

## CHAPTER TWO

THE CROSS FACES THE LOUDSPEAKERS: A VILLAGE  
CHURCH PERSEVERES UNDER STATE POWER

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On a sunny Sunday in winter 2002, hundreds of villagers congregated at a humble church well blended into the surrounding mud-colored houses. Atop the entrance gate stood a tall cross in bright red. Peaceful hymn singing flowed through the windows and filled the air. It was another ordinary Sunday in this remote village in the northwestern Province of Gansu. Shortly after ten o'clock, Elder Liu stood up, walked to the pulpit on the raised platform, and began preaching. His voice was soft and clear in the quiet sanctuary.

Suddenly, a shrill sound pervaded the church. It came from the loudspeakers on top of the Village Committee Office across the street. The secretary of the village branch of the Chinese Communist Party was making announcements to the whole village: A command had come down from the town government—each household must provide two laborers to plant trees on the nearby Guatai Mountain; an oil seller would be coming in the afternoon and anyone who wanted to buy should come to the Village Committee Office. The announcements were repeated several times. Following a brief pause for a minute or so, the loudspeakers began to broadcast earsplitting Qinqiang, the local-style opera known for its high-pitch singing in the local dialect.

The broadcasting drowned out Elder Liu's preaching. However, the soft-spoken preacher continued without a pause, and no congregant appeared to be distracted or disturbed. About half an hour later, when the sermon concluded, the Qinqiang opera also stopped. Then the congregation started singing praises to God joyfully and wholeheartedly.

After the service, we asked people about the intrusive broadcasting. Uncle Fu, a long-time church member, responded with a smile. "We've become used to it. It's been like this for years. Actually, it's become better now than it was a couple of years ago when the

*Laoshuji* was still around.” *Laoshuji* means the ‘old secretary’ of the Wuzhuang branch of the Chinese Communist Party.

Actually, Wuzhuang Christians have had to get used to the intruding sounds of the loudspeakers, which signify the state power that pervades every corner of the country, even down to this faraway village in remote Gansu Province. Indeed, these village Christians feel genuinely grateful for the improved political condition nowadays. Having lived through the more difficult years of attempted eradication and suppression, they have learned to live in peace without giving up their faith. This chapter describes how the Wuzhuang Christian Church has persevered despite state restrictions and intrusions, just like the red, tall cross atop the church that silently yet sturdily faces the loudspeakers on the roof of the Village Committee Office. The congregation has managed to survive as a government-approved, open church since 1982.

#### *A Brief History of the Wuzhuang Christian Church*

Wuzhuang is a remote village in the southeast corner of Gansu bordering Shaanxi Province.<sup>1</sup> From Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu, it takes more than five hours by train to reach the city of Tianshui, and one more hour to get to the village by local train or two more hours by bus through the spiraling mountain roads. It takes about 18 hours by train from Tianshui to Beijing.

However, Wuzhuang is located at the birthplace of Chinese civilization. The village is in the Wei River valley at the foot of Guatai Mountain. Guatai is believed to be the very place where Fuxi, a legendary forefather of the Chinese people, first conceived the eight diagrams (*ba gua*) of yin and yang, which became the foundation of *Yijing* (*I-Ching*) and of many schools of thought. On the top of Guatai Mountain, a Fuxi temple has existed for an innumerable number of years. Fuxi worship has been a folk tradition of the surrounding villages for countless generations.

On the east side of Guatai Mountain, looking down at Wuzhuang, people find that the most eye-catching sign is the tall cross in bright red atop the Christian church near the center of the village. To its

<sup>1</sup> Wuzhuang is a pseudonym, meaning the ‘Wu Village,’ where more than eighty percent of its residents share the Wu surname. Pseudonyms are used for all Wuzhuang residents.



left is the Village Committee Office compound, followed by the Wuzhuang Elementary School. Scattered around these buildings are over five hundred houses spreading out in the valley.

Christianity was first brought to the Tianshui area by British missionaries of the China Inland Mission at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, the Wuzhuang Christian Church was formed by over thirty converts. They built their first chapel two years later. By 1920, its membership had grown to nearly 200, and they built a brick building with a large sanctuary. Meanwhile, they helped to spread Christianity to the surrounding villages. By 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded by the Chinese Communist Party, over 1,100 Christians worshipped at eleven village churches in the valley, including more than 200 believers in Wuzhuang.

In the 1950s and 1960s, waves of political campaigns washed over Wuzhuang again and again. In 1958, the church buildings were confiscated and occupied by the village government as its office and as the elementary school. While many Christians stopped worship activities, some believers continued to gather at homes discreetly. In 1962, as the political climate became less tense, about 40 members came together and began Sunday worship services at the then elementary school. The building was used by the school on weekdays and by the church on Sundays. Beginning in spring 1964, however, all religious activities were banned in the whole of Tianshui Prefecture, as well as in many other parts of the country. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), several Wuzhuang Christian leaders were persecuted as 'anti-revolutionaries' (*fan geming*), 'landlords' (*dizhu*), or 'wealthy peasants' (*funong*). Several people were jailed, including Deacon Wu Ende, who was in prison from 1966 to 1973.

