In China, a church divided

Government-approved churches are booming, but so is an underground network of Christians who risk harassment, jail time and torture in the pursuit of greater religious freedom

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By Mark O'Keefe of The Oregonian staff

JIADING, China - The presses are humming at the Love of Christ printing plant in this industrial suburb of Shanghai. One line is spitting out 1999 calendars depicting such scenes as Jesus kneeling and praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Another turns out the monthly magazine of the China Christian Council. A nearby warehouse stocks Christmas cards and Sunday school materials.

"This is freedom, freedom, religious freedom," shouts plant supervisor Xu Minghan over the churn of machinery. "We can print anything we need!"

Yet in the industrial town of Zhengzhou, 400 miles away, Zhen Shuqian, 60, is suffering, not celebrating. Zhen, the leader of the Fancheng Christian Fellowship, kneels on the floor, his head touching the turfgreen carpet. He moans in prayer, trying to decide whether he should publicly challenge a government with a long track record of crushing its dissidents. "We have been persecuted for so long," he prays. "Do you want us to speak out now? Just guide us. We have been so careful, but we still get arrested. We don't know why."

Xu Minghan, with his printing plant of freedom, and Zhen Shuqian, with his prayers to stop persecution, illustrate how China's Christians are polarized into two camps regarding their relationship with a government they see through disparate lenses.

Few would dispute that, compared with the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when all religion was outlawed, this is a golden age of religious freedom. Official religious leaders point to the existence of 10 million Protestants and 4 million Catholics.

Twenty million copies of the Bible have been printed since 1980, and 8 million copies of the Chinese New Hymnal have been distributed.
"Americans cannot imagine what is happening today in terms of China's religious policy," says Xu, the printing plant supervisor and vice president of East China Theological Seminary, which is adding buildings to accommodate a waiting list of students. "We can't even imagine what has happened in the last 20 years. There is more and more freedom for us."

Yet Zhen and other underground Christian leaders say it isn't religious tolerance that's increasing in China but oppression. For the first time, several of these leaders have decided to speak out, agreeing to have their pictures taken and names printed in the Western media. They say the rest of the world must know about their suffering, even though emerging from the underground could send them back to jail.

These underground Christian leaders describe lives as fugitives. They say they stay a step ahead of authorities only by moving from house to house, never sleeping in the same bed four nights in a row and keeping in contact with believers through cell phones that never leave their sides. They speak of campaigns of harassment, scores of arrests and jail terms that routinely include torture with the dreaded dian bang, or "electric stick."

Churches face choice to register with the government or resist Why is one group of Christians satisfied and the other oppressed? The answer lies in the way these two groups respond to the Chinese government's profound need to control.

The Chinese government demands authority over nearly every aspect of citizens' lives, from family planning to the stock market. This control is more political and social than religious, but it clearly includes religion. Each church must register with the Religious Affairs Bureau, which, along with local authorities, governs church activities in ways that vary widely from place to place.

Behind churches' choice to register or resist lies a philosophical and theological divide.

The official, or "registered," churches have agreed to comply with government orders. They say they see it as a practical matter, irrelevant to their spiritual lives. In philosophy and approach, these churches resemble mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States. But while U.S. denominations have seen falling membership in recent decades, the Chinese registered churches are booming.
The others members of the underground, or "house church" movement refuse to register on the grounds that doing so requires submission to a government hostile to unbridled Christianity. They cite biblical passages that, in their interpretation, command them to resist such earthly authority.

Nearly all the dissidents fall under a theological umbrella that in the United States would be called evangelical, emphasizing a belief in an intimately personal relationship with a God who requires them to spread "the good news." Some of the evangelicals are also charismatic, emphasizing physical healings and other modern-day miracles. The Chinese government prohibits this type of religious expression, calling these groups "cults."

These underground Christians say they have at least as many believers as the official churches and possibly many times more. Many compare their underground movement to the dynamic first-century church described in the Bible's Book of Acts.

