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INSIDE THE BIGGEST REVIVAL IN HISTORY

Bestselling author **Paul Hattaway** gives us a rare glimpse inside China's underground Church



It has been described as the Chinese Marshall Plan, a 21st Century Silk Road and a state-backed campaign for global dominance. The "One Belt, One Road" (*yi dai yi lu*) initiative is President Xi Jinping's plan to connect Asia, Africa and Europe through a 'belt' of overland corridors and a maritime 'road' of shipping lanes. The goal is simple: China wants to become the new world superpower, with the most powerful economy and military on earth.

The Chinese are not in a rush, but are determined to gradually work their way towards this vision. The Communist leaders behind this project are hard-line atheists who desire absolute power over what people say, do and even think. Anyone who may pose a threat to their goals is being subdued or eradicated.

Contrary to almost all predictions, the last few years have seen persecution

against Christians in China skyrocket to levels not seen since the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). These are frightening times for religious adherents in China, and Christians aren't the only group under threat. The BBC estimates that as many as 3 million Muslims have been detained in concentration camps in the Xinjiang region.

In December last year more than 100 members of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu were arrested, including Pastor Wang Yi and his wife, Jiang Rong (pictured, above). Foreseeing this circumstance, Pastor Wang wrote a letter to be published by his church should he be detained for more than 48 hours. Many thousands of Christians all over the world read the letter when it was released online. In it, Pastor Wang said: "Separate me from my wife and children, ruin my reputation, destroy my life and my family – the authorities are capable of doing all of these things. However, no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith…Jesus is the Christ, son of the eternal, living God. He died for sinners and rose to life for us. He is my king and the king of the whole earth yesterday, today, and forever. I am his servant, and I am imprisoned because of this. I will resist in meekness those who resist God, and I will joyfully violate all laws that violate God's laws."

Over the past two years, hundreds of leaders in the Chinese house church movement have faced a similar fate to Pastor Wang. Many have disappeared



Pastor Wang Yi and his wife, Jiang Rong were arrested last year. Jiang was released in June, but her husband remains in secret detention

into the 'black jail' system, and not been heard from again. These black jails are secret facilities outside the legal system, where victims are often tortured mercilessly without any hope of justice. Family members are not notified of detainees' whereabouts, and no visitors or legal representation are allowed in.

Many house church leaders in China say that President Xi is determined to finish the job that Chairman Mao began, namely the complete eradication of Christianity from the country. Remarkably invasive technology is being deployed, with tens of millions of facial recognition cameras able to identify and track anyone the government deems a threat, including Christians who gather for worship.

INSIDE HOUSE CHURCHES

While we often hear stories of persecution inside China, there are also numerous reports of miracles and

> "THESE ARE FRIGHTENING TIMES FOR RELIGIOUS ADHERENTS IN CHINA

mass conversions. The Church has grown from about 1 million believers at the advent of Communism in 1949 to around 100 million today! Numerically, at least, this is the greatest revival in Christian history. There has been a great work of the Holy Spirit, and God's children have learned that they grow stronger when they are placed under great pressure.

Approximately 60 million of China's Christians are members of unregistered evangelical house churches, which have increasingly been targeted in recent decades. Their refusal to register with the Communist authorities, means the house churches are technically illegal, and therefore bear the brunt of the most intense persecution.

Since the 1980s, when I first became involved in Christian work in China, I've had the privilege of attending a number of these underground church meetings. On



> WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT BRINGS REVIVAL IT IS EXHILARATING AND TERRIFYING

one occasion, I was collected by a Chinese driver in a van with tinted windows and driven several hours into the countryside. I was instructed to sit in the back, to wear a coat with a hood and to keep my head down whenever we approached a roadblock or intersection. After arriving at our destination, I was given a short time to settle in, before being taken to a meeting room that had been soundproofed with egg cartons affixed to the walls, while triple-glazed windows prevented the sound of singing and preaching from reaching the street outside. Waiting for me in the meeting room were dozens of house church leaders, many of whom had travelled long distances to be there. With faces brimming with the love and light of Jesus, I was warmly welcomed like a long-lost brother.

