hadn't settled, so we didn't push it," Zhang Bin said.

"Last April, though, I felt I could do it and was baptized. I am a Christian. I feel really calm now and can handle anything."

"You should get a job," Guoqing said approvingly. "You need to stand on your own two feet, get a place to live, and maybe start a family."

We sat down on old rattan chairs that had been rescued from a dump. Tea was procured, and Zhang Bin got down to business. Early Rain's support was appreciated, but the center needed more—about three times as much. A Norwegian woman provided some money, but foreign money was a bad idea, he said. Guoqing nodded. This was true; outside funding always led to complications. It was the easiest reason for the government to close down a nongovernmental organization.

"You need to reach out to congregations more," Guoqing said. "You come to us once in a while, but you don't really have a good relationship with the church. You only come when you need something."

"We do talk to congregations," Zhang Bin said, then added pointedly, "So many congregations send people here, but they don't really do anything. Everyone wants to come and see this and feel they're part of it and claim credit for it, but they don't do much."

"But why don't you make your books public? People will be more generous if they see what you do. It's not complicated."

"It's hard," Zhang Bin said vaguely. He rambled on about how the bookkeeping was complex. Guoqing and I looked at each other; neither of us understood what he meant.

"It's simple," Guoqing said to Zhang Bin before we left. "People want transparency. If you're getting money from someone, that person has a right to know how it's spent."

Early Rain's social work started with the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, which killed sixty-nine thousand people. For many activists and Christians, the earthquake was a turning point, as important as the 1989 Tiananmen protests had been to an earlier generation. While government leaders flew in from Beijing to try to direct rescue operations, the main efforts took place across the country as a whole as people spontaneously donated time and money, driving from far-off provinces in cars laden with food and water or renting out trucks to deliver supplies. They were shocked at the government's focus on presenting itself as heroic; many were further alienated by how the government treated them—as an embarrassing reminder of its own failure, rather than an inspiring example of civic compassion. It caused many citizens to look more closely at how society was organized and the values that underlay it.

After the catastrophe, people attending Wang Yi's new church began helping the injured in one of Chengdu's hospitals. They also supported a discount supermarket for poor people in western Sichuan's Ngawa Prefecture, a Tibetan part of the country that had been the epicenter of the earthquake. Its most sensitive project, however, was financial support for families of prisoners of conscience. Chengdu has the highest number of dissidents outside Beijing, and the church tried to help family members coping with having a loved one in jail. This came to a head in 2011, when Arab countries went through the Jasmine Revolution that toppled authoritarian leaders. Voices on social media called for a similar uprising in China. The call was ignored, but the government reacted nervously. It rounded up dozens of dissidents, including Ran Yunfei, the strong-minded writer who was close to the church. His prominence led to his quick release, but others were still stuck in prison. Speaking of the families of the prisoners, Wang Yi once put it to me like this: "In China,

the families are like untouchables in India. Often the wife or spouse loses work; the family has little to fall back on. In Chinese society, there's no social force that's independent and organized enough to help these people except the congregations."

A key point that Wang Yi and Guoqing emphasized time and again is that the donations were not from abroad: foreign aid guaranteed that authorities would stop the project. The money was solely from congregation members and it was not anonymous. If the Public Security Bureau wanted to know who donated, the church could provide a list. Guoqing also stressed that it wasn't meant to support the prisoners—just their families, as a humanitarian gesture.

We were now pulling up to the west gate of Chengdu University. Guoqing waved breezily at the guards, and they let us through. After passing several newer sections of campus, we arrived at a quiet corner of half a dozen buildings from the 1970s. They were five-story concrete structures streaked with mold and dirt. A small stand of ginkgo trees surrounded the buildings protectively, as if hiding something shameful.

Guoqing left the car at the side of the road, and we walked up four flights of stairs in one of the buildings. He knocked at a door and then yelled until a tall, exhausted-looking woman opened it. Wang Qinghua was in her late fifties, with dyed-black hair that was partly pinned up in a bun and partly falling down around her ears. She had an ashen complexion and small, even teeth stained with nicotine.

She and Guoqing knew each other, and he walked right in, closing the door behind us. We sat down at a small wooden table.

"We want to know how your situation is," Guoqing said.

"What part of my situation?" she said.

