

WINTER 2019

VOL. 21, NO. 4

ChinaSource Quarterly

A Song in the Night

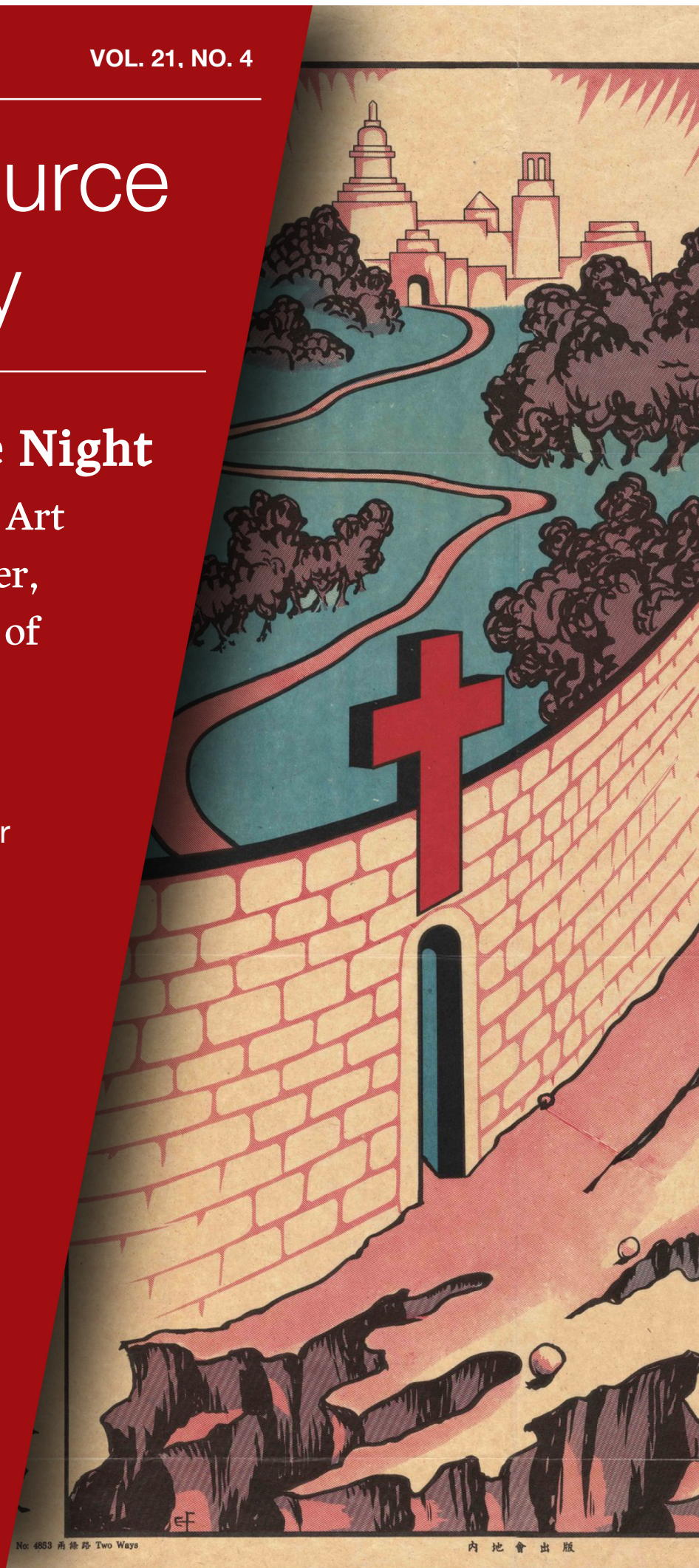
Chinese Christian Art
as Sower, Sustainer,
and Disseminator of
a Faith Immured

BJ Arthur, Guest Editor

華源協作
CHINASOURCE

No. 4853 兩條路 Two Ways

內地會出版



About ChinaSource

For the past 20 years, ChinaSource has been a trusted platform facilitating the flow of critical knowledge and leading-edge research among the Christian communities inside China and around the world and engaging them in collaborating to serve the Chinese church and society.

As China continues to grow and change, the church in China is doing the same. With over 100 years of collective China-ministry experience, the ChinaSource team is strategically positioned to help bring knowledge, clarity, and insight to groups engaging with China.

Content

ChinaSource's content is aimed at providing reliable, balanced, and relevant information to those who serve China. All of ChinaSource's content resources can be found on the website: www.chinasource.org

Partnerships

ChinaSource's partnerships are aimed at playing a catalytic role in bringing together the right people, asking the right questions, and influencing Christian thinking about China.

We partner with individuals, organizations, churches, and interested groups who share our vision to see China's Christians engage the society inside and outside of China as they contribute to and influence the global church conversation for the advancement of God's Kingdom.

Training/Consulting

Under the ChinaSource Institute, ChinaSource provides its training/consulting services packaged in a variety of products and services that are easily accessible to a wide audience. A full list of our offerings can be found on our website: www.chinasource.org

Engagement

ChinaSource is committed to actively engaging with China in order to better connect and amplify the voice of Christians in China. We hope to act as a conversational bridge between the church in China and the global church. Whenever and wherever the church in China is being talked about, ChinaSource aims to be part of the discussion. This is primarily done via our network of Chinese Christians, conferences, research, events, and through media.

www.chinasource.org

To access embedded links to resources and other related articles, please go to the online version of this ChinaSource Quarterly (bit.ly/a-song-in-the-night).

Cover image courtesy of Chinese Christian Posters (ccposters.com/poster/two-ways-2/).

ChinaSource Quarterly

Winter 2019, Vol. 21, No. 4

In this issue . . .

Editorial

[Art—a Pathway to the Heart, Soul, and Mind](#)

[Page 2](#)

BJ Arthur

Articles

[Contemporary Chinese Art and Christianity](#)

[Page 3](#)

Clover Zhou and John Camden

Contemporary Chinese Christian artists have grown out of historical relationships between Chinese culture, contemporary art, and Christianity. This article looks at these three factors to help us understand contemporary Chinese Christian art.

[“The Spirit in Fire and Wind”: An Opportunity for Silent Artists to Converse](#)

[Page 6](#)

BJ Arthur

In the spring of 2019, ten of China’s highly respected Christian artists gathered at Purdue University to freely display and discuss their work with each other and a fascinated public. Only now is art being encouraged in the church, but this connectedness of art and faith is providing a refuge for artists in this increasingly difficult time.

[Spreading the Gospel with Christian Propaganda Posters](#)

[Page 8](#)

Daryl Ireland

The author brings to our attention Christian propaganda posters, intentionally used in China between 1927 and 1951, aimed at toppling China’s ideological systems. They provide a view of what Chinese Christians believed about their faith, and how they believed Christ could transform China.

[Singing from Underground to the World: Listening to the Music of Contemporary Chinese Christianity](#)

[Page 12](#)

XU Song-Zan (徐颂赞)

This article looks at the development of Chinese hymns and spiritual songs, along with some examples, during recent periods of Chinese history. These provide insight into the hearts of Chinese Christians during both the difficult days and today’s contemporary church.

[When Will Messiah Return . . . to Beijing?](#)

[Page 16](#)

BJ Arthur

In 2001, Handel’s *Messiah* was performed in Beijing’s Forbidden City conducted by Timothy Su Wenxing (苏文星), a Christian. When he took the podium, he displayed a public manifestation of faith seldom seen in the PRC. When will Handel’s *Messiah* again be performed in China?

Book Review

[In Drawing Plain People, He Draws the Face of God](#)

[Page 18](#)

Soul and Beauty by Fan Xuede

Reviewed by Ah Qian (阿浅)

Using a conversation format, the life experiences and oil painting of Yang Feiyun, head of the Chinese Academy of Oil Painting, are explored.

Resource Corner

[In God We Trust: Contemporary Chinese Christian Art](#)

[Page 21](#)

By Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky; co-curated by Dazi with an essay by Wang Yun

This brochure, from an exhibit held at Bard College (Annandale on the Hudson, NY) in September 2011, is an introduction to contemporary Chinese art.

Editorial

Art—a Pathway to the Heart, Soul, and Mind

By BJ Arthur

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”

Matthew 22:37

A very perceptive young Chinese, Sun Yong, made the following observation in the preface to an anthology of three novels written by up-and-coming contemporary Chinese authors:

The world’s understanding of China is still very cursory in my view. It knows little of China’s rich minds and how a sea change of social reforms has impacted Chinese mentality and feelings for the simple reason that the Chinese language is too difficult for many Westerners, and talents capable of translating Chinese literature into English are hard to come by. . . . Yet, Western thinking is not alien to the Chinese because China has translated a large volume of Western literature and history books over the last 100 years and several generations of Chinese have studied and entered the inner worlds of Westerners through these works. We are publishing English versions of excellent Chinese novels in an attempt to change the situation. . . . Their stories . . . can help Western readers enter the inner minds of the Chinese more easily.¹

This issue of the *China Source Quarterly* offers an opportunity to understand some of those rich, creative Chinese minds, as well as the impact of one of those social reforms taking place in Chinese contemporary society—the explosion of Christian belief.