A similar divide about registration exists among Catholics. Because submission to a foreign entity is strictly forbidden, these churches have no official ties to the Vatican. No one knows how many attend underground Roman Catholic churches, which refuse to register while maintaining allegiance to the pope. But human rights organizations have reported that several of the movement's priests and bishops have been jailed.

U.S. notes China's difficulty in ensuring religious freedom. The roots of this theological divide about registration reach all the way to the United States, influencing Christian thought and U.S. foreign policy from both sides.

Nine years after the massacre in Tiananmen Square, the United States' relationship with the world's No. 2 superpower and increasingly vital trade partner is as complex as ever. The State Department reports that China, though improving, for years has had problems allowing religious freedom. Still, the United States has not imposed sanctions as it has on countries guilty of similar human rights violations.

Earlier this month, Congress passed a bill, signed by President Clinton, requiring the administration to take action against countries that engage in a pattern of religious persecution.

People who support the underground churches strongly supported the legislation.
"We respect civil laws and pray for government leaders, however, we also acknowledge the biblical mandate to obey God rather than men,' " wrote Tom White, director of Voice of the Martyrs, an Oklahoma based group highlighting persecution of Christians around the world, in the group's September magazine.

People who support China's registered churches have been more cautious. Nelson Graham, for example, criticized earlier drafts of the legislation and warned against simplistic China-bashing. He is the son of evangelist Billy Graham and the president of East Gates, which works with official and unofficial churches, as well as with the Chinese government.

"There is a school of thought in China that includes this persecution theology," Graham says. "It views the government of China as inherently evil and corrupt. Quite honestly, that isn't the case. But these people are very proud in what they see as their purity.

"The tenet is that if you haven't suffered as I have suffered, you're not as righteous as I am. Therefore, it sometimes becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They bring persecution on themselves and others unnecessarily."

Biggest official Protestant church overflows with believers By 7:15 a.m. on a recent Sunday in Beijing, outdoor chairs await an overflow crowd at Chongwenmen Christian Church in Beijing. This is China's largest registered Protestant church, which President Clinton visited in June.

Unmarked by any steeple, the gray building is at the rear of a hotel parking lot. Inside, Bible-carrying believers begin to line wooden auditorium-style seats. By 8:30 a.m., the sanctuary is full, and worshippers spill into an outdoor courtyard equipped with a sound system and video monitor. When the service begins at 9:30 a.m., more than 2,500 people have jammed into every seat in and around the church.

Li Peiying, a 34-year-old seminary graduate and pastoral assistant, says that 10 years ago, only 300 people attended on an average Sunday.

"They come here to seek God," she says. "They now have enough necessities for living, for work. They have their material things, yet they're not yet satisfied. They aren't spiritually satisfied. They're looking for faith."

Human Rights Watch/Asia says that these requirements effectively squelch the free practice of religion. In a 1997 report, the human rights group says that by requiring registration, the government can block the selection of clergy, supervise financial affairs, veto building programs and restrict social welfare and other projects.

Publication of Bibles, religious books, magazines and other materials is subject to government scrutiny, as are seminary students. Proselytizing among those younger than 18 is forbidden. Sermons can be checked for content. Messages about the Second Coming of Christ, Judgment Day and the biblical account of creation are to be avoided, as are sermons questioning government policies, such as the limit of one child per family.

Sitting in the doorway of Chongwenmen church, Li dismisses such Western human rights reports. She says ministers can preach as they please, to whomever they please. She concedes there is no proselytizing outside of church property but says that with such booming attendance, there is no need for it.

"The government doesn't interfere with this," she says. "This church is as free as Christian churches in the United States."

What about reports of imprisoned church leaders?

"It's a rumor," she says. "Nobody was put into prison. Maybe during the Cultural Revolution, but I have never heard of this thing now. On Sundays, it is very crowded in this church."

**Born Again Movement labeled a cult by Chinese government**

People in the underground churches, however, say that imprisonment is still a reality. Zhang Rongliang, for example, says he's been arrested three times.