Mrs. Wang had been living alone for three years, since her husband, Tan Zuoren, had been detained and jailed for five years for opposing construction of a PX chemical plant near a residential area. He was being held at a prison in Ya'an, a town about ninety miles away.

His imprisonment had not been a shock to Mrs. Wang. Tan had participated in the 1989 antigovernment protests in Chengdu and gone underground, fleeing to Shenzhen. "We thought he had died because we had no word from him," she said, smiling at the

memory. "Then he called from Shenzhen, and I went down there to marry him."

Tan wasn't arrested, and eventually the couple returned to Chengdu, where he worked as a freelance writer and filmmaker. After the 2008 earthquake, he had been the first to point out the link between corruption and collapsed buildings, and he also set up a database for missing children. His arrest spurred protests in Hong Kong and was later highlighted by the activist-artist Ai Weiwei. Ai traveled to Chengdu to try to attend Tan's trial and said he was beaten up in his hotel room.

Mrs. Wang related all of this quickly for my benefit, with an air of pride but also exasperation. Then she fast-forwarded to the day when he would be released and what their first words would be.

"I guess he's going to explain first how he was right about being jailed and how he was right about June 4 and how he was right about the earthquake," she said. "He's always explaining how he's right about various things. It's something he does really well."

Guoqing nodded. Easy does it, he seemed to say.

"But he needs to do something else: He needs to get a job. He needs to earn money and support his family!" Her lips were trembling with emotion, and I thought of her daughter, who hadn't been able to attend university because of the family's political problems. Instead, she had taken an online marketing job—poorly paid and with no future. Mrs. Wang had been given early retirement from the phone company at age fifty and now took 600 yuan a month in charity from Early Rain. These were educated people, and they could have had a good life. She tried to speak again but could only gasp.

"That's right!" Guoqing said, cutting in to save her from crying. "He's able-bodied and there's no reason why he can't work. Everyone should work for their food."

Guoqing was talking partly as an administrator of the fund but also out of conviction. Like the Puritans of old, the Chengdu Christians believed in the value of labor. Tan Zuoren was one of China's best-known dissidents, but when he got out of jail, he would still be in his fifties. He should work.

Mrs. Wang took a call. It was her mother. After she got off, she explained, "She's over ninety but worried about me. She knows I'm here, without a husband, and hopes I am okay."

"How does she feel about Tan?" Guoqing said.

"Both my parents were in the underground Communist Party in Chongqing before liberation. My father—it doesn't work too well here," she said, pointing to her head. "But my mother supports Tan Zuoren. She says that some people in China need to speak out. If no one dares to speak out, how will China improve? Everyone can't keep silent and go along all the time. Some people have to speak."

"How is he holding up?" Guoqing asked.

"Depressed," she said.

"Didn't Ran Yunfei write to him?" Guoqing asked.

"He wrote a three-page letter to Tan urging him to keep up his spirits in jail, but they wouldn't deliver it. When Ran tried to read it to him over the phone, they cut the phone line. So Ran gave it to me in person, and I rewrote it, pretending it was from me. Then I sent it to the prison. After a while they gave it to him. The warden told him, 'We didn't want to give it to you, because it's really quite strong stuff, but it's from your wife, so we relented.' But Tan knew it was from Ran. It meant a lot to him."

I thought of the dissident blogger in Chengdu named Huang Qi. He ran an Internet site called 64Tianwang, which carried news from across China about unrest and protests. Of course, the site was blocked in China, but it raised the question of why the state allowed him to publish in the first place. Why not just pull the plug on him entirely and block his Internet access or his VPN? I mentioned this to Mrs. Wang.

"They can't do that," Mrs. Wang said. "They might pull the Internet access during a sensitive period, but it's controlled by another department, the Telecom Ministry. They can tell them to shut down your access for a day and tell you that it's 'broken.' But you'll complain, and by the second day they'll feel embarrassed because everyone's supposed to have Internet access if they pay for it. And so by the third day it'll be up again."

"And don't forget Wang Bin," Guoqing interjected. He was a technician who worked as Huang Qi's right-hand man. He was also a member of the Early Rain Prisoners of Conscience Fund's board of directors. But everyone also believed he worked for state security.

"Huang knows he is state security—we all do—but Huang fig-

ures he might as well be transparent. If the state security wants to give you a computer expert, you might as well accept."