“Chinese Contemporary Art and Christianity” by Clover Zhou and John Camden offers insight into the complex relationship between three cultural heritages: Chinese ancient and revolutionary history, contemporary art, and Christianity. “The Spirit in Fire and Wind: An Opportunity for Silent Artists to Converse” describes a unique opportunity at Purdue University for Chinese artists to gather and share their work with one another, with reviewers, and with the general public. Daryl Ireland provides fascinating insight into the early use of art and propaganda by the Religious Tract Society in “Spreading the Gospel with Christian Propaganda Posters.” XU Song-Zan reveals his passion for praise music in “Singing from Underground to the World: Listening to the Music of Contemporary Chinese Christianity.” On a more somber note, “When Will *Messiah* Return . . . to Beijing?” reviews the history of the public performance of the *Messiah* oratorio in China and the illustrious career of conductor Su Wenxing. These are discussed in light of the current government’s prohibition of the performance of *Messiah* in any public venue.

Regarding Fan Xuede’s *Soul and Beauty*, the reviewer, Ah Qian, notes Fan’s tribute to his teacher and the work of the Holy Spirit in artistic creation: “With his paint brushes blessed by the Holy Spirit, Teacher Yang ‘seeks and displays godly nature in humanity.’”² Available in this issue’s Resource Corner, *In God We Trust: Contemporary Chinese Christian Art* is an information-packed pamphlet, which introduces and analyzes the work of fourteen prominent Christian artists who participated in an art show at New York’s Bard College in 2011.

Sun Yong, that perceptive young person mentioned above, introduced three novels, one written by Bei Cun. First gaining fame as an avant-garde author, Bei Cun became one of the very few prominent Chinese artists to give a bold statement of coming to faith: “At 8:00 in the evening on March 10, 1992, I received the leading of God and entered an old broken-down building in Xiamen. In that place I saw some people, some people who lived in a world above our own. God chose me.”³

God is choosing to use contemporary, Chinese Christian artists to further his work of growing his church in China. May they and their nation be blessed for his glory.

¹ Bei Cun, Xu Yigua, Li Er, *Stories from Contemporary China*. Preface by Sun Yong, translated by Wu Yanting, Wu Xiaozhen, Hu Lingque (New York: Better Link Press, 2010), preface.

² Ah Qian, 他画朴实的人，画出神的样子, “In Drawing Plain People, He Draws the Face of God,” *Sohu.com*, January 3, 2018 at http://www.sohu.com/a/214647965_661949.

³ Bei Cun, Xu Yigua, Li Er, *Contemporary China*, preface.



Contemporary Chinese Art and Christianity

By Clover Zhou and John Camden

Contemporary Chinese Christian artists are the unique product of three cultural heritages, each with a complicated relationship and history with the others. One stream is comprised of Chinese culture, both traditional and revolutionary. This cultural heritage has a storied history of tension with the other two inherited traditions, namely contemporary art and Christianity. In turn, contemporary art and Christianity themselves have a complicated relationship with one another.



This article briefly charts the historical relationships between Chinese culture, contemporary art, and Christianity in order to elucidate the multifaceted terrain of contemporary Chinese Christian art.

Though contemporary art enjoys an increasingly positive position of relative esteem in China today, this was not always the case. The relationship between government authorities and the contemporary art community in China has a dramatic history.

The unique inception of contemporary art in China serves as an apt beginning to this story. The Western art world tends to associate contemporary art with postmodernity. Marcel Duchamp and the Dada movement sowed the seeds of contemporary art in the 1920s, and these grew into what would become the mainstream by the 1960s and 1970s. In China, however, contemporary art was forged from an alloy of both modern and postmodern approaches.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the field of Chinese art began to throw off the yoke of decades of political usurpation. Simultaneously, Chinese artists and intellectuals set about embracing recently introduced postmodern revelations. However, because the socio-economic modernization of China came relatively late—beginning in the 1980s and continuing even at the time of this writing—the cultural transformation that drew inspiration from postmodern thought outpaced the nation’s material modernization. Chinese art historian, Gao Minglu, aptly explains, “Postmodernity was considered mostly as a set of concepts that served as the first step in a search for modernity.”¹

Chinese artists inherited communist idealism regarding social change. With the waning momentum of the errant Cultural Revolution, they perceived an imminent positive turn in national evolution. The catalyst for this new hope was thought to be the hybridization of Western innovation with Chinese traditional philosophy and culture.

In the field of art, Western influences include Dada, Surrealism, German Expressionism, and Pop art. Even though Chinese artists fully imbued their work with the strong emotions of their hope for China, the untamable, avant-garde style of their art provoked the ire of the government. The *1989 China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*—the first national-scale, Chinese, contemporary art exhibition, debuted in Beijing on February 5 of that year. The event’s provocative performance art was not viewed with favor by local police who shut down the art exhibition within a couple of hours on the opening day; the exhibition was closed for the next three days.

The Chinese contemporary art community was largely forced underground in the wake of this totalitarian eclipse of hopes, which was exacerbated by the immediately subsequent events of Tiananmen Square. They were further burdened with the legal requirement that all exhibitions receive government approval.

This government scrutiny was polarizing. Some artists backed away from their ambitions, while others boldly doubled-down, consciously resisting through wildly experimental work. Accordingly, the underground exhibitions initially blinked in and out of clandestine locations—apartments, deserted factories, or empty warehouses. Eventually, the events began to gain renown as symbols for trends in Chinese contemporary art, such as “Post Sensitivity” and “Supermarket.” Simultaneously, China began to open up to globalization in a nationally unprecedented fashion. The underground art scene was no exception. The international reputation of Chinese contemporary art began to flourish in such global art exhibition venues as the Venice Biennale and *documenta*.

Beginning in the early 2000s, in response to this positive press, the Chinese government gradually reversed its stance towards contemporary art. When Chinese contemporary artists, such as Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, and Yue

Minjun, miraculously broke the ceiling in Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses in 2007, Chinese contemporary artists found themselves in an unfamiliar era of overt government sponsorship. International and domestic galleries sprang up across Beijing and Shanghai. The cultural influence, which emanated from these galleries, transformed surrounding neighborhoods into local art districts.

Around this time in 2007—during the height of the public emergence of contemporary art in urban China—Christian artists appeared on the scene. This had less to do with the success of the art industry than with the explosive growth of the Chinese church after the Cultural Revolution, especially the Chinese family (house / underground) churches.

Chinese family churches first took root mostly in rural areas, where household registration policies were less strictly enforced than in urban areas. This allowed for easier relocation and thus evangelism. However, when unprecedented numbers of Chinese students entered the university system as a result of the 1990s policy of college enrollment expansion, a loophole for campus ministry opened a floodgate to Christian influence among the urban, collegiate population. Western missionaries trickled into China by way of professional education in order to reach the next generation of intellectual elites on campus. These Western-led campus ministries reached art professors and young art students, who became the first generation of Chinese Christian artists, including Yang Feiyun, Zhu Qingsheng, and Daozi. These artists employed classic art media and strategies, such as traditional oil painting and Chinese ink painting, to create biblically influenced works of art.

As the new century dawned, these now Chinese-led campus ministries gradually reached a crop of young artists who were interested in pursuing contemporary art. Its international success and newfound acceptance in mainstream Chinese culture attracted the interest of many Chinese Christians as well. By 2010, a few young Christian artists had gravitated to the Chinese contemporary art scene. Many of them were driven by an understanding of themselves as Christ's ambassadors within the art world and a desire to share the gospel with observers and colleagues by producing the world's first Chinese, Christian-themed contemporary art.

This production of Chinese Christian art, however, did not follow a path devoid of difficulties. Unlike most classical art, contemporary artists commonly refrain from explicit presentation of the concepts behind their work. The multiple meanings of a visual element might elude the lay-observer in the absence of interpretative guidance from artists, curators, or art critics. Because Christianity has historically been a cultural institution in the West, Christian symbols and metaphors are disproportionately salient for the Western public. Precisely the opposite holds true for Chinese audiences; not only are subtle Christian symbols too often obscure, they also are not obviously or reflexively related to the contemporary issues and values of Chinese culture. The end result is that Chinese Christian artists must walk a knife's edge of ambiguity. Otherwise, they must choose between creating either Christian-themed artwork that resonates with Christian audiences or connecting with wider audiences by suppressing the relatively obscure worldview of their faith.

Only a small number of outstanding Chinese Christian artists have successfully traversed the tightrope which connects Christian narratives and values to contemporary Chinese realities and thereby generated meaningful art that is well received in both the secular art world and the Christian church. Needless to say, these diverse audiences sometimes receive such works from opposite angles of perception and sometimes even respond with antithetical reactions. It is precisely this refracted array—as the singular output of otherwise sundry beams of attention and dialogue—that testifies to the connective ingenuity required of the successful contemporary Chinese Christian artist.

In 2011, Gao Lei's installation *NS24* debuted in a group exhibition "Almost Tangible" (触摸) at the Arario Beijing Gallery.