In the 1970s, Wuzhuang Christians clandestinely gathered at homes in the night. In summer 1975, two young men got baptized in the Wei River behind the village, the first baptisms in two decades. Many more people followed in their footsteps in the next few years. After secretly celebrating Christmas in 1978, they began Sunday worship services in daytime, semi-openly, although still illegally. By 1980, the number of Christians in Wuzhuang reached 300. In 1982, Wuzhuang Christians succeeded in getting back one of three church properties, the one that had been used as the Village Committee Office.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A new Village Committee Office compound was then erected across from the church; on top of its roof, four loudspeakers were installed.

Wuzhuang Christianity began a period of rapid growth. By 2000, there were at least a thousand Christians in Wuzhuang, about a third of the total village population of 3,129.

The post-1949 history of Christianity in Wuzhuang is quite common in the People's Republic of China. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party regarded foreign missionaries as part of Western imperialism and drove them out. Chinese Protestants were coerced to participate in the so-called Three-Self (self-administration, self-support, and self-propagation) Patriotic Movement. The goal of this movement was to cut ties completely with Christian organizations in the West. Noncompliant leaders were put into jails or labor camps. Beginning in 1957, denominational or sectarian systems were also abolished, and all Protestants had to attend union services under the leadership of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Committee. The number of worshippers dropped. Many churches were subsequently closed. When the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, all religions were banned, and eradication measures were imposed. Secretly keeping a Bible was a crime. The remaining believers had to make public renunciations or were sent to jails or labor camps. However, some Christians who stopped attending the union services began to meet underground in the late 1950s. In the 1970s, while staying underground, Christianity began reviving in many parts of the country, especially in rural areas (Hunter and Chan 1993; Chao and Chong 1997; Leung 1999; Lambert 1999; Aikman 2003).

Under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set a new course to modernize China. It launched 'economic reforms and opening-up' policies at the end of year 1978. In order to rally the people for the central task of economic development, the pragmatic leadership began to loosen control over various aspects of social life, including religious life. A Protestant church in Ningbo City, Zhejiang Province, first reopened for religious services on 8 April 1979. Following this, churches began to re-open throughout the country. The national TSPM Committee was revitalized in 1980. Since then, the national and local TSPM committees have facilitated the reopening of many churches. In 1982, the TSPM committee of the Beidao District of the Tianshui Prefecture was established. In the same year, it helped the Wuzhuang Church to get back one of its properties. Since then, Wuzhuang Church has been an open church under the supervision of the TSPM Committee of Beidao District

of Tianshui Prefecture. Nationwide, many Christians have refused to join the TSPM organization because they regard it as a means of government control. In the Tianshui area, however, as far as we know, underground Christians have not been many, or they were not as active and visible as in some other parts of the country.

*The Village Church in the Reform Era*

In 1982, religious toleration was formally reinstated in a new edict of the CCP—"The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Affairs during the Socialist Period of Our Country"—which has become known as 'Document No. 19.' This central document has served as the basis for the religious policy since then. 'Document No. 19' acknowledges that religion will exist for a long time before eventually withering away and that religious believers should be rallied for the central task of economic construction. It states that freedom of religious belief should be guaranteed as long as the believers love the country, support CCP rule, and observe the socialist laws. Since 1982, CCP and the government have issued a number of circulars and installed various formal ordinances and administrative orders (Potter 2003). However, the basic policy remains the same—religious tolerance with restrictions.

The authorities try to control religion by allowing only five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism); by conferring legal status only to those churches, temples, and mosques under the supervision of government-sanctioned 'patriotic' religious organizations; and by certifying clergy. For Protestant Christians, the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the China Christian Council, whose personnel are shared, are the only legally recognized Protestant organizations. Any evangelist who is not accepted by the TSPM committee and certified by the government's Religious Affairs Bureau should not conduct religious services or organize religious activities. Moreover, no propagation of religion outside of approved religious premises is allowed. Violators of these regulations may face punishments from warnings and fines to prison terms.

Government-approved churches have to operate within the limits imposed by the government in exchange for being able to carry out open religious services. Many evangelical Christians do not accept the restriction on evangelism within the walls of the church and do

not want to be supervised by the TSPM committee, whose top leaders have been regarded as holding liberal theological positions (Chao and Chong 1997). These Christians have mostly stayed underground in spite of risking periodic raids and crackdowns by the RAB and police. Meanwhile, other Christians find it beneficial to stay aboveground in spite of the restrictions. They find they can still manage to hold most religious services satisfactorily. Moreover, without much proselytizing effort beyond the religious premises, it seems that as long as the church doors remain open, many people have found their own way to the church. In fact, some seekers have come to the church, knocked at the closed doors, and demanded to be taught about the faith (Lambert 1999: 156; Yang *forthcoming*). This is happening in part because while public demand for religion has been increasingly awakened during the market transition process, religious organizations have been in short supply (Yang 2004). The Wuzhuang Church has remained aboveground and has grown despite regulatory restrictions and state intrusions. It has dealt with regulations and intrusions tacitly and creatively.