It was such a tangled mess. Maybe at their extremes all societies are, but the level of double-talk in China was disorienting. Compared with places like East Germany, where an estimated 3 percent of the population were official secret police informants, China's system was more refined and subtle. It was easy to dismiss or write off as an exceptional part of society, but it underpinned everything else; it was society's rotten core. A government that relies on fear cannot instill morality; it can only enforce behavior. This was why Wang Yi's church stood with people like Mrs. Wang.

"The 600 yuan is a huge amount of money for us," she said, pulling out a fresh pack of cigarettes. She unwrapped the cellophane, crumpled it, and put it on the desk, where it slowly uncoiled.

"But it's not only the money. It's knowing that people care about us and that we're not forgotten. Living here . . ." she said, her voice trailing off. I looked around the concrete apartment and out the windows at the ginkgo trees sprouting big flat leaves. "It's not what I expected. I wonder why, what am I doing? Why are we here?"

"The way I see it," Guoqing said quietly, "we're all working for the same thing—for a more open and better China. Some are on the inside. Others are on the outside. I could be there and he here."

For the first three decades of his life, Wang Yi hadn't thought too much about religion. He had studied law at Sichuan University and began teaching at twenty-three. He quickly became known as an idealistic legal-rights advocate, especially through two popular online discussion groups, "Gate to Heaven Teahouse" and "Century Salon." By 2001, he had set up another online forum on constitutional law and a fourth to cover personal interests, like film. Soon he was a nationally known commentator, writing columns in some of China's most influential publications, such as *Orient*, *Readers*, *Southern Weekend*, and *Twenty-First Century Economic Herald*. A national magazine called him one of China's fifty most prominent public intellectuals, and his effort at promoting constitutionalism seemed in line with the new policies of the incoming government of Hu Jintao, who had taken over from Jiang Zemin in the early twenty-first century.

In 2002, a friend gave him a copy of a multipart documentary called *The Cross*. It had been made by Yuan Zhiming, who in the late 1980s had helped make a documentary called *River Elegy*. That film had aired on national television in 1988, arguing that China was too inward looking, its culture too insular, and its political path too narrow. The series had a strong effect on students who participated in the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Many credited it as a key to opening their eyes to the need for wide-ranging reforms—not just economic changes, but social transformation. After the crackdown, Yuan had been labeled one of the "black hands" behind the student protests, and he had fled abroad. Like many involved in the protests, he began to wonder if China could have political reform without spiritual change. He converted to Christianity and turned his filmmaking skills to the story of Christianity in China.

"Before that film, I didn't realize that China had a Christian history," Wang Yi told me. "I knew there were one or two churches, but I didn't think it played a role in Chinese history or contemporary China."

We were sitting together with his wife, Jiang Rong, in their home, a small but cozy apartment in a complex near one of Chengdu's biggest temples. Visiting was always tricky: the guards demanded IDs and then made notes. But inside, all of that was far away; their home was decorated with drawings by their young son, and one wall had shelves overflowing with hundreds of DVDs—a reminder of Wang Yi's long-standing interest in film. No wonder that a documentary had awoken his interest in Christianity.

Yuan's series started with the Nestorians, a Christian sect that came to China with Persian traders during the seventh century. Although they faded, others tried to bring the religion to China, culminating in the Jesuits, who arrived in the sixteenth century and established a permanent Christian presence in China. Foreign missionaries came next, after Western gunboats forced China open to the outside world in the nineteenth century. Although this period is uniformly portrayed in Chinese history textbooks, museums, and movies as a period of humiliation, *The Cross* took a different tack. It showed a dynamic time when Christianity spread widely and missionaries helped found many of China's first modern schools and hospitals.

The film's most riveting segments covered the twentieth century, telling the lives of heroic Chinese Christians like Wang Mingdao, a fierce evangelizer who spent nearly three decades in Communist labor camps for refusing to join the government-run church. Others, such as Watchman Nee, died in prison for their faith. Abroad, websites and books tell their stories but in China they are excluded from the historical record. Wang Yi recalls being shocked when he saw those segments: "For me this was a complete blank. I'm a public intellectual and pay a lot of attention to Chinese society, but I didn't know anything about this."