The installation is comprised of two rooms. In one room, a taxidermic goat lounges in dictatorial luxury in a bathtub of suds composed of white fleece. A bundle of microphones is suspended above the comfortable capra, and their white-thread cabling leads over to a Soviet-era loudspeaker in the neighboring room. In this room, the skull of a sheep on a human skeleton is laid out in an almost surgical posture in a barber's chair. Harkening back to the goat's bubble bath, the same white fleece litters the floor around the barber's chair as apparent evidence that the sheep was shorn to death.

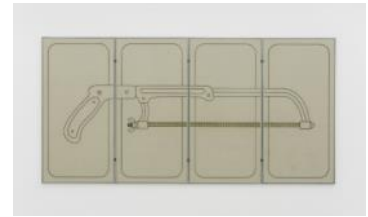


The two rooms combine to form a powerful portrait of exploitation. The mundane objects of a bathtub or a barber's chair hint at the ubiquity of systemic injustice. Likewise, the title draws one's attention to these dynamics of exploitation across both space and time: "NS" suggests spatial dimensions as "north" and "south," while 24 represents either 24 time zones or 24 hours in a day. Thus, the global connotation of "NS24" implies that this regrettable scene is a microcosm of our world.

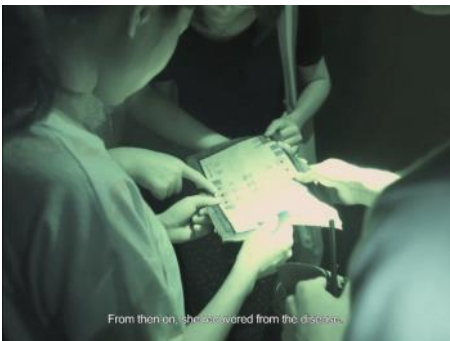
On a theological level, *NS24* clearly employs the symbolism of the eventual separation of the sheep from the goats described in Matthew 25:31-46. However, Gao's installation does not depict that eschatological scene. Instead, it opens a window onto the "goats" and "sheep" as they live their lives on the earth. Gao

Lei's own interpretation of his work puts a finer point on the scene: the sheep is martyred in the act of joyful self-sacrifice. In contrast to the insatiable goat, the sheep is overjoyed to hear from the Lord, "...I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me" (Matthew 25:35-36).

Gao Lei went on to create another series of works of art that are biblically-themed but more abstract. *Screen—The Saw of Manasseh* (玛拿西之锯), a minimalistic triptych portraying a hacksaw, appeared in the Beijing Whitespace Gallery in 2016. It is based on a tradition about the death of the biblical prophet Isaiah from the Rabbinic Jewish Talmudic passage, Yevamot 49b. Isaiah, spuriously accused of false prophecy, was sawn in half by King Manasseh's servants. The artist uses the complicity of the king's servants in this tradition to implicate contemporary structural evils which compel us to participate in systemic injustice.



Another Chinese Christian contemporary artist, Li Ran, suffuses his art with church life and church history. In 2014, he made a video named *Escape from the Scene—The Land of Mystery*, in which footage of friends from church in an escape room is dubbed over with a testimony narrated by a young female Christian. Her testimony is centered on the exorcism of evil spirits. The escape room functions as a metaphor for salvation analogous to the testimonies of deliverance seen in Mark 5.



Three years later, in ShanghART Beijing, Li Ran held a solo exhibition entitled "Life of the Pilgrim." All of the works of art in that exhibition were Christian-themed. A video creation of the same name was the centerpiece of the exhibition. The video features hundreds of old photographs of sheep which were shepherded in Xinjiang by a group of Chinese military construction workers in 1954. Li Ran employs the sheep as a symbol for Christians, weaving together the photographs in order to tell the story of Protestant church history. Simultaneously, the same story, told through the same footage of sheep photographs, conveys the past sixty years of Chinese political history. The "Life of the Pilgrim" is a work of self-expression in the context of the intersection of theology and sociology. It is a testimony to the dynamics of the interplay between society and faith.



The "Life of the Pilgrim" is a work of self-expression in the context of the intersection of theology and sociology. It is a testimony to the dynamics of the interplay between society and faith.

Well-known Chinese contemporary Christian artists include the Gao Brothers, Deng Dafei and He Hai as well as Zeng Jianyong. Unlike Western Christian artists, whose practices might be subsidized by a church, the works of Chinese contemporary Christian artists have yet to garner widespread support from the church. One reason for this is that art education in China is not sufficiently popular to create a broad appreciation of contemporary art, either within the church or in society at large.

Still, Chinese churches face significant and, unfortunately, increasing opposition from the government. The task of survival in this climate is far more important than cultivating an appreciation for contemporary art. It is significant to note, however, that Chinese Christians, as a result of this persecution, have drawn increased attention in the contemporary art world due to its support for political and spiritual freedom. Contemporary Chinese Christian artists are creatively pioneering their liminal frontier, despite the exceedingly complex environment of the art world's partial reconciliation with religion, the Chinese government's partial reconciliation with the contemporary art scene, and the increasing government persecution of an ever faster growing Chinese church. These works of art express a love and a hope for the advancement of China, contemporary art, and Christianity.

¹ Minglu Gao, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 3.

Clover Xuesong Zhou is an art critic, art theologian, and visual artist. She is a longtime writer for ArtForum China, and has also been published extensively in other Chinese art journals such as The Art Newspaper China, The Art World, Randian, and Vision. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in theology at Fuller Theological Seminary.

John Camden is a biblical scholar, author, musician, coder, and digital artist. He is best described as belonging to the global, ecumenical church, having travelled and lived abroad extensively and having served or studied with most every major Christian denomination—from the Greek Orthodox to the Assemblies of God. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Old Testament theology at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Gao Li image credits: Arario Beijing Gallery and the artist.

Li Ran image credits: ShanghART Beijing Gallery and the artist.

“The Spirit in Fire and Wind”

An Opportunity for Silent Artists to Converse

By BJ Arthur

“Turning our eyes to China, we see people hustling and bustling throughout the vast land, which is littered with ruins from demolitions, constructions, demolishing [the] recently constructed, constructing out of recently demolished, or constructing and demolishing at once. The ruins of constructing and demolishing fill the void in the land, the society, and the heart-mind. On the ruins, however, there also blows the spiritual wind and burning holy fire. Where there is the blowing wind of the spirit, the holy fire destroys, purifies, and protects, but also kindles the soul, life, and zeal.”

“The Spirit in Fire and Wind,” Fenggang Yang, Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University, 2019.



Hustling, vast, void . . . in the heart-mind: these are indeed apt adjectives for today’s urban China. Yet, there is no void where the “spiritual wind blows,” where the quiet yet passionate worshipers of the underground Chinese church meet and study; here, there is no emptiness in the “heart-mind.” So, too, in the midst of the demolishing and constructing, there is a vibrant creating that is beautiful and powerful. Chinese Christian artists are sculpting, painting, filming, and performing works of art that reveal the scarred soul and sanctified spirit of their contemporary China.

In the spring of 2019, Purdue University’s Center on Religion and Chinese Society gathered ten of China’s highly respected Christian artists and provided a venue for them to freely display and discuss their work with each other and a fascinated public. For a foreigner who had lived for years in the tightly closed society of the Peoples Republic of China, it was a delight to see them talk, laugh and debate with one another without fear in their eyes . . . a fear that was not for themselves, but for family and friends.

One middle-aged artist was able to bring his wife; it was the first time for either of them to be out of their homeland. When asked how he received permission to bring his wife, he smiled sheepishly and said that he had told authorities that they were going on a short vacation. When his wife was asked about the strain of constant surveillance, she looked up quickly with her strong, steady, fearless eyes and said simply, “It is the China Road.” Their devotion to one another and the joy they shared in this “free” time together is a rare thing to witness among mainland couples who are often “united” in a marriage of convenience—for career, finances, or in response to family pressures. However, this couple had indeed been blessed by a “holy fire” and spirit—not only in the art he created, but in their marriage as well.

This artist, like many at the exhibition, creates in multiple mediums. He is an independent documentary film director and printmaker—and obviously a fearless one. All of the works that he displayed were political in theme and critical of brutal despotism. When asked what gave him the courage to create these works, his answer was simply, “The story must be told; there must be a record of those who suffered.”

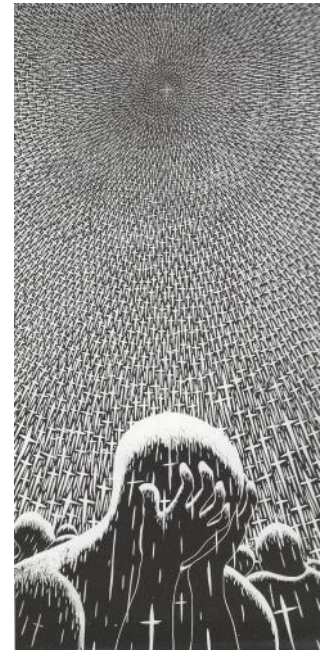
Another artist at the conference was intent on recording contemporary history as well. His paintings, that call to mind recent persecutions in Southwest China, exhort the Christian heart to action. One pictures a cross dangling from a crane over a blood-red cross painted on the ground. Another shows a red cross lying on the ground in the midst of falling rain. These would seem to harken to the on-going persecution of one of China’s most vibrant churches that is located in the Southwest. Its pastor is imprisoned; should Christians remain silent?