Zhang has no printing plant. He has no church building or seminary. What he does have, he says, is a loose-knit underground flock of 10 million uncompromising believers.

In August, Zhang and 11 other house-church leaders met in a large upper room of a two-story house just outside Zhengzhou, a city of nearly 2 million, the capital of Henan province in the eastern part of central China. The 12 men and women say that together they represent at least 15 million Christians scattered throughout the country. Almost all of these leaders are peasants with no formal training. They say their motto is, "Prison is our seminary."
Religious groups inside and outside China claim huge numbers of members of such underground congregations. According to Christianity Today magazine, as many as 20 million people are involved in spinoffs from a single underground stream, the Born Again Movement.

The Chinese government has labeled the movement a cult, similar to the Branch Davidians who died in a fiery apocalypse in Waco, Texas, in 1993. Like many underground house-church networks, the movement does have some unusual beliefs, such as one encouraging new converts to weep for three days seeking forgiveness of their sins.

But what religious experts find most striking about the Born Again movement is its size. And it's just a single stream of the underground church. Some say there might be as many as 80 million underground believers, eight times the amount in registered churches.

The Chinese government disputes these numbers. Yet government officials have begrudgingly begun to acknowledge the existence of such underground leaders. The government calls them pawns to foreign organizations who sow discord in China.

These leaders take great offense at such allegations, particularly the cult charge. In the past, they have worked independently of one another in the strictest secrecy. On this day, however, after much discussion and prayer, they decide to speak jointly and openly about their lives and their worries.

Zhang, 47, the leader of one of the largest house church networks, emerges as the group's spokesman. He has a stocky build and an easy smile, and he wears a button-down, short-sleeve white shirt and khaki shorts.

Zhang says he travels by train and van to solve problems among his far-flung congregations, never staying in one place for more than four consecutive nights and always keeping his pocket-sized cell phone at his side.

"In China, there are so many people. But if you have one of these," he says, holding up his phone, "you can be found anywhere." He says he's been on the run since February 1994, when he was released after spending 14 days in a labor camp on a charge that he held unauthorized religious meetings with foreigners.

In 1990, he was imprisoned for 14 months on a charge that he was a counterrevolutionary. He says he was in a labor camp from 1967 to 1974 after
being accused of fomenting "counterrevolutionary activities under the guise of religion."

Another underground leader, Zhen Xiangui, 37, says people in his unregistered church network of 500,000 believers in Anhui province, in the eastern part of central China, have been frequent targets of local authorities. He says the church plans on at least 10 arrests a year, budgeting 40 to 2,000 yuan each ($5 to $250) to bribe officials for the release of prisoners. Some years have been worse than others. Zhen says that in 1990, 30 believers were arrested at a meeting. In 1992, 33 more were arrested.

Zhen says he was imprisoned for two months, beginning in November 1997. In an effort to make him reveal the names of others in the church, their secret meeting places and their strategies, Zhen says authorities kicked him in the face and chest and zapped his ear lobes with an electric probe, the dian bang. It didn't work, he says.

"You cannot confess," Zhen says. "We have to protect the church. Nobody ever confesses. That's how they know we're strong."

During the course of a day, the leaders write a document and ask two American journalists to present it to the world. Among other things, the document asks the Chinese government to establish a dialogue with the house churches and to present a clear definition of what it considers a cult. It is the first time Protestant underground leaders have come together to try to express themselves openly to their government and to Westerners.

A peasant farmer who was once a Communist, Zhang doesn't see himself as a counterrevolutionary or any kind of threat. Christians, he argues, make good Chinese citizens because they are honest and hard-working.

"Tell the government," he says, "that we are their good friends, not their enemies."

Split between churches stems from movement in 1950 In Beijing, Allen Yuan is considered one of the patriarchs of the Chinese house-church movement. He says the split between official and unofficial churches goes back to the founding of the People's Republic of China.