*Resorting to State Regulation and Rhetoric to Protect Church Interests*

Reform-era changes in inland provinces have lagged behind coastal provinces. In the sphere of religious affairs, Gansu, like many inland provinces, has been late in implementing the new policy of limited tolerance toward religion. In the coastal provinces, churches began to reopen in 1979. However, the Wuzhuang Church could not get back any of the church buildings until three years later. After the CCP circulated 'Document No. 19' in 1982, Wuzhuang Christians took the circular to the local government bureaus and petitioned to get the buildings back. Only after showing this CCP document did the local government officials consent. In the process, the Beidao District TSPM Committee mediated between the government bureaus and Wuzhuang Christians, eventually reaching a compromise—returning one of the three church properties.

In the process of petitioning to reopen the church, besides leveraging with 'Document No. 19,' Wuzhuang Christians had to offer persuasive justifications pleasing to the authorities. Above all, they had to acknowledge repeatedly the legitimate authority of the Chinese Communist Party. In their oral and written presentations, church leaders had to praise the greatness of the past and present CCP leadership, the glory of the CCP history, and the correctness of the

current CCP policies. Moreover, they have had to recite the officially imposed slogan “love our country, love our religion” (*ai guo ai jiao*), with ‘love our country’ preceding ‘love our religion.’ Underground Christians reject this official slogan as idolizing the state and regard TSMP church leaders as having betrayed the Lord Christ who should be the ultimate authority. In reality, many TSMP leaders do not feel comfortable singing such praises to the CCP and the state. Several leaders of the Wuzhuang Church expressed this discomfort. For the TSPM church leaders, repeating the slogan “love our country, love our religion” was like chanting a political mantra, which was for the simple purpose of avoiding political troubles while getting things going.

Wuzhuang Christians celebrated the return and reopening of the church with great joy. After 18 years (1964–1982) of prohibition and persecution, they rejoiced about a spiritual triumph given by God. In remarking on this victory, Wuzhuang Christians liked to recite these biblical verses: “God’s thoughts are higher than man’s thoughts, and His ways higher than man’s ways” (Isaiah 55:9); “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will” (Proverbs 21:2). They have shown respect to the state power, but put their faith in the almighty God.

#### *Adopting the Discourse of Anti-Imperialism*

Wuzhuang Christians do not find all patriotic rhetoric difficult to say. Besides submission to the CCP and the state, patriotism in the official discourse also includes anti-imperialism. Wuzhuang Christians have had little difficulty about this. In petitioning for the return of their church buildings, the leaders handed to the authorities a copy of the church history as told by Elder Wu Shengrong, in which were recorded patriotic stories of the Wuzhuang Church in the 1920s.

It was during the time after the sanctuary was completed in June of 1920, and before my father Wu Buyi [one of four founders of the church] passed away. A British missionary, Li Chunlei [the missionary’s Chinese name], offered a donation of 200 *liang* of silver, and asked us to give the deed to the China Inland Mission. At that time, our Elder Wu Buyi realized that it was the imperialists’ trick to control our church. We firmly refused it, so that their planned plot failed. That was probably the first case of all the churches [in this area] in which a foreign swindle effort was of no avail. Li Chunlei was shocked and ashamed, saying that it was the first time he was in this kind of situation since he came to China.



The description of this incident was well liked by the TSMP and CCP authorities, for it was later included in the official publications, *History of Christianity in Tianshui* and *History of Christianity in Gansu Province*, as an example of Chinese believers' patriotism in their struggles against Western missionaries.

That incident was the precursor of the Christian Independence Movement (*jidujiao zili yundong*), which spread throughout China in the second quarter of the twentieth century. The Wuzhuang Church History continues:

In the year 1927, when the National Revolutionary Movement was at its climax, Brother Tong Lin-ge of Tianshui initiated the independence movement of the Chinese churches from the control of Western missionaries. He called Chinese believers to establish Chinese indigenous churches with four measures: Self-governing, self-supporting, self-evangelizing, and self-standing (*zili*, independence). So our village church became the 'Independent Christian Church of China' and formally cut off all ties with foreign missionaries. The imperialists' control of our church passed into history. At that time, Elder Wu Jietian went to Tianshui City and spent 40 *liang* of silver to have a gilt board made, on which was inscribed "Independent Christian Church of China," with signatures of the four founders—Wu Buyi, Wu Rongyi, Wu Farong, and Wu Jizhi. We held a grand ceremony, hanging up the gilt board and celebrating this magnificent feat. . . . In order to make the church sustainable on its own, Elder Wu Buyi also selected three young people—Wu Jietian, Wu Yongfu, and Wu Zhaofan—as Elders. They replaced the aged Elders to take care of this house of God.

The historical development of the Wuzhuang church is doubtlessly factual. It shows that Wuzhuang Christians have been very conscious of what the authorities like to hear, and have adopted the discourse of anti-imperialism to highlight their patriotic history. These are assets they have fully exploited to secure peace with the authorities.