Also at the conference was a young man from Beijing who came to share about the growing body of house church praise music. Being encouraged by the blessings of the Canaan Hymns—praise songs penned by an uneducated peasant woman¹ from Henan—young, believing, musically trained college students are excited about composing praise music for their home congregations. Some of the students have formed bands that lead worship locally then travel beyond and offer to lead worship in other churches or provide praise music as mood music in Christian coffee houses or reading room/bookstore venues.

Performance art is popular among these contemporary artists, perhaps because of the energy and constant variation imbued by movement; however, in today’s China, performance art is also convenient because it does not leave a record that could be used as evidence by authorities. One artist’s performance piece places a red chair and a table with a white cloth and a trumpet in “the wilderness.” These pieces become a judgment seat, a prosecutor’s seat, a

defender's seat, and a convict's seat. The artist becomes a lawyer and pleads not guilty for an innocent lawyer held in prison. Another performance piece has a small table between two straight-backed chairs. The artist invites the parents of a murder victim, along with the parents of the convicted murderer, to reconcile, demonstrating the possibilities for love and forgiveness. The artist is seated in one of the chairs and his work is entitled "Waiting for the Day of Reconciliation."

Because many of these artists have had to flourish in whatever place they find amenable at the moment, most use a variety of mediums and techniques. One artist shared a photograph of thousands of sheep pastured behind what appeared to be the Forbidden City in Beijing. He had originally interpreted that image as representing the docile people of China unthinkingly accepting the care and guidance of the government. Now, since the artist's conversion, the title speaks to the dragon's battlefield becoming the pasture land of Jesus. This same artist brought a poster to the conference of an engraving that was too large to bring from China. It pictured a plank of wood more than five feet tall and three feet wide that had been painted white and over painted with black. The artist had then carefully exposed thousands of tiny white crosses emanating from a central tiny cross as if it were the sun. Beneath the shower of crosses were shadow figures of men covering their eyes as the white crosses rained down on them. This stunning piece was entitled "Repentance in the Light."



This art conference, from May 3-5, 2019, was entitled *The Spirit in Fire and Wind: Christian Art in Contemporary China* and was chaired by Yang Fenggang, the founder of the Center at Purdue and a well-known sociologist and author. In his introduction of the program book for the conference, Dr. Yang wrote:

The vast land of China is undergoing the blowing of the spiritual wind and the baptism of the holy fire. The rise of the collective of Christian artists and their artworks in the 21st century is a testimony of the spirit in the wind and fire . . . This great awakening, which is happening in a vast land that is filled with diverse cultures and undergoing dramatic social changes, is a rare event in human history, perhaps comparable to the seismic changes in the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Its significance to the Chinese and humanity may only become clearer in the coming decades.

Dr. Yang was greatly influenced by the writing of Robert Wuthnow who authored *Creative Spirituality*, a book described in an Amazon review as, "an intriguing discussion on the artistic process, zero[ing] in on the mysterious place where creativity and the sacred meet."

In his opening remarks, Dr. Yang noted that this year marks the following "anniversaries": the 100th of the May 4th Movement; the 70th of the People's Republic of China; the 40th of the reopening of churches on the mainland; the 30th of June 4th. He then traced the progression of events in China after the student massacre in Tian'anmen and how they impacted his own life. (We have heard this testimony from many Chinese friends; after June 4th they knew they had to search for a new place to "put their soul".) He stated that "now under Xi, it is getting increasingly difficult to study the impact of Christianity in China. Therefore, the record and exchanges of this conference are very important!"

The program book for the conference highlights ten prominent contemporary artists, but twenty-some attended. Other younger artists and some interested observers from the mainland, Taiwan, New Zealand, and Purdue also participated as observers.

Rachel Smith gave the keynote address, offering the perspective of "an outsider seeing how Christian artists are contributing to Chinese society." She addressed again the spiritual void after "Mao destroyed and Deng failed to rebuild." The result was an eventual *Jingshenkungxu* (spiritual void), especially among intellectuals and artists. She spoke then of a revival of all belief systems—traditional, domestic, and foreign—and the developing interconnectivity of history, society, and faith. She saw this as beginning with an art show in Singapore in 2006 by Xu Bing entitled "Believe" and then carried out in many other artists who worried about man "barreling into modernism without thinking of the dangers."

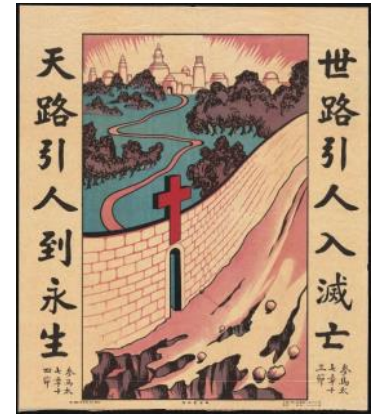
Dr. Smith quoted Liu Di, who identified three callings that Christian artists have adopted in addressing the current society in which they live: the priestly calling (example: self-portrait with nail-marked hands); the kingly calling (example: picturing the intrinsic goodness of creation) and the prophetic calling (example: Autumn Rain Filleth the Valley of Baca . . . referring to the joy in the midst of persecution expressed most recently by those in Chengdu). She

[Continued on page 15](#)

Spreading the Gospel with Christian Propaganda Posters

By Daryl Ireland

The Chinese Nationalists launched the Northern Expedition in 1926 to unseat the ruling Beiyang government. They swept north to Beijing behind a phalanx of pamphleteers. In Hankou, central China, the Religious Tract Society (RTS) watched jealously as the Nationalists, “using *our* means and improving upon them,” brought the revolution to pass.¹ Propaganda, the General Secretary of the RTS concluded, had established the new masters of the Middle Kingdom. The Nationalists had made language and imagery subservient to their purpose of winning the masses. Could not Christians adjust their tactics to inaugurate the Kingdom of God? The General Secretary issued a challenge to his fellow believers: “Do propaganda work for [your] Lord and Master.”²



Seemingly in response, between 1927 and 1951, millions of Christian prints entered the Chinese market. Copied on-to the cheapest paper and put on walls with starch and brooms, the large (109 cm x 76 cm), brightly colored posters briefly attracted attention before they crumbled in the rain or were covered by a more current notice. Yet, these “silent preachers” diligently portrayed a Christian vision of China’s national salvation. Hanging in tearooms, shop windows, at local temples, or unfurled for street preaching, Christian posters were innovations in mass-produced art. They were aesthetically appealing, symbolically rich, yet easily comprehended.

Protestant Christian propaganda intentionally aimed to topple China’s other ideological systems.³ Some images were explicitly produced to take the place of ancestral tablets or posters of the kitchen god. Others were crafted as substitute blessings to hang on doorposts.



Some images more directly challenged the political systems of the day, depicting Jesus orchestrating China’s transformation. In them, it is *his* modern army of evangelists that routs China’s enemies of foreign aggression, greediness, and superstition.



These Christian prints depicted an alternative vision for China’s salvation. The kingdoms of this world, whether Nationalist or Communist, would fade before the kingdom of Christ. Viewers now had to choose: Would they stake their lives and their hopes for the country on religious or political systems that could only end in destruction, or would they enthrone Jesus Christ as Lord, whom the posters promised would save the nation?

Posters of Urgency

Christian propaganda expressed urgency. Image after image invited people to grasp the crisis they and China faced. This was not a time to dither. There was not a moment to waste. Immediate action was required both for personal salvation and for the sake of the country. Time was running out. A giant cross with a clock superimposed over it ac-

centuated the point. Drawing on Chinese cultural associations between a clock and death, the poster explained that *now* was the moment of decision, for “you do not know what [tomorrow] will bring.”



Yet, the salvation of the individual was not the only thing at stake. In subtle but clear ways, the posters exposed China's desperate situation. A poster like “Sin the Enemy of Man” at first appears to address rather standard vices of an individual: alcohol, opium, prostitution, and gambling.



However, the man ensnared by these sins would have been recognizable not just as an individual but as a metaphor of the Chinese nation. For at the back, in a green shirt and holding a spear to the neck of the poor man, is a masked figure. Beginning in the 1920s, images inspired by Marxist-Leninist teachings circulated in China with such masked men.



They always conveyed a clear message: Westerners, especially missionaries, could present themselves as “civilized” men and women but, in reality, they were monsters. Foreigners were particularly sinister, so the propaganda went, because their treachery was hidden behind high-minded ideals. What appeared to be an offer of assistance to China through education, agricultural modernization, and medicine, was in fact a ploy—nothing more than a cover for cultural imperialism and economic exploitation.⁴ National salvation, this early communist propaganda suggested, began by recognizing the reality of foreign aggression hidden behind the mask and expelling the evil force from the country.