Equally unsettling was how it was Christian faith—not belief in abstract ideas like human rights or democracy—that held out strongest against Mao's totalitarianism. In fact, some liken the persecution to a crucible. When the Maoist era ended in the late 1970s, Christianity, especially Protestantism, took off in popularity. From one million adherents in 1949, when the Communists took over, Protestantism began to count its followers in the tens of millions.

"They were just very simple people from the countryside without education. And yet in the Cultural Revolution they refused to sing Chairman Mao songs or to pray toward his statue. They were sentenced or bullied or beaten. They were much more courageous than the intellectuals. They were the toughest, the strongest. They succeeded. The intellectuals failed."

Another event in 2002 got Wang Yi thinking more about the link between religion and China's future. The township of Buyun east of Chengdu was the scene of an intriguing experiment in local democracy. For several decades, villages in China had been allowed to hold elections for village councils, with varying degrees of fairness depending on the open-mindedness of local officials. Buyun took this to another level. A township of sixteen thousand residents, it comprised a dozen villages. Optimists saw it as a stepping up the ladder toward county and maybe even provincial elections—the sort of slow-but-steady progress that places like Taiwan had seen several decades earlier. That proved too optimistic, and Buyun was the last township to hold such elections. But for Wang Yi, that didn't matter. He found something more significant.

"I noticed the religion. That township had twelve villages, and each one had a religious activity center. Most were Buddhist or Dao-

ist or folk religion, and there was also one Catholic village. Each village had a government office of course—party committee, mayor, and so on—but each village's religious center also had its own financial arrangement and supervisory committee. And not only that, but each religious organization had better financial management than the official side! Each of the twelve villages had a debt of 200,000 to 300,000 yuan, but each of the twelve religious groups had a surplus. And each of the religious groups—they were called clubs [*buisuo*]  
—they were elected! So the best-run organization in the village wasn't the Communist Party but the local religious association."

This might seem far-fetched, but it reflects what some political scientists have documented in China—that in places where religious groups have status, they can act as a check on government power, holding officials accountable for their actions. Wang Yi began to wonder if political progress required the support of a higher authority, not an ideal or a constitution, but a God who endows all people with the same rights—something that could not be taken away by a political leader.

As he talked, his wife, Jiang Rong, sat next to him on the sofa. The two had known each other since childhood and began courting in college. They married shortly after graduating in 1995. Short and petite, with a pageboy haircut and a determined jaw, Jiang Rong had a sharp mind and followed conversations closely. She was reserved, but when she spoke, she often seemed a step or two ahead of the discussion. Without being asked, she told how Wang Yi's political and religious awakening strained their relationship.

When Wang Yi had started his legal-rights work, she was working at a company that staged concerts. Worried that her husband's activism would cause him to lose his teaching job, she put in overtime to bolster their savings. One day, she went to the office and opened a letter. The letter laid out all of her personal details, her job, her husband's job, and said her husband was evil. If she stayed with him, the letter said, her company would collapse. The anonymous writer suggested she get divorced. She was dumbfounded; it felt like something out of the Cultural Revolution. Soon after, the government audited the company where she worked. Jiang Rong showed the letter to her boss.

"He was really an upright person. He said this wasn't fair. He

said, 'Don't leave this job, you have a job here. I have always admired Teacher Wang—show me his latest writings! Show me what is causing the problems!'

Jiang Rong did so and then read Wang Yi's writings herself. She discovered that she actually hadn't paid too much attention to her husband's work.

"I began to read carefully. I began to know him. I thought I knew him but didn't really. I found that our views were different. It was like we were in different worlds."

Understanding did not lead to agreement. She was especially upset at his new friends. He was spending more time with "rights defender," or *weiquan*, lawyers. They were a serious legal movement that lasted for about a decade in the early 2000s, giving widespread hope in China and abroad that rule of law might be permitted. They represented farmers with polluted soil, people illegally arrested, and others who had run afoul of the system. They didn't challenge Communist Party rule, but they tried to hold the government accountable to its own laws. About a quarter were Christians—including many of the movement's most famous members—inspired by the faith's emphasis on social justice.

"I thought they're doing good work, but I didn't really think it had to do with me. I really thought, why are they doing stuff the government doesn't want? They've all got good educations. They're ruining their lives. What's the point? It's not worth it."