In China today, the authorities treat Protestant and Catholic Christians with greater suspicion than other religious believers in regard to their political loyalty. Christians are still referred to as believers of a 'foreign religion.' After the Tiananmen Square democracy movement in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet regime in the early 1990s, the Chinese communist authorities adopted strict measures against foreign hostile forces that seek to 'peacefully subvert the socialist system.' The significant role of the Catholic Church in the collapse of communist Poland has been frequently cited by Chinese officials in expressing their concern about Christians becoming a political force threatening to the regime. In 1991, the CCP circulated *Document*



No. 6—“A Further Notice to Better Deal with Religious Affairs.” It declares that China faces two kinds of political threats related to religion. First, “overseas enemy forces have always been using religion as an important tool for their strategic goal of ‘peaceful subversion,’ infiltrating China and causing damage to our country.” Second, “the separatists are also making use of religion, attacking the leadership of the Party and the socialist system, threatening the unity of the country and harmony among the ethnic groups.” While Tibetan Buddhism and Uygur Islam are the references for the second threat, Protestantism and Catholicism are the focus of the first threat. Anti-infiltration has become a major concern of the authorities in regard to Christianity. Within this social and political context, to ensure continuous legal existence, Christian leaders at the government-approved churches must repeatedly reiterate their patriotism and political loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party.

*“Giving to Caesar What Is Caesar’s”*

Adopting the patriotic discourse is not a temporary tactic on the part of Christians, but a permanent adjustment under CCP rule. Besides the anti-imperialist history, Wuzhuang Christians also stress that they do love the Chinese nation and are good citizens. They would quote what Jesus said, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). An often preached message to the congregation is “all those who believe in the Lord are obedient to the laws and regulations.” The current leader Elder Liu Guizhu said:

The authorities often hold meetings to emphasize the importance of ‘loving our country and loving our religion.’ But as I see it, these meetings are nothing but formality and superficiality. In fact, if a person really believes in the Lord, knows God, and loves God, naturally he wouldn’t do anything unlawful.

Uncle Fu, the longtime member, spoke in agreement:

No matter whether it’s turning in the public grain [a form of tax in rural China], or donating clothes and money to areas stricken by natural disasters, I can say that every time it was the [Christian] believers who were most cooperative and active. I have never heard of a single believer refusing to turn in the public grain.

Indeed, the accountant of the Wuzhuang Village Committee confirmed this: “These Jesus believers are all honest, good fellows, and really easy to deal with.” Of course, Wuzhuang Christians are not exceptional in

this regard. This pattern of civic obedience and social charity among Christians has been observed and reported by several studies published in China (Xu and Li 1991; Jing 1995; Wang 1987).

However, obedience to the government does not mean Wuzhuang Christians are willing to abandon their faith. Rather, it means that as long as they are given the space to practice their religion, they will be good citizens. While they are willing to “give Caesar what is Caesar’s,” they also insist to “give God what is God’s.” Actually, many Christians think that their faith in God should take precedence over anything else, including the state or nation. As the history of the 1960s and 1970s has demonstrated, Wuzhuang Christians could not accept the government’s prohibition of practicing religion. They did break the ‘law’ during the eradication period when they secretly practiced Christianity.

During the reform era, the CCP has maintained a policy of religious tolerance within limits. However, some ideology-driven measures and officials continue to demand political loyalty above everything else, including religious piety toward God. An example is the authorities’ demand to put patriotism before the faith. Li Dezhu, the Deputy Minister of the Central Unified Front Department of the CCP, said, “In regard to religion, when the national and the people’s interests are violated, there is but one principle to follow: Stand by the interests of the nation and the people. No ambiguity is permitted on this point. No damage to the state is allowed with whatever excuses” (Li 1996: 13). Such a demand corners Christians in the government-approved churches into an impossible situation, forcing them to choose between compromising the faith and going against the authorities. This is one of the reasons many underground Christians have cited for their staying away from the government as much as possible.

Fortunately, Christians do not have to deal with this problem everyday. In the reform era, it seems that as long as Christian leaders reiterate patriotic slogans and express respect to the CCP authorities at formal occasions, they do not have to take the slogan ‘love the state first’ by heart or change anything in their religious beliefs and practices. An interesting anecdote is quite telling about the pragmatic solution of the tension between political loyalty and religious piety. The current leader of the Wuzhuang Church has been Liu Guizhu. Liu is the surname, and Guizhu the given name, which in Chinese literally means ‘belongs to the Lord.’ It is a name that Chinese Christians can immediately recognize for its Christian iden-

tity. However, the TSMP Committee of the Beidao District has listed Liu Guozhu as the leader of the Wuzhuang Church. Upon inquiry, the TSMP leader told us that Liu Guozhu is Liu Guizhu, the same person with two names. The pronunciations of Guizhu and Guozhu are close, but the written characters are very different, and the meanings or symbolisms very different as well. Guozhu in Chinese means 'a pillar of the state' or 'a pillar of the nation,' which is a commonly recognizable patriotic name. Among Wuzhuang Christians, Elder Liu is known only as Guizhu, the Christian identity. He also referred to himself as Guizhu when we talked with him. It appears to us that to accommodate the authorities' demand for patriotism, Elder Liu chose to use the patriotic name 'a pillar of the state/nation' for the formal registration of the church and for official occasions. However, at the church and in his daily life, he is the Christian Guizhu. This kind of acknowledgement of political loyalty may seem superficial, but that seems to be enough for government officials.