Chow Chih Chen, the Religious Tract Society artist who composed “Sin the Enemy of Man,” used this iconographic clue of a masked man to help viewers realize that his poster was not simply about the moral shortcomings of an individual. Chow turned the poster into a parable of China's national condition. He pictured the entire nation as chained and ensnared by what many had assumed to be harmless leisure activities—only various kinds of amusements. Yet in its epicurean reverie, China had rendered itself incapable of resisting the foreign powers that held a deadly spear to its neck. The poster warns, “The wage of sin is death.” Such a poster sent a clear message to those

who had eyes to see. National salvation did not lie in revolution, modernization, or military strength. Unless China escaped its self-induced dissolution, duplicitous foreign powers would make sure China ceased to exist. It was imperative that the nation turn to Jesus immediately. He alone had the power to break the bonds that held China captive.

Posters of Decision

Few things could communicate the necessity of changing direction better than posters with two different roads. It was a common visual tool in China for simplifying a person's choices. Cartoons, like the one that appeared in the newspaper *Shenbao*, put people at a crossroads. To the left is a road designated "enemy products." It is the road to perdition. To the right is a road named "national products," which points to "national survival." Everything hinged on a choice. Which road would people take?



Christian propaganda posters only slightly modified the scene. They seldom depicted people paused at a crossroads; rather, they showed individuals who mindlessly wander past the fork in the road, continuing in their selfsame direction. Christian posters proclaimed that, if the wanderers did not heed the street signs around them, the results would be catastrophic. "Look, You Blind!" shows that various types of Chinese people, who could represent the entire nation, follow the "wrong road." They are a half step away from going over a cliff and about to plummet to "eternal death," as the sign on the road warns. Yet, even at this last moment, it may not be too late. If people would just heed the road signs, things could turn out much differently. There is a different path, an ascending path, one that leads to an eternal reward. Sinners just need to make a decision to change course now and a crown of glory would be theirs.



Posters of Salvation

Many Christian posters warned that if China and its people did not decide to change directions, disaster awaited. Their feet were already on the edge of the abyss. Other posters, however, portrayed the critical moment as already past. The people of China did not need to make a choice, but rather needed to be rescued. Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism had failed to preserve the people in safety. Thus, stuck in a pit, the people waited for a savior.



In Protestant posters, salvation always came through the cross—a firm anchor to hold on to. The cross was the life preserver people could cling to in order to survive. Nothing else would suffice. Although others in China promoted various economic schemes and political solutions, Christian propaganda insisted that only the cross of Jesus could transform the nation and its people. Its auspicious red color promised not only a new beginning but immediate blessing. The ill fortunes of China could be reversed if it would just grab hold of the cross.



Christian propaganda posters provide a view of what Chinese Christians believed about their faith and how they tried to make it attractive to their compatriots. In hundreds of posters collected at ccposters.com, one can see how Chinese Christians vied for the soul of the nation. They believed Christ *could* transform China and depicted his marvelous acts of salvation in a variety of ways. From clocks and masks to roads and crosses, Christians deployed common propaganda symbols of the day to point people in a new direction: to national salvation through Jesus Christ.

¹ J. Sidney Helps, *The Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society for China, 1925-1926* (Hankou: Religious Tract Society, 1926), 13, emphasis added.

² *The Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society for China, 1926-1927* (Hankou: Religious Tract Society, 1927), 7.

³ *The Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society for China, 1931-1932* (Hankou: Religious Tract Society, 1932), 8.

⁴ *Dongfang zazhi* (July 1925).

⁵ Ka-che Yip, *Religion, Nationalism, and Chinese Students: The Anti-Christian Movement of 1922-1927* (Seattle: Washington University, 1980).

⁶ *Shenbao*, May 4, 1933, reprinted in Weipin Tsai, *Reading Shenbao: Nationalism, Consumerism and Individuality in China, 1919-1937* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 123.

Daryl R. Ireland is a Research Assistant Professor of Mission at Boston University and the Associate Director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission. He led a team of researchers in collecting, digitizing, transcribing, translating, and tagging hundreds of Chinese Christian posters which are now available online at ccposters.com. What he writes above is part of a larger work that will be published by Baylor University Press, tentatively titled: *Visualizing Salvation: Chinese Christian Propaganda Posters*.

All images of Chinese Christian posters are courtesy of Chinese Christian Posters.

Singing from Underground to the World

Listening to Music of Contemporary Chinese Christianity

By XU Song-Zan (徐颂赞)

The contemporary Chinese church was formed in the later stages of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. Many underground meetings and house churches emerged in southeastern and central China. As part of these flourishing fellowships, many localized hymns were created, then shared and passed along by traveling pastors and evangelists. Studying these hymns and spiritual songs can shed light on the little-known history of contemporary Chinese Christianity, especially the development of the underground house church network.



[Peter Chou Kee Liu via Flickr](#)

Hymns composed and sung during the age of persecution in 1960 and 1970

In 1966, Chairman Mao (毛泽东, 1893-1976) and “The Gang of Four” (四人帮) held supreme power in China. They initiated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution with the aim of purging remnants of imperial and feudal elements from Chinese society. This political cult viewed Christianity as the “Daring Vanguard of Western Imperialism.” Many churches were forcibly closed; priests were persecuted; and Bibles were confiscated and torn to pieces by Chairman Mao’s Red Guards (红卫兵). In the midst of this persecution, most Christians went underground and resorted to secret meetings.

These Christians faced the daunting question of how to lead a normal Christian life under the grave threat of this disastrous, national, political climate. It was a severe problem for those surviving in this era. Singing hymns helped to quiet their souls and offered a beacon of hope to other believers as well as to suffering, non-believers alike. When these Christians were sent to compulsory camps for “re-education through labor” (劳动改造), they walked in the countryside singing hymns that were engraved on their memories.

Among those precious songs that inspired many Christians were hymns written by Watchman Nee (倪柝声, 1903-1972). For example, the hymn “Olives That Have Known No Pressure” (你若不压橄榄成渣) spread widely and rapidly through the underground church.

Olives That Have Known No Pressure

From olives that have not been pressed
No oil will burst out;
If the grapes escape the winepress,
Cheering wine can never flow;
Only when Spikenard is crushed,
Does the fragrance fill the room.
Shall I then, Lord, flinch at suffering
Which Thy love for me would choose?

Chorus: Each blow I suffer
Is true gain to me.
In the place of what Thou takest
Thou dost give Thyself to me.

你若不压橄榄成渣，它就不能成油；
你若不炼哪哒成膏，它就不流芬芳；
你若不投葡萄入酢，它就不能变成酒；
主，我这人是否也要受你许可的创伤？

副歌：每次的打击，都是真利益；
如果你收去的东西，你以自己来代替。

Although Watchman Nee passed away in prison in 1972, his hymns and teachings continued to exert great influence over Chinese churches, especially during the time of the Local Church Movement.

Other spiritual songs that spread widely in the 1970s and 1980s also inspired Christians. The famous song entitled “The True Disciples” (真门徒) was shared and cherished in the underground churches in the Zhejiang area. This song was said to be written by an unknown Christian.

The True Disciples

Breaking through the barriers ahead,
Stepping over the mountains before us,
Stand high, advance bravely, and never look back.
There is only bitterness in the world,
There is only sweetness in the Lord.

There is only difficulty in the world,
There is only striving to keep up for us Christians.
What are the difficulties, hardships, and sorrows?
We have uprooted all of them with a hoe.
Sometimes we found no way out, but still feel worthwhile.

True disciples gave their lives long ago,
Hoeing strongly, begging without shame.
Wearing rags as formal dresses.
Standing against the wind, airing no complaints while being persecuted.
If only we could spread the Gospel around the world,
We are willing to be crucified upside down!

冲破前途的壁垒，踏平拦路的高山，
挺身昂首勇往直前，绝不回头看。
世界上只有苦中苦，在我们只有甜中甜，
人世内只有难上难，在我们只有赶上赶。

什么是艰难困苦、愁烦怨恨？在我们早已一律铲。
偶尔日暮途穷，也觉得实在上算。
真门徒命早捐，锄地有力，讨饭不丢脸。
衣彬褴褛当作礼服穿。
冻死迎风站，屈死无怨言，
只要把耶稣传遍，十架倒悬也心甘。

Undoubtedly, the composers and singers of these hymns had been cruelly treated by the local police. Many Christians were imprisoned several times. While in prison, they gradually made the prison into a “silent church” sustained by a deep love for one another and communion with God. Often, when someone sang a verse from a Christian hymn or just hummed the melody, others in different rooms would respond with the next verse. Although imprisoned, they were able to continue to lead a Christian life in particular ways: one was by singing hymns. Eventually, the state apparatus became a musical instrument of the Holy Spirit and these songs became the underground documentation or souvenirs of those hard times.

In 1976, Chairman Mao passed away and the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution ended. Many priests, pastors, and lay Christians regained partial freedom. Although the brutal persecution of Christians had ended, the prospect of freely practicing the Christian religion in China remained problematic; churches continued to develop primarily in the “cracks.”

