

Chengdu: Entering the City

It was January, and Chinese New Year was approaching once again. Soon, the church's annual meeting would take place, when Wang Yi would announce bold new plans for Early Rain. But first, members of the church looked back to take stock of the past year's work. Over the past year, the congregation had supported the families of political prisoners and Chengdu's homeless while trying to balance the needs of its own poor members. It had founded a seminary that was helping its own members deepen their understanding of Christianity and also training dozens of pastors from across China. It had held an inspiring Christmas service despite government harassment. And the church had formed an alliance with two other Reformed churches in Chengdu. Quietly, Wang Yi had traveled farther afield, too, making preliminary contacts across China in hopes of forming a loose coalition of like-minded, urban-based churches. Foreign contacts had also increased, online but also in person through visits by foreign missionaries.

Sometimes, these foreign contacts stimulated awkward debates. One was on abortion. In China, family-planning policies had resulted in tens of millions of women undergoing forced abortions. Sometimes—especially in the early years of family planning in the 1980s—officials marched women into abortion clinics to terminate pregnancies. More often the pressure was more subtle: have an abortion or lose one's job, or pay a steep fine, or accept that the child will never be insured or receive an education. In 2015, the policy was relaxed, but family planning still limits the size of families and heavily punishes women who exceed their birth quota (usually two per womb for ethnic Chinese living in cities, with one more allowed for

rural Chinese and minorities). And the issue is still so sensitive that the government censors books and articles that discuss abortion's health risks or potential moral considerations. Early Rain wanted to challenge this.

It started its campaign a year earlier, when Wang Yi issued a call against abortion. On June 1, which is International Children's Day, he and a dozen other members of the church went to nearby hospitals and handed out brochures explaining how abortion wasn't necessary and amounted to murder. Then the efforts had died down; no one had been too sure how to proceed. They could demonstrate but to what end? How could they influence people's attitudes?

So on this Sunday before the church's annual meeting, activists in the church met in a small office next to the church crèche. Outside, the buildings of the city blurred into the smog, but inside the debate was sharp and pointed.

"According to government statistics, China has had 320 million abortions since the policy began in the 1980s," said a young man in his twenties. "We need to do something about this. We can't just sit around and talk all the time!"

Everyone around the table nodded vigorously. The group was made up of four men and four women. Later, a fifth man came in and joined the group. Five to four. But what was even more apparent was their age: except for the chairwoman, everyone was very young, and none were in relationships. For them, this was a moral outrage but an abstract one—something akin to a human rights violation in another country.

The young man handed out a flyer. It was called "The True Face of Abortion" and was authored by two Americans. It argued that modern science proved that life began at conception and that a fetus's fate wasn't the mother's alone. The paper cited *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that regulated when abortions could be performed in the United States. The flyer argued that the Court's ruling—that the state could only step in and terminate a pregnancy in the third trimester—was mistaken. Finally, someone spoke.

"I don't understand this; it's completely different here in China," a young woman said. "It's the right not to have an abortion!"

Two other young women began giggling nervously. They said they didn't have experience with sex.

One of the men started to discuss the mechanics of how abortions are performed. The three young women made faces. "It's like a horror movie," one said.

Finally, the chairwoman spoke up. She was in her forties and married, a lawyer who served on the church's legal affairs committee. She said she had visited abortion clinics in China and had some experience with the situation.

"The first thing is where did you get this material?" she said. "You downloaded stuff from the Internet? It's all American material translated into Chinese! It says that unwanted children can be easily adopted, but here in China it's not true."

"But I heard you could adopt!" a young woman said.

"It's possible, but it's not easy. If you're a pregnant woman, where will you give birth if you're illegal? Who's going to care for you? And then you have to abandon the baby outside an orphanage? It happens but it's rare. I'm against abortions, but if you hand out this, you're not handing out anything useful at all."

"I know," the well-dressed young man said. "But we've been meeting for months and want something to happen. We thought this material was good."

"All we do is talk," one of the young women said. "We need some action."

"Well, why don't you write your own brochures and hand them out?" the older woman said.