He knows, because he was there.
It was 1950, a year after the Communists came to power. China had been evangelized, on and off, by Christian missionaries for more than 1,000 years, with marginal success.

In an effort to distance religion from what it saw as foreign, imperialist influences, the new Communist government formed. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement for Protestant Christians. It was to be "self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating," all under the watchful eye of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau.

"The idea," says Yuan, now 84, "was that all organizations, religious or secular, had to be led by the Communist Party." From that point on, Christianity developed on two often-competing tracks, one registered and regulated and the other unregistered, unregulated and illegal.

Yuan refused to join the Three-Self movement. In 1958, he was arrested. He spent the next 21 years and eight months in a labor camp near the Russian border, separated from his wife and six children.

Believers such as Yuan are uncompromising. They say a church that weds itself to a government, particularly a communist government, is a whore.

They say the Bible requires the church to be the bride of Christ, "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish," in accordance with Ephesians 5:27 and other Scriptures. They quote 2 Corinthians 11:2-4 in arguing the church must be like a "pure virgin" for its husband, Christ.

Ten leaders of the Born Again Movement, perhaps the most influential in all of China, express a similar view at a secret meeting in Beijing. Nine of the 10 say they have been imprisoned.

Last December, the movement's founder, Peter Xu Youngze, was sentenced to serve three years in a reeducation-through-labor camp in Henan province. It is the third time Xu, accused of cult practices, has been imprisoned. Around the table, his followers, who ask not to be identified because of fear of retribution, insist their group is not a cult. The controversial weeping, they say, does occur, but it's not a requirement of salvation.

They do however, believe in miracles.

They tell a story of a woman, paralyzed for 20 years, who suddenly found healing in 1993 after Xu sang to her throughout the night, stroking her hand. In
another, a teen-age girl who had been imprisoned twice tells of praying for protection when a policeman tried to rape her. She says he fell down and was taken to a hospital; she was spared.

Such stories spread through the house churches like wildfire. So do stories of arrest, which seem only to fuel interest.

Yuan, the 84-year-old leader, agrees persecution has helped, not hindered, the cause of the underground movement.

"It's good for the church, like growing pains with children," he says. "All throughout history, Christianity has grown by persecution. It's like a spring. You try to push it down, and it recoils."

A picture of the Rev. Billy Graham, who has visited Yuan, is tacked on a wall next to peeling plaster. A banner says, in Chinese symbols, "I am the way, the truth and the life," from John 14:6.

Yuan says his service was shut down in June, during Clinton's visit to Beijing. "The Public Security Bureau said to me, 'There are 2,000 reporters coming to Beijing,' " Yuan says. "'They are free. But we don't want them to talk to you or to see your meetings.'"

Now back in operation, Yuan holds a regular Wednesday night meeting. At this one, 25 folding chairs and six stools are crammed into Yuan's 10-by-20-foot, one-room apartment. Three teen-age girls sit on his bed, behind a microphone and a makeshift amplification system, while at least 30 others on the street try to listen through an open door.

Yuan introduces Norwegian missionaries based in Japan. Holding the microphone, he interviews them as if he is an American talk-show host. The Norwegians sing a verse of "The Old Rugged Cross" in English, followed by a verse in Mandarin, led by Yuan.

"This is a very special song to me," Yuan says. "I was in prison for 22 years. I had no Bible. I sang two songs to myself. One was from Psalm 27. The second was 'The Old Rugged Cross.'"

Two hours later, the meeting ends. Most of the crowd lingers, taking time to catch up with friends and to chat animatedly about the meaning of various Bible passages.
Yuan concedes the authorities know of this meeting and could permanently shut it down in a minute, if they wanted to. Does the very existence of Chinese believers mingling with foreign missionaries in an unregistered Beijing church make the point that freedom of religion thrives in the People's Republic?

No, Yuan says. "We have no freedom, really. What we have is freedom in a circle, just like a bird in a cage."