*Keeping State Intrusions at Arm's Length*

Government's control over religious organizations has been less effective in the rural areas than cities. Urban churches are more easily and closely supervised by government officials. For example, following official guidelines or hints, ministers at the churches in Tianshui City have avoided preaching on certain topics. Pastor Wei of the Beidao Church told us:

There *are* some topics that are not suitable to talk about at the present. The Religious Affairs Bureau has given me hints against topics like the doomsday, the final judgment, and the creation of the world. I should talk about them as little as possible, if at all. But we hold that if it is in the Bible, we should talk about it. I am against the so-called 'construction of theological thinking.' That stuff belongs to the unbelieving type.

The 'construction of theological thinking' is a theological movement promoted by Bishop Ding Guangxun, the chief leader of the TSMP in the reform era. Bishop Ding has spoken on various occasions and published the *Collection of Ding Guangxun* in 1998. His central idea is to make Christianity compatible with the socialist society under Communist rule, which would be achieved by emphasizing the notion of love above anything else. Underground Christians have rejected this idea as giving up faith in Christ. Some aboveground church

leaders have resisted the movement as blurring distinctions between Christians and non-Christians. Both underground Christians and aboveground critics say that the importance of ‘justification by faith’ should not be compromised for whatever reasons. “Without this core belief, what kind of Christianity would it be?” Pastor Wei continued:

Actually we have to do that ‘construction of theological thinking’ thing here. But we just hand some materials to those people in charge. That’s all. We get pressures from the above. Somebody has reported me to the provincial government bureaus. But I’m not afraid of it. I was not afraid of that kind of stuff even when I was a young man. At worst, I would just quit.

As a young man, Pastor Wei was imprisoned and spent three years in a ‘reform-through-labor camp’ in Xinjiang. After the TSMP was reopened in 1982, Pastor Wei has been the Chairman of the Beidao District TSPM Committee. While he was determined to resist this particular ideological movement, his non-cooperation had obviously generated heavy pressure on him. He has had to get psychologically prepared to step down if the situation became worse.

In comparison, the leaders of the village church in Wuzhuang have felt little such pressure. First of all, they really have no position to lose. Their leadership status has been attained very much through members’ trust nourished over a long time. Even if an official title of Eldership or Deaconship were removed by an order from above, that would not take away their influence and trust among the members. Second, the TSMP and government officials have made infrequent visits to this remote village. Therefore, the indirect hints or even explicit guidelines of the RAB have made little impact on the content or mode of the pulpit message delivered at the Wuzhuang Church.

Nonetheless, Wuzhuang Christians conform as much as possible to the requirements of the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee. This manifests itself in many routine arrangements of church affairs. Here we provide a few examples.

First, acting on the order of the RAB, the TSPM has instructed the churches to hold regular meetings to study state policies, regulations, and laws. The Wuzhuang Church has followed the order by holding a Thursday evening meeting every week. They post the meeting schedule and intended content at the most visible place on the wall of the chapel (not the sanctuary), so that when the TSMP or RAB



officials come to inspect they will feel reassured and satisfied. In reality, however, such study sessions have routinely turned into Bible study or testimony-sharing meetings. As a matter of fact, even the study sessions organized by the CCP for CCP members have frequently turned into chatting or gossiping meetings. Therefore, even if the actual contents of the Thursday evening study sessions became known to the officials, the officials are likely to treat it ‘with one eye shut.’ Some kind of formal compliance to the state requirements seems sufficient to avoid troubles.

Second, the authorities have imposed a ‘three fixes’ policy. All religious groups must have a ‘fixed place’ to hold activities. All churches or ‘gathering points’ must have ‘fixed persons’ in leadership and membership. And all clergymen must have ‘fixed areas’ of ministry and cannot conduct religious services in other places without prior approval. The ‘three fixes’ are to restrict evangelization across administrative borders. Uncle Fu told us:

If our church people go out to other places to evangelize, if it is within the valley, they don’t have to inform the authorities. If they go out of the valley, they have to inform the Beidao District authorities. If they go out of Beidao jurisdiction, they have to inform the Tianshui Municipal authorities. If they go out of Tianshui Prefecture, they have to inform the provincial authorities. Actually it is almost impossible to go beyond the province. The same is true for those missionaries who come to Wuzhuang.

Have there ever been visiting preachers to Wuzhuang? Uncle Fu said:

Yes, but very few. They were mostly from the valley area. Occasionally the Beidao Church would also send somebody to lead the service, about one or two times a year. That’s all.

Elder Liu Guizhu told us that this policy of restricting cross-border evangelists was not all bad. It could help prevent disturbances by heretical sects that have been very actively proselytizing. But Uncle Fu said:

I think there’s nothing good about it. We believers need to communicate with each other in order to grow spiritually. But generally speaking, we don’t invite evangelists from other places, for someone [at the Wuzhuang Church] may report us to the authorities and that would get us into trouble.