The group agreed. It was January. They would have the brochures done by February, then make the big push around Children's Day. On social media, church members began sending out pictures of themselves in front of clinics, sometimes holding up small pieces of paper with handwritten messages, such as "Admit it, a fetus is a life."

There was a lot to question about the church's efforts. Besides being framed in American terms, the debate was devoid of interfaith dialogue. By far, most Chinese are Buddhist, and many Buddhists oppose abortion. This is why Buddhists in some countries have temples to fetuses that die; they are considered sentient beings who deserve our prayers. But no one at the meeting had thought about this. For them, the campaign's efficacy was secondary; what mattered more was joining an international dialogue on a difficult moral issue.

In 1907, a French Catholic priest named Léon Joly published a history of Christian missions in Asia that asked a question that had troubled many of his contemporaries: After hundreds of years of contact with Christianity, why had so few Chinese converted? For much of the nineteenth century, missionaries had enjoyed unprecedented access to China. They built schools and hospitals. They traveled to the remotest parts of the empire and erected churches. And yet China had only about 1 million Christians in a population of 400 million. Joly ascribed the low numbers to Christianity's image as a foreign religion. China was too different to accept Christianity without modifications, and he proposed bringing it more into alignment with Chinese culture. Although he left the details vague, Joly provoked a lively debate in the West and set the tone for how generations of Western observers saw Christianity in China: as a failure. Missionaries had only been allowed in after China was defeated in the Opium Wars. The religion was too closely tied to imperialism. And people argued that it was too different, too foreign.

From today's perspective, Joly's most striking assumption is that Christianity had failed. Part of the reason for this is that Joly was looking at Christianity before its astounding growth in the twentieth century. But Joly might even have been disappointed today. Like many Christian thinkers of his era, he defined success based on Christianity's experiences in ancient Rome. There, Christianity had achieved quick results, converting the Roman emperor Constantine and then winning converts throughout the empire in a relatively short period of time. By contrast, even today Christians make up less than 10 percent of China's population. Compared with the grand hopes that missionaries had, it remains a small religion.

And yet, this would miss the bigger picture. Even one hundred years ago, Christianity had achieved something remarkable. Although small compared with the overall population, it was the first foreign religion to find a home in China since Islam had arrived over a thousand years earlier. And while Islam even today predominates among non-Chinese ethnic groups on the country's margins, Christianity was already part of the mainstream of China's spiritual landscape.

Scores of congregations like Early Rain are dotted across China's biggest cities, attracting educated young adherents who are influential members of mainstream society. China may not be a Christian nation, but Christians easily make up the third-biggest group of believers after followers of Buddhism and folk practices.

Another of Joly's questionable assumptions is his assertion that Christianity would have to indigenize to take root. In the first decades after he wrote his essay, his argument seemed plausible. Catholicism had problems surviving the wars and Communist persecution because it had relied so heavily on foreign missionaries; their exodus in the 1950s had dealt the faith a serious blow. Protestantism had more local leaders, and so when the Communists expelled foreign missionaries in the early 1950s, Protestantism fared better, and now the number of Protestants is many times higher than the number of Catholics. So in one sense, Joly was right: a more localized clergy would have helped Christianity grow faster in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But in terms of ideas, Joly was wrong. Christianity went through a phase of indigenization, but over the past decades local forms have weakened. In the past, Christianity had two main centers in China: the city of Wenzhou and the rural province of Henan. They were uniquely Chinese forms of Christianity: Wenzhou was home to family-run businesses whose employees often belonged to a church sponsored by the company boss, while in Henan charismatic leaders ran rural churches that often opposed the government and sometimes violently clashed with it.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, these models were losing influence. Both still have many Christians, but they are not prototypes for the new, dynamic churches in China's big cities. The Wenzhou model has been weakened by the decline of an old economic model: family-style companies where a boss controls his workers the way an old patriarch runs his clan. Meanwhile, the rural churches in Henan have been reduced due to urbanization. The unique Christianity in these regions has also faded in importance because of a realization they are not standard internationally. They are outliers—outgrowths of a period when China was cut off from the world. Now that links to the outside world have been restored, people seek global norms, not local forms of their faith.