The Canaan hymns and revival of the house church movement since the 1980s

Henan, also referred to as “China’s Galilee,” has enjoyed several revivals since the 1970s. During the hard years under Mao, Christians in Henan sang rural spiritual songs due to a lack of hymnals. After China’s Reform and Opening Up policy was implemented in 1978, Henan churches regained access to many hymnals from abroad. They began to sing formal hymns again, just as they did in the former Republican period. However, these traditional hymns seemed cold and incomprehensible to most adherents of the growing Henan churches as many were illiterate peasants and factory workers. While the traditional hymns were not a good fit for Henan Christians, God provided a way to encourage and nourish them and similar young Christians.

In late 1989, Lu Xiao-min (吕小敏), a female peasant who was born in Henan, joined a house church; her aunt having shared with her about Jesus. After dropping out of middle school due to poor health, she prayed and was healed. In 1990, at age 19, she began writing down verses the Lord gave her as she worked in the fields or during the night when she could not sleep. Her songs are now published as the *Canaan Hymns* and number more than 1800. They have been widely welcomed in the Henan church and throughout the entire Chinese church body. They have be-

come the most famous, local, Chinese hymns. These songs have not only helped the world to understand the revival occurring in China but have become a symbol of the Chinese church's resurgence and passion.

Five O'clock in the Morning of China (中国的早晨五点钟) (Canaan Hymns #268)

At five o'clock in the morning in China, there arises the sound of prayers.

Prayers bring revival and peace, bring harmony and victory.

At five o'clock in the morning in China, there arises the sound of prayers.

Everyone offers sincere love.

In each corner of the earth, we are brothers.

At five o'clock in the morning in China, there arises the sound of prayers.

Spreading across mountains and rivers, melting icy hearts and souls.

No more bondage, no more war.

Bringing about blessings, turning around destiny; this is a year of harvest.

中国的早晨五点钟，传来祈祷声，祈祷带来复兴和平，带来合一得胜。

中国的早晨五点钟，传来祈祷声，人人都献出真诚的爱，五湖四海皆弟兄。

中国的早晨五点钟，传来祈祷声。飞越了万水千山，融化冰冷的心灵。

再没有枷锁，再没有战争。带来了祝福，扭转了命运，今年是好收成。

In addition, many Chinese missionaries left their hometowns for other lands to deliver the gospel by singing the *Canaan Hymns*. From that great revival of the Central Plains in the 1980s, there have emerged large missionary teams in Henan and Anhui such as the *Fangcheng* Gospel Team and the China Gospel Fellowship, also known as the *Tanghe* Fellowship. Within such fellowships, the *Canaan Hymns* serve multiple roles, functioning as personal spiritual exercises, corporate praise, mission mobilization, and even identity expression—a way to communicate to nonbelievers that they are Christians.

The *Canaan Hymns* played a very special role in 2008 during the rescue operation after the devastating Wenchuan earthquake that killed tens of thousands. More than 500,000 Christian volunteers from over 300 house churches came to the front lines and offered help to the suddenly homeless families and newly orphaned children. As they passed out food, water, and clothing, many sang the *Canaan Hymns* to bring comfort, hope, and perhaps faith to a shocked and hurting people.

Singing the new songs of the Chinese younger generation

Every generation has its own collection of songs. With the Reform and Opening Up policy, Chinese people and their churches began to reopen to the world again. The Internet transformed the landscape in 1994 and the WTO brought more of the outside world into the homes of the average Chinese. By 2001, the whole of society had made a huge step forward and the younger generation of Christians sought more modern hymns in the popular style.

Among these younger Christian fellowships, *Streams of Praise (赞美之泉)*, along with praise and worship music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, were welcomed and widely adopted. These hymns replaced the songs sung during the days of persecution with catchy melodies and simple lyrics in a modern style.

In addition, many gospel singers, like Huang Qi-shan (黄绮珊), Zhao Jun-lu (赵珺露), Li Ying-feng (李映峰), and Lin Yue-xuan (林岳轩), have been featured on TV shows and mass media events. To survive under the stringent censorship rules that often severely restrict Christian activities, Christian singers have had to present the gospel message more implicitly in their performances. For example, Huang Qi-shan, a famous singer and now a committed Christian, sings many songs carrying spiritual messages on some popular TV shows, expressing deep spirituality but omitting ecclesiastical terminology.

In 2015, Huang Qi-shan sang *The Lighthouse (灯塔)* on Zhejiang Satellite TV. This song was about someone's search for eternal love. On the surface, this song was not about the gospel. However, it was clearly adapted from the beloved hymn *Amazing Grace*. The lyrics of *Amazing Grace* were carefully rewritten for *The Lighthouse*, with the names God, Lord, and Christ changed to "Eternal Love" (屹立不变的爱) and heaven to "the other shore" (彼岸), a term commonly used by Chinese people to describe an eternal world. Such popular songs sung by gospel singers share their spiritual journeys without using explicitly religious terms. In this unique way, the gospel, along with clear testimonies of Christian faith, has been successfully brought into the public sphere. Christian voices are reaching the hearts of the Chinese people.

Conclusion

Since the mid-1970s, the number of Christians in mainland China has increased remarkably. Because of the political situation in China, many Christians have expressed their faith and their gospel message in creative ways such as writing and singing hymns. Different hymns and spiritual songs have appeared in different periods as different generations have needed to write and sing their own songs.

With the reopening of society, many Chinese churches have moved from underground into the public sphere. Listening to their hymns provides insight into the hearts of these Chinese Christians during both the difficult days of the past and today's contemporary church.

Editor's Note: The author wishes to thank BJ Arthur and Ellie Li for their assistance with this article.

XU Song-Zan (徐颂赞) is an independent scholar and writer in China with a Master's degree in religious studies from National Chengchi University in Taiwan. He may be contacted at songzanxu@gmail.com.

"The Spirit in Fire and Wind"

Continued from page 7

Liu Dwent on to describe several other metaphors put forth by artists as they have spoken on how to live in this world: steward vs. sojourner; full citizen but looking to our future home; not nested in this world, but operating outside the gates (*Ai Weiwei*); and finally three aspects of the artistic calling (*Dao zi*)—nurturing the church, nurturing society, and seeking change.

The conference followed a format of a chair introducing a panel of three artists who each had thirty minutes to show and explain their paintings. There were a total of eight sessions following this format. On Friday night, participants attended an art exhibit open to the public at the West Lafayette library and each artist was given ten minutes to talk about his creations that were included in the show and answer any questions from the public. Saturday, there were twelve sessions following the panel format and, on Sunday, all attended a service at a near-by church. Sunday after lunch, two writers shared about their works of poetry and fiction before closing remarks.

The spiritual revival in China is very much alive in the artist villages where artists are freer to discuss and share ideas than in the public square. One commented that he would guess that about fifty percent of the artists in these communities are believers. This connectedness of art and faith is providing a refuge for artists in this increasingly difficult time. One noted that art is now only encouraged in the church. Yet, art is flourishing across all mediums and responding to social experience. For example, the ubiquitous traditional painting of the tiny temple set in the vast Karst Mountains of Guilin has been replaced with a large temple dominating a landscape of those mountains. The colorful figures of classical Beijing Opera are used to depict Bible scenes! Many of the wounds of the Cultural Revolution, June 4th, and the current persecutions are being alleviated by the opportunity to express them in sacred art.

¹ Lu Xiaomin was an untrained, young believer when she composed over 1600 hymns that are sung in both registered and unregistered churches.

² Fenggang Yang, "The Spirit in Fire and Wind: The Rise of Christian Artists in Contemporary China" in *The Spirit in Fire and Wind: Christian Art in Contemporary China*, Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University, 2019, p. 2.

³ *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* by Robert Wuthnow, Amazon Books review, https://www.amazon.com/Creative-Spirituality-Artist-Robert-Wuthnow/dp/0520225007/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=.

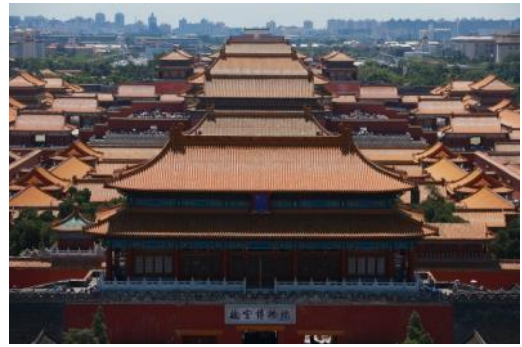
BJ Arthur (pseudonym) has lived in China for many years and was in Beijing in June 1989.

Images courtesy of "The Spirit in Fire and Wind: Christian Art in Contemporary China," Purdue University.

When Will *Messiah* Return . . . to Beijing?

By BJ Arthur

“A more open China awaits the 2000 Games” was the slogan used for the PRC’s failed attempt to host the Summer Olympics that year. A different slogan was adopted in their successful bid for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. The underlying reality, however, was that the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics did manifest more cultural openness than in the years that followed. One of the more amazing manifestations of that openness was the performance of Handel’s *Messiah* in 2001. The chosen venue was not only in Beijing. It was actually inside one of China’s greatest cultural symbols—the Forbidden City.