As is the usual custom in these meetings, I was required to teach God's word in three to four-hour blocks, separated by meal breaks. Each day started with corporate prayer at 7am and concluded late in the evening, or sometimes, even after midnight, if the Holy Spirit was especially moving. As the guest teacher I was given my own room to sleep in, while the Chinese laid down on mats side by side and head to toe. When the new day dawned, the routine repeated itself.

The Chinese Christians have always impressed me by how well-organised and resourceful they are. In the days of cassette tapes, they had a line-up of machines to record every message. As technology advanced, the tape recorders were replaced by CD players, and later by smartphones.

If the teaching was deemed helpful and anointed by the spirit of God, the recordings were taken to a central location, where mass duplicating machines quickly produced hundreds of copies. They were distributed far and wide, and recopied until they had made their way throughout the house church networks. Within days, tens of thousands of Chinese believers may have already listened to the message.

A GLORIOUS MESS

I've found the most difficult part of house meetings to be the intense prayer sessions, which often continue for hours. Every believer would kneel and cry out to God from the depths of their souls. In order to fit in, I too would kneel on the cold, hard floors. I found the ground was often wet from believers' tears as they engaged in fervent intercession.

To be honest, at times I too have had tears in my eyes during those long prayer meetings, though not from compassion, but because I felt close to passing out from the pain in my knees, especially during winter-time when my lower legs went completely numb from kneeling. When participating in areas that have been touched by powerful heaven-sent revival, I sometimes found my spirit was willing but my flesh was weak (Matthew 26:41). On occasions I think I may have caught a glimpse of what revival meetings were like in the time of Wesley, Whitefield, Finney or Roberts. In my experience, when the Holy Spirit brings true revival to a community it is exhilarating and terrifying, joyful and exhausting, all rolled into one.

Someone once asked me to describe the Chinese revival in a few words. I thought about it for a moment and replied: "A glorious mess!"

Many Christians assume that a





church in the midst of heaven-sent revival must be clean, structured and highly unified – a near-perfect representation of Christ's body on earth. The reality, however, is that the Chinese Church in revival has had to deal with plenty of problems, temptations, trials and weaknesses. These include theological debates between different leaders, and dealing with members who fall into sin, as well as those who cause division, just like in the churches of the New Testament.

The biggest weakness in the Chinese Church has been a lack of theological training. Some have criticised the revival for being a mile wide but only an inch deep. There is some truth to this assertion, but outsiders often fail to realise that the lack of theological depth in China today is largely caused by persecution. The government's decades-long plan to cut the house churches off from Bibles and other resources, and to block their members from attending seminaries, has created a large void, leaving many Christians susceptible to error and being lured by the many cults operating in China today.

The reality is that the mighty revival in China during the last 40 years has not been the work of men and women. It has been a sovereign act of God, who has chosen to show his glory through weak vessels, "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever" (1 Peter 4:11).

EGGS AND EVANGELISM

Over a number of years I have been privileged to travel throughout China, meeting and recording the testimonies of many elderly house church leaders, who don't want the story of what God has done in China to go to the grave with them. Among the hundreds of stirring eyewitness testimonies I've heard, two spring to mind that offer a unique insight into the character of God and the special touch of the Holy



The Golden Lampstand Church in Shanxi province was one of the largest Protestant evangelical churches in China. It was razed by the authorities last year. After the initial explosion, crews broke apart the remaining pieces with diggers and jackhammers

Spirit, which has characterised the Chinese revival.

In the 1980s, many house church leaders in one province were imprisoned and forced to render hard labour 18 hours per day, seven days a week. Totally exhausted, they struggled to survive under intense spiritual, physical and mental pressure. To make matters worse, the prison food was dire, and the men had not eaten any protein for weeks. In one cell, three pastors cried out to God and asked him for mercy. One of them prayed a simple prayer: "Lord Jesus, please send us some protein so we will have strength to endure each day."

Moments later, a large rat that they'd heard scurrying around inside the wall appeared at the end of the cell. The rat rolled a chicken egg across the floor and left it right in front of the stunned pastors! For weeks the same thing occurred, with the rat rolling a fresh egg into the cell at the same time each day. The protein made a huge difference to the pastors, and helped them endure the relentless workload.