In her book *The Missionary's Curse*, the British scholar Henrietta Harrison traces the history of Cave Gully, a village in northern China that converted to Catholicism in the late seventeenth century, when local businesspeople heard of the faith in Beijing and brought it back home. They acquired prayer books and some fragmentary knowledge but no systematic understanding of the faith. The result was something highly indigenized. God was seen as another version of the Chinese concept of heaven, or *tian*. Worship of Mary was conflated with worship of popular female deities in northern China, such as Our Lady of the Azure Clouds and the Buddhist goddess of mercy, Guanyin. The Ten Commandments were a kind of moral formula, familiar to local people through Confucian texts. Western missionaries who tried to correct these practices were rebuffed.

But by the nineteenth century, China was opening up. Rail, telegraph, steamships, and other technological innovations created the first era of globalization. Catholics in Cave Gully realized that they were part of something bigger—a global Catholic Church with rules and standard theological interpretations. Soon, people looked to Rome for benchmarks of how to be a good Catholic. In other words, the opposite of indigenization took place. The religion started with the familiar—respect for a supreme deity, a popular female goddess, moral rules—but eventually moved beyond these easily digested universal manifestations of religion to uniquely Catholic ideas, such as the supremacy of the pope.

This history is reflected in Wang Yi and the congregation of Early Rain. They also longed to be part of a global movement—something orthodox, standard, and authentic, and not “indigenous.” Perhaps this lesson applies not only to Christians but to China as a whole: as contact increases, international norms and standards seep into the country. Just as people want to be “real” Christians and participate in global discussions about moral issues, they also yearn for a country that really is committed to rule of law and human rights. But as Joly's frustration shows us, we should probably temper our expectations and take a long view. Like Wang Yi's congregation, we should take what has been accomplished—incomplete and inadequate as it is—as a miracle.

Early Rain's annual meeting was held on a Saturday, on the last full moon before the Spring Festival. Of course, the church does not follow the Chinese moon calendar, but it makes use of it. For many congregations, the roughly one-month period from Christmas to the Lunar New Year is a long holiday season, a period of recovering from the excitement of Christmas and preparing for the Lunar New Year. Wang Yi had told me that the Lunar New Year was another chance to proselytize, to mention to colleagues or friends the Good News and bring them into the church. So it wanted to have its annual meeting early, before the holiday started, to set plans before everyone got busy.

The meeting was efficient and informative, with half a dozen people giving presentations on different aspects of the church. We heard from a former urban planner who heads the "duty committee," a group of five people who oversee almost every activity in the church. Others represented subcommittees that handled youth work, education, legal affairs, and finances. All of them had PowerPoint presentations and spoke quickly, confidently, and firmly—not unlike the lists, plans, and goals presented by the government during its springtime meetings of parliament. But what they also wanted was passion, and this could only be offered by Wang Yi. They had heard the nuts and bolts, but they needed a vision.

Wang Yi's speech ended the meeting. The key for the coming year, he said, was growth. This would only be possible by splitting the church and moving some of the congregation away from the current home in the River Trust Mansion. Right now, Early Rain had roughly 380 worshippers each Sunday and had to turn away about 70 for lack of space. Those people would found a new church in the city's center, near Sichuan University.

This was a classic church-planting technique that was outlined in books that the seminary had studied last summer. The books had been published in the United States and translated into Chinese and were now being used as a template. Wang Yi and his deputies had discussed this for many months and decided it was a way also to protect Early Rain. If the mother church were to be closed, then the southern branch could keep going.

The church, Wang Yi said, had to grow because Chengdu was

growing too. Rural China was emptying out. So growth had to take place here, in big cities that were becoming regional and even international hubs.

As always, his lecture had a pedagogical flare: he loved to explain, and the audience loved to learn. Wang Yi described how cities have always played a big role in Christian history—the city on the hill referred to by Jesus and founders of new Christian communities through the ages. When John Calvin was laying the foundations for Presbyterianism in the sixteenth century, Geneva had just a few tens of thousands of residents. And back then, only 3 percent of the world's population lived in cities versus 60 percent now. And yet even then, cities were central.