[leoric_c](#) from [Pixabay](#)

When Christian conductor Timothy Su Wenxing (苏文星) took the podium in the Forbidden City to conduct *Messiah*, he displayed a public manifestation of faith seldom seen in the People’s Republic of China. Who was this bold young musician?

Su was born into a poor Miao family in the remote Suinan county of Hunan. When he was five, Su’s musical talent was discovered by a purged musician, who had been sent back to live in his village in the countryside. When that musician was allowed to return to Hunan’s capital city, he arranged for Su to study at the College of Fine Arts of Hunan Normal University. Su later studied in the music department of the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing. There he was befriended by foreign Christians and was baptized in the faith in 1996.¹ With the help of both the Chinese music community and Chinese and foreign Christians, Su was able to arrange for the 2001 performance of *Messiah*, only the second performance since the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949—and the first time it was performed in Chinese in China.²

A review in “Sina Entertainment” speaks of that first *Messiah* performance in Beijing by Conductor Su.

Su Wenxing has invested a lot of enthusiasm in this work. For the first time last year, he initiated and directed the singing of this world famous song in Chinese. At the end of this year, on the evenings of December 7th and 8th, the Zhongshan Concert Hall was full, and the atmosphere was warm . . . After the closing ceremony, the applause lasted for ten minutes . . . A staff member of the theater said that this scene is too rare. The *Messiah* is incredible . . . for the climax of the world-famous *Hallelujah* chorus the audience stood up and sang softly. This scene was [very] impressive. The applause echoed in every corner of the theater, and with every curtain call of Conductor Su, the applause suddenly exploded. The flowers on the stage piled up and Su Wenxing dedicated the kind of audience participation as exciting and memorable . . . After the show ended, flowers to the band, the choir and the soloists. The audience continued their thunderous applause. Someone made a cry and someone gave a friendly whistle. This kind of scene of enjoying a concert is really rare . . . For a young conductor, people gave the highest praise—Changming’s applause . . . That night, the temperature in Beijing was -10°, which formed a great contrast with the warm atmosphere in the concert hall. The outside was cold and the passersby rare. However, inside the audience and the actors singing together warmed the heart. Some viewers saw it last year and watched it again this year. They said that since they saw it last year, *Messiah* has become a concert they must watch every year before the New Year, and said that they will come again next year.³

Su was then able to conduct *Messiah* in Beijing in the following two years and also in Guangzhou, Qingdao, Wenzhou, and Changsha.

As his renown burgeoned, Su helped establish the Canaan Music School to train worship leaders for unregistered churches, a project that continued for many years. In October 2005, Singaporean author and business executive, Chan Kei Thong, arranged for Su and Rev. Zhang Boli to lead a week of evangelistic meetings in Singapore. Su directed the Canaan Music School choir and more than a thousand people believed in the Lord during those meetings.

As the era of relative openness in China waned after the Beijing Olympics, Su’s public ministry also receded. However, he recently returned to the headlines through a “gift to the 70th anniversary of the founding of New China.”⁴

On the evening of June 23, a large-scale symphony concert with the theme of celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of New China was held at the Changsha Concert Hall. The special conductor of this concert is a well-known Chinese conductor, Su Wenxing.⁵

In that same article, Conductor Su shared some of his goals. “I went to the United States in 2003. Since 2007, I have

been working closely with my hometown. I have already cooperated with the Changsha Symphony Orchestra (formerly the Hunan Symphony Orchestra) for a number of large-scale concerts and participated in many of the music season's planned performances.”⁶ Su added that he has been working to promote cooperation between foreign artists and local symphony orchestras, and that he also “hopes to see more Hunan-based artists ‘going out’ and more internationally renowned artists ‘walking in,’ so that the regional art scene can be enriched.”

What are the chances of another public performance of Handel’s *Messiah* in China in the near future? In 2017, the *Economist* printed an article entitled: *In China, singing Handel’s “Messiah” is forbidden in public. So is performing any religious music outside places of worship.*⁷

The lead paragraph addresses the hope of future performances of such music.

The words of the chorus die away: “*Quan Zhongguo de ernu yongyuan xiang taiping*” (China’s children will always wish for peace). The members of the orchestra pack up their instruments—cello and *dizi* (Chinese flute), *yangqin* (dulcimer) and double bass, *suona* (reed horn) and *xiaobo* (cymbals). Beijing’s International Festival Chorus (IFC), a 60-strong group of Chinese and expatriate amateurs, finishes its final performance, a recording of a cantata by Xian Xinghai who studied in Paris in the 1920s, and was one of the first Chinese composers to be influenced by European classical music. The chorus has now disbanded. Xi Jinping, the president, has scored one more, small, Pyrrhic victory over Western cultural influence.⁸

This is certainly no longer the China of 2002. When will *Messiah* next be performed in Beijing or anywhere in China? Will it be before the New Year this year, or next year, or in five years, ten years? Only God knows. He’s the one actually in charge.

¹ Wanwei Reader Network, Rainbow’s Covenant; submitted by Yang Aicheng, June 6, 2005 at <http://www1.bbsland.com/rainbow/messages/340625.html>

² On May 18, 1928, Handel’s *Messiah* was first performed in China by Yenching University students under the direction of Prof. Bliss Wiant. It was thereafter performed annually in Beijing during the Christmas season until 1951. *Messiah* was not performed publicly in China again until 1998 in the city of Tianjin. Ruan, Chunli, “The Spread and Influence of Oratorio *Messiah* by Handel in China,” June, 2017 at <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icesame-17/25877427>

³ *Sina*, December 10, 2002 at <http://ent.sina.com.cn>

⁴ 长沙启动新一年戏曲进校园活动 庆祝新中国成立70周年, Changsha Launches New Year’s Drama into Campus Activities Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of New China, 苏文星 长沙 2019年6月23日 www. Changsha.cn, June 23, 2019. <https://news.changsha.cn>xctt>html>20190623> accessed November 23, 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The *Economist*, “In China, singing Handel’s *Messiah* is forbidden in public,” August 24, 2017 at www.economist.com/china/2017/08/24/in-china-singing-handels-messiah-is-forbidden-in-public

⁸ Ibid.

B J Arthur (pseudonym) has lived in China for many years and was in Beijing in June 1989.

Book Review

In Drawing Plain People, He Draws the Face of God

Reviewed by Ah Qian

《灵魂与美感》(*Soul and Beauty*) by 范学德 (Fan Xuede). In Chinese only. 广西师范大学出版社; 1 edition (August 1, 2017). ISBN-10: 7549578923, ISBN-13: 978-7549578924, paperback, US\$23.68. Available on [Amazon](#).



I finally finished Brother Fan Xuede's 400,000-word work, *Soul and Beauty*. After reading it, here is my greatest takeaway: **the book talks about oil paintings but shares about life.**

The book is a record of a conversation between Brother Fan and Teacher Yang Feiyun, head of the Chinese Academy of Oil Painting. Brother Fan is the interviewer, and Teacher Yang is the speaker, discussing his own understanding of life experiences and oil painting.

Someone who does not run in art circles (me, for example) may not be familiar with Teacher Yang. But his credentials are impressive:

- In 1978, at age 24, he was admitted to the oil painting school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. This was its first time recruiting after the ten years of the Cultural Revolution.
- In 1986, he was sent by the Central Academy of Fine Arts to the African country of Djibouti to do a portrait of its president.
- In 2007, the Chinese Academy of Oil Painting was officially founded, and he was named as its president.
- From early 2008 onwards, he served two consecutive terms as a representative to the National People's Congress.
- In 2012, his work *Girl before Still Life* was successfully auctioned for 34.5 million yuan at the Beijing Poly Spring Auction.

Over the past couple of decades, Teacher Yang has had numerous exhibits and interviews and completed more paintings. Author Bei Cun is quoted as saying: "If China has any artist who truly enters deeply into the spirit (not just technique) of Western art, Yang Feiyun is without question one such artist."

Brother Fan, however, thinks that Teacher Yang is not just a famous artist:

but [is] at the same time an educator, an organizer and a leader of contemporary Chinese oil painting artists, as well as one of the most outstanding curators; in addition, he is an individual who has and continues to seek a profound understanding of oil art.

Even though I don't know much about oil painting, I find this book interesting because of the rich life and deep thought contained within. Let me give an example. When Teacher Yang spoke about the era's problem, he thought that there were three problems we could never solve. The first is humanity's dual sin problem—hidden sin and presumptuous sin, the second is human pain and trouble, the third is death.

This made me think of the famous book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. The author Yuval Harari believed that when humans overcame the problems of plague, famine, and war, the new problems would be immortality, happiness, and man's acquiring the "nature of gods."

There are similarities between the problems, but the solutions are utterly different. Harari believes that technology is the answer, whereas Teacher Yang returns to faith and expresses faith through art. In his view of art, we do not need to "become" humans with a godly nature—we are originally created by God and already bear his image. With paint brushes blessed by the Holy Spirit, Teacher Yang "seeks and displays the godly nature in humanity."