The harassment picked up. She got calls at three in the morning, with the caller using the intimate, diminutive form of her given name, "Xiao Rong," which would be like saying "my little Betty." The caller would hang up. Other times, the caller detailed her exact movements during the day to show he knew everything.

She also got letters saying her husband was having an affair. She asked Wang Yi, and he said he had been receiving similar letters.

Then the SARS epidemic struck China in 2003. It was a respiratory ailment that swept the country, canceling any sorts of public events. Her company lost business, and employees were given leave. One day, while she was at home, her husband brought home Yu Jie, an outspoken Chengdu writer who was living in Beijing. He had just converted to Christianity and was eager to share his story. He gave her a book by a Chinese-American woman whose marriage was saved

through Christianity. The woman was visiting Chengdu, and Jiang Rong called her up. They began meeting regularly and were joined by Huang Weicai, a woman a few years older who was also interested in Christianity and who today is a key member of the Early Rain governing committee. By now, it was the spring of 2005, and they met outside in parks, their numbers gradually increasing.

"One day Wang Yi said, 'You're always meeting outside, why don't you start meeting here at home?' It was April, and that's how it started. More and more people started coming on Sunday afternoons."

It was only after she learned about Christianity that she began to understand her husband. She had resented him for his impracticality: as a university professor, for example, he had been offered campus housing but had rejected it. She had thought this foolish. Now she realized it was because he did not want to owe anything to anyone. Slowly, her frustration turned to admiration.

"I realized that this was work that really had to be done. There needs to be people who work for the public benefit."

In August 2005, a visiting Chinese-American pastor from the United States baptized Jiang Rong, Huang Weicai, and several others at an outdoor ceremony in a river. Like the Christians of old, they were dunked completely in water. Wang Yi, though, wasn't quite ready.

"I thought philosophically that Christianity was good, but my heart wasn't opened yet," he said. "They all joked that they had brought an extra set of clothes in case I wanted to be baptized, but . . . ah, I don't know."

Wang Yi asked Yu Jie endless questions, such as where good Chinese from earlier generations went. What about his favorite poet, Su Dongpo? He was one of the great figures in Chinese history—a man of letters and an upright administrator. Had he gone to hell? Yu Jie talked him through his concerns, the two men spending long days together whenever Yu Jie came to Chengdu or Wang Yi traveled to Beijing. Eventually, it happened. On Christmas Day 2005, Yu Jie came home to Chengdu for Christmas. They held a service at Wang Yi's apartment. Nine people converted, including Wang Yi.

By then, over twenty people were meeting regularly in the couple's apartment. They weren't registered with the government. They were a house church, and they wondered what to call themselves. A friend

mentioned one of her favorite verses from the Bible: Deuteronomy 11:14. They read it and named themselves after one of its phrases:

He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.

A few hours after our visit to Wang Qinghua, the committee that ran the prisoners of conscience program met to discuss the best way to help people like her. The Good Friday service had taken place in the later morning, and now we were just half a dozen, sitting around a little table that looked out on the Chengdu smog.

Guoqing was there, of course, now dressed more formally for church in a serge blue suit, red-and-blue striped shirt, and a smart red tie. He was lively and jocular, putting everyone at ease, eager to share some of the ideas that had come to him since our visit earlier in the day with Mrs. Wang and the homeless people. Four others were there too: an impatient woman with a green trench coat, prim but with heavy makeup; a quiet man who didn't say much; and a former dissident who now sold real estate—a sad man with oversized glasses, thinning hair, a blue suit, and an expression that all of this would end badly for everyone involved; and finally the chairwoman, Huang Weicai, who had converted along with Jiang Rong. She was in her early fifties, a bit harried, but humorous and efficient. She was there to make sure that the families were helped but also that the meeting didn't devolve into an antigovernment cabal. The church wanted to send a signal, not get closed down.

After a hymn and a short prayer, we began discussing a book that the group was reading in translation. It was *Good News About Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World*, a work about Christians who stood up to human trafficking, forced prostitution, persecution, and torture. The committee met once a month and read a chapter each time. They were on chapter 5, which discussed the value of compassion, and everyone took turns reading it paragraph by paragraph.