"Ever since I was little, I thought that the city was my dream. But why do we want to live in cities?"

In the Bible, Wang Yi continued, cities are sometimes shown to be bad; Babylon, for example, was the epitome of worldly sin. But cities are also places for people to better themselves and develop their potential.

"I'll use one word: 'opportunities.' What sorts of opportunities? Hope is one. When I was growing up, we used to say, 'Hong Kong, Hong Kong, why are you so fragrant?'

"It represented capitalism, reform, and opening. It was the goal of every Chinese city to be like Hong Kong. Especially people like me who are from small towns and come to a big city, they want to stay. They hope to stay in the city. They also come for culture, for justice, and for generosity. People don't go to a village to get an education. They go to the city—to the schools or the bookstores. Petitioners don't go to a village to appeal for help; they go to the city. Beggars come to the city. They don't go to the countryside.

"Entering the city is what Jesus did in Jerusalem. Entering the city is entering a place of justice, of generosity, and of spreading the Gospel. It's a place of hope. And it's why we're in the city here, and growing here.

"In the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul was in Lystra spreading the Gospel, what happened? Some people wanted to worship him, thinking he was Zeus. But some stoned him almost to death, and when they thought he wasn't breathing, they threw him out of

the city. But he got up and went back into the city. This line really shocked me. It's from chapter 14, verse 20: 'He got up and went back into the city.' He was thrown out of the city, but he reentered it.

"So if we're thrown out of Chengdu, we're going to get back on the bus and reenter the city. And the goal isn't because of opportunities, or culture, but it's because it is the city that has the chance for peace, for generosity, and for the Gospel. God wants us to be in this city."

I looked around the room. About half the congregation had closed their eyes but had light smiles on their faces, listening to a vision. It was a prophecy of struggle—of perhaps being closed by the government, but also of determination, hope, and victory. Wang Yi stood before them, looking out on his congregation, confident and firm. Then he made his pitch, his claim for them to think of their hometown as more than just another city, but that it and their lives were the center of a great movement.

"Earlier today, some disciples asked me what was the main theme of today? I said it's 'Entering the city.' And they said, 'Well, aren't we already in Chengdu? Why do we need to enter the city?' The answer is we need to keep entering the city. The city is the history of humanity's hope for the future. There's the city of God and the city of man. In the past it was Babylon, or New York, or Hong Kong, or Chengdu.

"When we talk to brothers and sisters, we should ask them, why are you in Chengdu? What sorts of dreams have brought you here? And what are our dreams? We are creating a Jerusalem. This is the city on the hill. For us, Chengdu is this city."

Shanxi: Ghost Burial

The widow sat in a little room adjacent to the coffin. She was too old to participate in the ceremonies and simply waited, watching the casket—her own personal wake. She was eighty-two years old, dressed in a purple silk padded jacket, her white hair pulled back in a bun, her face soft and creased, her eyes glassy and still. The deceased had been her second husband. Her first had starved to death in the Great Leap Forward, along with their four children. She had married into this family fifty years ago, and now she presided over it. While we talked with the help of a grandson who could speak Mandarin, the Li family's musicians assembled outside the farmhouse in front of the temporary altar. The children lined up and made the ritual offerings of money, grain, meat, alcohol, and tea. We heard this through the window while watching her husband's coffin through the doorway.

One day she would be there too, and the process would repeat itself. The tombs, though, would they survive the coming upheavals? The graves of her first husband and children had been unmarked, their corpses hastily buried in the sandy soil, where with luck only the dogs had eaten them. What would happen to this generation's dead? Would all of this be plowed over and become a subdivision or a shopping mall, a holiday resort or a dude ranch?

A little girl ran into the room and yelled a greeting at her great-granny. Her mother, dressed in mourning, followed her in and picked her up, sending her back outside.

Li Bin appeared in the doorway, and the young woman called him in. Could he tell fortunes? He smiled and laughed. "Of course," he said, and asked for her hand.