Apparently, the Wuzhuang Church has observed this regulation even though they do not like it. However, we also learned that Wu Ende,

the former deacon who was jailed for six years during the Cultural Revolution, had been traveling around the Tianshui Prefecture to evangelize. He has even traveled to areas in the neighboring provinces of Shaanxi and Ningxia, and as far as to Qinghai and Tibet. When we asked Uncle Fu about what the authorities have done to Wu Ende, he laughed:

Him? The Three-Self Church can't order him. He is not an elder or deacon now, just a layman. Besides, he goes out with his silver needles to do acupuncture, and evangelizes along the way. The Religious Affairs Bureau can't do anything about him.

Apparently, the state power diminishes over village Christians who do not hold any official title or position and thus cannot be dismissed. Their evangelization cannot be controlled as long as they can keep it low profile without obviously violating the criminal code. In fact, tens of thousands of such nameless evangelists have been active in the vast rural areas since the 1970s. Believers call them 'brothers' and 'sisters,' 'uncles' and 'aunts' (Aikman 2003). These nameless evangelists have led the revivals in rural areas, which have multiplied the number of Christians in China in the last few decades. Wu Ende was just one of them.

Third, the most intrusive act from above to the Wuzhuang Church has been the appointment of an Elder. State regulations require church Elders and Deacons to obtain the approval of the higher level TSMP committee and the RAB. When the Wuzhuang Church was to elect Elders and Deacons in 1996, the Beidao TSMP under the instruction of the Beidao RAB handpicked a Wuzhuang believer, Wu Shenzhao, and appointed him as one of the three Elders. The TSMP and RAB wanted Wu Shenzhao keep an eye over the church and report any violation of regulations. He was used as a means of state control. The Wuzhuang Church acquiesced to the appointment. While the rest of the church leaders and lay members have been careful not to antagonize Wu Shenzhao, they have managed to circumvent his power and influence effectively by distancing themselves from him. Most of the church affairs have been decided by the senior Elder Liu Guizhu. Believers would not go to Wu Shenzhao for anything important to church life. Up to now, Wuzhuang Christians have been able to keep state intrusions at arm's length.

*Wuzhuang Christians in the Village Power Structure*

While the village church has managed to keep state intrusions from above at arm's length, Wuzhuang Christians have to face fellow villagers day by day. In this ancient village that has a majority of Wu families, clan ties are actually not very strong. The power of the village has been in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party cadres. Although Christians comprise one third of the village population, they have no share in the political power. They have intentionally stayed away from village politics in the hope that this would keep away interference with their religious practice from other villagers. However, their unbending beliefs set off antagonism by the village Party chief. While their faith gave them the strength to endure silently the Party chief's abuses, the larger political atmosphere for social stability ensured their peaceful existence in the village.

*Weak Clan Ties*

Although over eighty percent of Wuzhuang residents share the surname Wu, traditional clan bonds or divisions have not been strong in Wuzhuang. Unlike other villages that have been documented by scholars (e.g., Jing 1996), Wuzhuang does not have any clan temple (*ci tang*) or long-term clan association. Actually, the Wu-named villagers do not think that they are descendants of the same ancestor. Therefore, the entry and growth of Christianity in Wuzhuang met little resistance by traditional clan forces.

Since its early days, the church has had members with different surnames. Wu-named members and leaders at the church have been the largest proportion, but that is accidental and does not translate into clannish solidarity or division within the church. Actually, the only significant frictions in the history of the church were theological ones between the Calvinist rationalists and the charismatic oriented believers. The former inherited the traditions of the China Inland Mission, while the latter was influenced by the Jesus Family, a Chinese indigenous church that originated in Shandong and spread to this part of the country in the 1930s. Since the reopening in 1982, Wuzhuang Christians have been well united with no significant internal conflicts. This is probably because the Christians have been a weak segment of the village population and have faced constant external threats and pressures.



*Powerful CCP Cadres*

Without strong clan forces, the CCP authorities retain the actual political power. With a population of over three thousand, Wuzhuang is considered a large village and entitled to have five official positions. The most powerful is the Secretary of the CCP Village Branch (*cun zhishu*), followed by the Chairman of the Village Committee (*cun weihui zhuren*), the Vice Chairman of the Village Committee, the Director of Agricultural Production (*shezhang*), and the Accountant. The villagers are organized into eight Production Brigades (*shengchan dui*). Although about a third of the villagers are Christian, no Christian has ever held one of the five administrative positions, and only one of the current eight brigade leaders is a Christian. The Party Secretary position naturally requires CCP membership, and the CCP Constitution has been clear that CCP members must uphold atheism. CCP membership is not required to serve in other positions, but it is clearly preferred. The village leaders have always been chosen from among the 30 or so CCP members. The Party cadres at the village do not like to share power with Christians. First of all, they are not compatible in ideology. Second, Christians do not smoke or drink, which would make the CCP cadres feel uncomfortable on social occasions or at the dinner table.

However, Wuzhuang Christians have expressed little desire to take any of the official positions. According to church leaders, Christians have been afraid of being corrupted and committing sins against God if they step into the quagmire of power. They have also been afraid of being suspected of having political ambition. Under the current ideological and political conditions, Christians have to show no interest in politics at all to avoid inviting any trouble. They hope that if they pose no threat to others, others would not care about what they do in their private life. The only Christian leader of a Production Brigade told us that he did not want the position. "Nobody wanted it," he said, "there was neither power nor profit in it, only countless odd jobs to do and responsibilities to shoulder." He was approached by the Village Committee after it failed to find any one else. Only after repeated urging and persuasion by the village leaders did he accept the position. His reluctance to enter the village power structure is a means of self protection. Wuzhuang Christians have been content to have a marginalized status in the village power structure.