The second story occurred in the Wanxian area of eastern Sichuan, after a team of 16 house church evangelists from neighbouring Henan Province arrived to preach the gospel. The evangelists were shocked to discover that the people despised them and would not listen to their message. For generations, bandits from Henan had ridden horses across the mountains to Wanxian and raided local communities, carrying away their goods and their young women as wives and concubines. Centuries of bitterness had ensued, and the people of Wanxian had grown to intensely hate anyone from Henan.

Despite the negative reception, the evangelists refused to give up, even after they were brutally beaten with rocks and sticks by the locals, who tried to drive them away. The evangelists decided to stay until God told them otherwise. They targeted one particular village where the hostility was greatest, and all 16 evangelists decided to fast and pray.

As they sought God's will, the Lord spoke individually to each team member, saying: "Wash the people's feet." They didn't understand, as they thought foot-washing was only for members of the body of Christ, but they decided to obey. Finding some old discarded buckets and containers, they filled them with water, went to the village entrance and waited for the farmers to return from the fields after their long day's work.

Months passed, and the evangelists had still not led a single person to Christ in that area. Whenever the Christians offered to wash the farmers' feet they were mocked and rejected, and some had the buckets

> CHINESE CHRISTIANS HAVE LEARNED TO NOT LOOK TO THEIR OWN STRENGTH

of water thrown over their heads. The evangelists, however, remained convinced that God had told them to wash the people's feet, so they refused to give up.

After a while, the farmers saw it was helpful to have their dirty feet cleaned for them, but they wouldn't let the evangelists speak to them. For almost three years the believers quietly prayed for each person as they washed their feet. Through harsh summers and bitterly cold winters they continued to sit at the village entrance and pray for the salvation of the people.

Finally, one old man couldn't take it any more. He asked the believers what motivated them to stay for so long and to endure such scorn. The evangelists told him that the risen Son of God had told them to wash the people's feet, and they were determined to obey his command.

Upon hearing this, the man broke down under intense conviction and became the first Christian in that village. The floodgates opened, and salvation spread like wildfire. Within three weeks, 1,500 people had surrendered their lives to Christ. The new believers soon took the gospel to other areas, and today an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 people have accepted Christ in Wanxian.

This testimony epitomises the best of the Chinese revival. Believers have learned to trust in Christ alone, and are willing to do lowly things that make little sense to human reason, such as washing the feet of hostile villagers for almost three years before seeing a breakthrough.

PRECIOUS JEWELS

The revival in China has undergone a dramatic transformation since new draconian laws were implemented last year. Almost overnight, thousands of churches stopped meeting together in large congregations, and have broken down into tiny home groups of no more than four or five believers. Most underground Bible schools have been discontinued for now. Just in the past few weeks, however, reports have reached our ministry that the dramatic changes in China are causing the churches to grow in many areas, as the light of the gospel attracts new people to the faith in a confused and unstable society.

There's an ancient Chinese story about a man named Bian who lived some 500 years before Christ. After discovering a large stone, which was actually an unpolished piece of jade, he presented it to the emperor. Unfortunately, the ruler saw nothing but a worthless stone, thought he was being tricked and ordered Bian's left foot to be chopped off. Bian later sent the same present to the next emperor, who assumed he was being insulted and ordered Bian's right foot to be chopped off. When a third emperor came to the throne, Bian held the jade in his arms outside the palace and wept for three days and three nights. The emperor sent someone to investigate, and ordered the stone to be polished. Only then did they discover the beautiful jade within.

One day China (and many other nations) will discover that the Christians they tortured and oppressed, whom they supposed to be ignorant lumps of worthless stone, are actually polished jewels sent by God to bring the blessing of Christ's salvation to them.

Regardless of what hardships they are called to endure in the coming years, the Christians in China know that their loving heavenly Father will never leave or forsake them (Hebrews 13:5). In the past, he has always carried them through the flames, and they know he will do so again.

In their humiliation, they have learned to not look to their own strength or to trust in man-made traditions or programmes. Their faith has been tried and tested and, like the apostle Paul, the Chinese Church today is able to testify: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:7-10).

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