After half an hour, the sixth member of the committee showed up: Wang Bin, the man believed to be an informant. Soon after his

appearance in the church a few years earlier, word had spread that he was working for state security. People were concerned, but a consensus soon emerged to let him attend. It was part of Wang Yi's policy of radical openness: let them know exactly what we do and they won't fear us.

Wang sat down at the end of the table and studiously ignored the others. He was fat, in a bright blue polo shirt, drumming his fingers dexterously as if a violinist limbering up. He began fiddling with his thermos of tea and a small Bible. He used the plastic edge of the Bible's cover to push at a tea stain on the edge of the thermos. He scraped and scraped, oblivious to the others, who cast quick glances at him before turning back to the book.

Mrs. Huang asked us what we thought the chapter meant and then offered her view: "How do we deal with injustice? In the past, people didn't talk about individual responsibility as much. Instead, responsibility was collective. If one person committed a crime, then all people were guilty. Injustice was everyone's duty."

She looked at Wang and ordered us to open the Bible to Romans 9:19–26, and then she read it aloud:

*You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to Him who formed it, "Why have You made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?*

I glanced at the informant. The verse seemed aimed at him in a message of forgiveness: the potter made you, too; we shouldn't judge your dishonor. But Wang Bin wasn't reading. Instead, he kept scraping, scraping, scraping, using the Bible like a scalpel on the stainless steel.

*What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?*



I mulled this over: Was mercy possible? Doomed for destruction, could the informant, the police, the state, be a vehicle for glory? And then we read the final lines of the verse, a message of forgiveness.

*As He says also in Hosea:*

*"I will call them My people, who were not My people, And her beloved, who was not beloved.*

*"And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them,*

*'You are not My people,'*

*There they shall be called sons of the living God."*

Guoqing spoke up. He said the readings made him think of China. God permits disasters, such as the earthquakes, or political persecution. One way to honor God was to use these troubles to show goodness through charity.

"During this time, we support the [political prisoners'] family members," he said. "In a way, we can say when the whole world is going backward, we are going forward. Through disaster we get to know ourselves; through disaster we get to know God and we improve ourselves."

He said he had recently talked about this with Wang Yi, who had told him that democracy was not the only solution.

"In the beginning, we counted on our leaders, but later we worshiped democracy, but democracy can't solve all problems. In this world, nothing can be relied on."

The group began speaking quickly, in a jumble of voices.

"Right now prisoners of conscience, including those who have left prison, are in a very bad state."

"Some are mentally disordered after getting out of jail."

"One prisoner told me, we don't really need the money. We need love."

Wang Bin kept silent. His fingernails were already bitten to nubs. He began using his pen to poke at the end of his left index finger. Soon it was covered with little dots. He jabbed, while the people spoke around him.

"One of them is a gambler. He's playing mahjong!"

"We need to tell him that gambling isn't good. I know he's not a Christian, but it's not good for anyone."

"But you can't cut him off, because he's a gambler. It's a sickness."

"Look at it this way, we're paying welfare to one of our members. She gets 600 yuan a month from us. But we're giving a non-Christian gambler 1,200 a month. Some people in the congregation might ask why we're doing that."

"These people are in a difficult situation. They're under incredible pressures. It's a question of love, like what we just read."

The last sentence was spoken by Guoqing, who then started to talk about his favorite topic: how Chinese politics were about to enter an era of reform. A party congress was coming later this year. The government was easing off. He was sure of it.

Finally, the informant spoke. Wang Bin's face was pockmarked and jowly, but his voice was cold, clear, precise, logical—the most rational in the room: "This is not reasonable. Yesterday more than one thousand police from Mianyang captured petitioners in Beichuan; the day before yesterday, several hundred police captured petitioners in another place. Why do you say that reforms are coming? This is just hope, not logic."

Guoqing was taken aback but kept his optimistic line.

"There is a saying that there might be a surprise redefinition of the June 4 incident," he said, citing an eternal hope by Chinese reformers that the 1989 protests would be declared patriotic and not counter-revolutionary, a revision that people hoped would signal political reform. "Overall, the political atmosphere in China is better."

The informant snickered. "There are more prisoners of conscience. That is an objective fact."

The group grew quiet, and then Mrs. Huang adjourned the session for another month. Everyone got up and cast quick glances at Wang Bin. He remained seated, cleaning his fingernails with the edge of the Bible and shaking his head in disgust.