*Antagonism and Assuagement of the Old and New Party Chiefs  
of the Village*

Even though Wuzhuang Christians have tried hard to avoid problems, they have nevertheless stumbled into various troubles. The most difficult ones in the reform era involved the *laoshuji*, the previous Party Secretary of the village. His antagonism toward the church started in the mid-1980s, when he imposed a temple tax on all villagers but Christians refused to comply.

As mentioned before, Wuzhuang is located at the foot of Guatai Mountain, which has been the center of Fuxi worship. From the late 1950s to the early 1980s, the authorities banned it in the name of cleaning up feudal superstitions. In the early 1980s, however, villagers around Guatai Mountain revived Fuxi worship as a practice of traditional culture. The authorities endorsed this folk practice by recognizing the Guatai Mountain Cultural Antiquity Preservation Group (*guataishan wenwu baohu xiaozu*), which has been commonly referred to as the Temple Management Council (*miao guan hui*). The Temple Management Council organizes restoration projects and various collective activities. The local town, county, and prefecture governments even encouraged Fuxi worship by partially financing restoration of temple buildings and sponsoring opera troupes during the annual temple fair (*miao hui*) around the fifteenth day of the first month in the Chinese lunar calendar.

The authorities endorsed and supported folk practices for political and economic considerations. Economically, Fuxi festivals may attract tourists. Politically, Fuxi as the believed progenitor of Chinese civilization is appealing to overseas Chinese as well as intellectuals in China. The authorities hope to use Fuxi festival celebrations to increase solidarity among the Chinese people at home or abroad. Patriotic propaganda is clearly reflected in these slogans in the form of traditional couplets during the 2002 festival: "All teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism can civilize people; All sounds of the bells, drums, and hymns may praise patriotism." For local villagers, however, Fuxi is known not so much as the forefather of Chinese civilization, but as a tutelage god who can heal the sick and turn bad luck into blessings.

The Temple Management Council members come from the two villages closest to Guatai Mountain. Wuzhuang's *laoshuji* served as its president from its establishment in the early 1980s until his death

in 1998. In 1984 or 1985, the Council decided to collect a temple tax or fee from every resident of the two villages. Naturally, *laoshuji* was responsible to collect this money in Wuzhuang. To his surprise, Wuzhuang Christians all refused. They told him that as believers of God they would not be involved in any idol worship. Uncle Fu explained to us: “If it were charity for disaster relief, we all would be willing to contribute. But we absolutely will not give any money for idolatry.” Indeed, Wuzhuang Christians have noticeably stayed away from the festivals on Guatai Mountain. Their refusal angered *laoshuji*. He took it as a sign of the absence of submission to his power as the Party Secretary. He also felt a loss of face in front of his fellow Council members. In the following years, instead of collecting a separate temple tax from each household, *laoshuji* ordered it to be lumped together with other taxes and fees. Because there were so many items of taxes and fees without clear explanations, villagers commonly could not tell which item was for what purpose. Christians suspected that the lump sum taxes might include the temple tax, but they never could confirm it, thus they did not confront *laoshuji* regarding it. The only thing they could do was to pray to God to stop the whole Fuxi worship thing.

After the incident of tax resistance, *laoshuji* became openly antagonistic to Wuzhuang Christians. He intentionally and regularly turned on the loudspeakers on the roof of the Village Committee Office when the church was holding a worship service or some other gathering. He would broadcast revolutionary songs or Qinqiang opera in the highest possible volume. The loudspeakers became so annoying that a non-Christian young man threw some bricks at the loudspeakers. *Laoshuji* immediately ordered several people to take him to the Village Committee Office, and they beat him badly. The Christians simply kept quiet about the very intrusive loudspeakers.

In 1995, as church membership increased, the Wuzhuang Church renovated and enlarged the sanctuary, added a chapel, and replaced the worn-out mud walls of the yard with new brick walls. They also built a covered gate, on top of which they erected a tall cross in bright red. The cross faces the loudspeakers silently, yet sturdily. It is a symbol of perseverance and determination. The renovated church visibly outshined the Village Committee Office across the street. This made *laoshuji* unhappy. Moreover, adding oil to fire, a *feng shui* master in the village told him that the taller church gate overshadowed the Village Committee Office, which would bring bad luck to the Village

Committee. This made *laoshuji* depressed. He made several attempts to stop its erection or to destroy it. As Elder Liu Guizhu recalled:

*Laoshuji* was unhappy about the brick walls and the new gate. He first asked us halt the construction. After its completion, he ordered us to tear the gate down. We did not follow his order. So he went up to the Commune and reported that the church had added new buildings in violation of state policies and regulations.<sup>3</sup> He asked the Commune government to send officials to Wuzhuang and to issue an order to tear down the walls and gate. Some Commune officials came and inspected the church. Surprisingly, however, they told *laoshuji* that having the new walls and gate was not a big deal. They ignored his request and left.