When Teacher Yang was young, he painted many beautiful girls. One of the paintings, *Northern Girl* (also on the cover of this book), is his painting of his wife, Pengpeng. Different from Zhao Lei's¹ *Southern Girl*, Pengpeng is neither weak nor sorrowful; rather, dressed in traditional Chinese red, she gives off a sense of simplicity, resolve, and healthiness.

As Yang advances in years and experience, this kind of "beautiful" image appears less and less in his paintings. He would rather run to the villages and paint plain fathers and village folk. In the eyes of many, these bodies are not particularly beautiful, but in his eyes, they have a "beauty of the soul."

What is beauty? Teacher Yang says: “The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—these are in essence the entirety of beauty. Even in one so humble that all they have is a kind heart, it is still beautiful. Beauty encompasses much.”

I was inspired by this perspective. In this age, people are commonly infatuated with beautiful bodies, various “pretty boys,” “good-looks club,” and numerous variations. It’s just as Zhao Zhao sings in “When You Are Old”:

How many people once loved you in your hours of youth and happiness,
Adored your beauty, sincerely or not;
Only one person still loves your pious soul
Loves the wrinkles on your aged face.

There will be a day when we all grow old. On that day, what a great blessing it will be, what true eternal beauty, if under the face of wrinkles dwells a noble and pious soul.

Brother Fan wrote out a chronology for Teacher Yang. What moved me was that when Teacher Yang was young, he had his name on only a few paintings a year; but when he was in his fifties and sixties, he had over ten paintings every year. Time has not weakened him but has ripened his creativity.

Brother Fan himself is this way as well. In 2017, he wrote a web-published article every day. As a web-writer, I know how difficult this is. From my point of view, it is only as he ages, that he begins to step into the golden age of creativity. The broader his experiences the sharper his pen.

This is the life I envy. I admit that my own experience is limited and so my creativity is limited. But I hope that when I reach Brother Fan’s age, I will have been to as many places as he has and will have connected with many ancient and modern people inside and outside of China, broadening the borders of my soul.

Regarding how to paint oil paintings, Teacher Yang repeatedly stresses two main points: **look at the masters and sketch in the villages**.

“**Looking at the masters**” means interacting often with the best works from the history of oil painting—observing them and copying the originals. You may not reach the same level as the masters, but you need a goal in your own heart.

As for Teacher Yang himself, he was greatly influenced by people such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Millet. He says:

I have seen many young painters who draw very well and have a good sense of drawing. However, they do not have the masters in their hearts, so their drawings are judged by themselves or judged by people around them. This does not work. The classics demand that we converse with them and interact with them continually throughout our whole lives.

I think it is the same with writing. When Brother Fan and I talked over the phone, he often urged me to read Augustine’s *Confessions*. On his own Internet platform, he often recommends reading various classics, such as Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, Chesterton’s *Heretics*, and so on.

Those with the masters in their heart live with confidence. When I think of my own writing, I often pay too much attention to other people’s judgments. This is because, to a certain extent, I do not have a standard for good essays in my heart. Only when I have firm ideas of “what is beautiful, what is good,” will I be able to go far on the road of creativity.

“**Sketching in villages**” means walking out of the ivory tower, going to the Chinese villages and drawing nature, drawing men and women in the village. Drawing still life—even drawing from photos—cannot compare at all with this.

Teacher Yang himself feels that when he goes to villages to draw, he is infused with energy. In 2007, when he went to Gannan to sketch and draw, he drew for over 40 days and completed a piece of work almost every day. He has especially deep feelings for this land and the people who live there.

Brother Fan also has a journey of “sketching.” He said that in the past year, his most popular articles were the weekly “witnesses” series, which describe brothers and sisters he has interacted with—people who have impacted his life. It is as if I can see how these people contributed strength to Fan as he wrote passionately about them.

He also really likes writing about nature. From a falling leaf, a blade of grass, to the setting sun on the tip of a fawn’s tail—he sees it all and praises God’s amazing creation.

In contrast, I write too narrowly. Those who often read *Fig Listening to Music* know that I mostly write about my wife and child, and then also about some music, books, and movies. In 2018, I need to purpose to go out often—to write about the scenery, to write about people. I want to encounter God in a broader life.

People often ask: “Why don’t I feel God?” This is a contradictory question, because God *is everywhere*, and we should be able to feel him everywhere. One possible answer is that our sight is too narrow, limiting our understanding of God.

*He was already working, but I thought he was unmoved;
He gazes passionately at me, but I thought he turned his face away;
He is beside me, but I thought he quickly passed me by.*

I am happy to begin the year 2018 with *Soul and Beauty*. I hope that in the coming 360 days, I will hold every day precious, and encounter more good books and remarkable people. *More importantly, I desire to meet God through these books and people*—He was nailed to the cross, resurrected from the dead, and displays his godly nature in humanity. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).

¹Translator’s note: Zhao Lei is a Chinese folk singer and musician. He released his first record in 2011, which included the popular song *The Southern Girl* with the following lines: “What’s in her graceful eyes? Thoughts of sadness. The South’s rainy winter isn’t as cold as in the north; There she doesn’t need big clothes to cover her water-like face...See <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/%E5%8D%97%E6%96%B9%E5%A7%91%E5%A8%98-southern-girl.html>, accessed on 11/23/19

“他画朴实的人，画出神的样子” (“*In Drawing Plain People, He Draws the Face of God*” by 阿浅 (Ah Qian) was originally published on January 3, 2018 at Sohu.com, http://www.sohu.com/a/214647965_661949. Translated, edited, and reposted with permission.

See original blog for images of Fan Xuede’s work that were included from Fan Xuede’s Sina Blog and WeChat official account.

Ah Qian (pseudonym), a Christian blogger living in Beijing.

Resource Corner

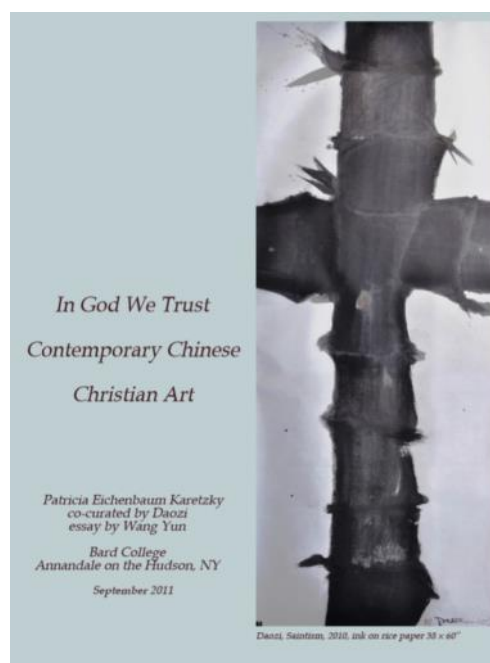
In God We Trust: Contemporary Chinese Christian Art ***A Brochure***

This brochure is from an art exhibit held at Bard College, Annandale on the Hudson, NY in September 2011.

The exhibit was co-curated by Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky and Dazi.

The brochure contains an introduction to Chinese Christian art, including biographies of artists and reproductions of their work, and an essay on the work of Cao Yuanming by Wang Yun.

It is available for [download on the ChinaSource website](#) by permission of the author.



Ying De, Hossanah, 2010, oils on canvas, triptych, 90 x 60" , as reproduced in *In God We Trust*.

ChinaSource Publications

ChinaSource Blog

A platform where China ministry practitioners and experienced China-watchers offer timely analysis and insight on current issues relating to the church in China. Posts feature voices from those inside and outside China.

ZGBriefs

For those who want and need to keep up on what is happening in China, we monitor more than 50 different news sources and curate the most relevant and interesting stories out of China each week.

ChinaSource Quarterly

Providing strategic analysis of the issues affecting the church and Christian ministry in China, the Quarterly encourages proactive thinking and the development of effective approaches to Christian service.

Newsletter: The Lantern

Our monthly newsletter keeps you abreast of how ChinaSource is responding to opportunities to serve with the church in China and of related items for prayer. To subscribe to any or all of our publications, visit www.chinasource.org.

ChinaSource Online Courses

Under the ChinaSource Institute, we offer online modules and on-site training on a wide variety of cross-cultural and orientation topics. Content is focused on the China context and geared to those involved in Christian ministry.

- ***Serving Well in China*** - Are you preparing to serve in China, or maybe you're already there? Are you working with Chinese students in your home country? This course will help you serve well where you are.
- ***The Church in China Today*** - The religious climate in China, especially for Christians, may be messy but it's not beyond understanding. This course offers a comprehensive overview, ranging from a historical understanding, to the struggles it endures in present day, to common misconceptions about the state of the church.

For more information, visit www.chinasource.org/institute/training-courses

ZGBriefs

Relevant news on China and
the issues that impact its church



[www.chinasource.org/
resource-library/zgbriefs](http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/zgbriefs)

Subscribe Now

華源協作
CHINASOURCE



info@chinasource.org



www.chinasource.org



[chinasource.org](https://www.facebook.com/chinasource.org)



[@ChinaSourceOrg](https://twitter.com/ChinaSourceOrg) [@ZG_Briefs](https://twitter.com/ZG_Briefs)