This enraged *laoshuji*. After that, in addition to turning on the loudspeakers, he sometimes stood in front of the Village Committee Office and swore at Christians as they were walking into the church. The Christians simply ignored his provocation and went to their gathering. During some evening services, *laoshuji* walked into the church and ordered the group to leave, accusing the crowd of disturbing the neighbors' sleep. The Christians simply acquiesced. "Because we believe the Lord will redress the injustices for us." Elder Liu continued:

In July 1998, we invited an old pastor to lead our summer revival meetings. Many people came to the church. Some came from neighboring villages. One night it was indeed quite late. *Laoshuji* led several people, who came in and ordered us stop the gathering immediately. The congregants were very angry, but the old pastor told us not to do anything, just leave for the night, and come back the next day. About two months later, in October, *laoshuji* suddenly died.

"What happened to him?" we asked. Elder Liu continued in his calm and soft tone:

Nobody knows. He was not very old, only around 60 years of age. His health had been very good. No illness and no accident. But suddenly he died. It took less than an hour [from showing symptoms to death]. It surprised people. We believers thought it was the Lord who redressed the injustices for us, so we were very thankful to God. He is the true

<sup>3</sup> Here the 'Commune' (*gongshe*) should be the 'town government' (*xiang zhengfu*). The Commune system was established in the 1950s under radical Maoism and abolished in the early 1980s under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The villagers habitually referred to the town government as the Commune government, which indicates that they did not see substantial changes in the administrative structure in the reform era.

and faithful God. Even nonbelievers felt that it was very strange. They said that it was because he offended our God. It was God's punishment of him. After that, many people became fearful [of the Christian God]. In the past some nonbelievers would curse us in front of us or behind our backs. But they dared no more.

Not only did average villagers seem to have learned the lesson of not insulting Christians, the new Party Secretary has also resorted to assuagement. On Christmas of 1998, he led all the village cadres to the church and conveyed greetings to Christians at this special occasion of their most important festival. He also brought a gilt board to the church, on which were inscribed the words 'everlasting friendship' (*youyi chang cun*). Under his new leadership, the loudspeaker has also come on less frequently.

Obviously, *laoshuji's* hostility toward the church was not totally driven by the atheist ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. As a matter of fact, he was very much involved in the folk religious practice of Fuxi worship and even took the *feng shui* master's words seriously. But he went too far so that even the government did not want to back him. The nonintervention of the town government officials was because they did not see it necessary to risk antagonizing Christians by tearing the new gate and walls down. In the 1990s, the authorities put high priority on maintaining social stability.

The new Party Secretary's efforts of assuagement do not mean any change of the overall religious policy. As a new chief of the village, he needed to consolidate his power. He knew that Christians were cooperative citizens on civic matters. He understood that it would do no good to antagonize this large mass of Christian villagers. In addition, like many other non-Christian villagers, he might also hold some fear toward the Christian God. The goodwill visit and the gilt board were gestures intended to end the bad relations under the old Party Secretary.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

The survival and perseverance of the Wuzhuang Christian Church shows that reform-era China has held a religious policy of tolerance with restrictions, and that the restrictions have not been very effective in the remote village, far away from the city where government bureaus are based. In order to attain and maintain a status of legal

existence, the church has had to resort to the patriotic rhetoric imposed by the authorities, conform to numerous ordinances and guidelines, and acquiesce to the appointment of a church elder by the Religious Affairs Bureau through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee. The Wuzhuang Church has managed to keep state intrusions at arm's length. Wuzhuang Christians have exercised extraordinary forbearance. After all, the overall situation has indeed improved in comparison with the earlier decades under Communist Party rule. It is still far from the ideal of religious freedom. Nevertheless, the social space for religious practice has enlarged.

In the reform era, China's economy has developed fast. Industrialization and urbanization processes have expanded and accelerated in recent years. Overall, the inland provinces have been lagging behind the coastal provinces, but they have seen significant changes as well. Moreover, in the new century, the central government has begun strategically steering attention and investment to western provinces. Nowadays, many young villagers go to cities for jobs. Some have gone far away to the southwestern coast. According to church leaders and village cadres, nearly half of the village population might not be home most of the year, and those who stayed behind are mostly seniors and women. This is having an important impact on church life. Church attendance has declined since the late 1990s. Moreover, compared with the past, fewer people get baptized now.

The rapid urbanization has brought new challenges to the village church. In addition to the lack of young people and fewer new converts, state control has been strengthened as well. As telephones and cell phones have become available to the villagers, Elder Wu Shenzhao can report 'problems' instantly to the city's Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the Religious Affairs Bureau. Instructions and orders from above also get to the village quicker. Meanwhile, a newly constructed highway and an extended railroad have shortened the distance between the village and the city. Soon after our research in spring 2002, the new highway near Wuzhuang opened. Instead of taking two hours by bus from Wuzhuang to Tianshui City, it now takes only twenty minutes on the highway. The villagers have welcomed it for greater convenience and better opportunities. However, it also means that it takes less time and effort for the RAB officials and police to get to Wuzhuang. In fact, according to the plan, Wuzhuang will soon join an urban district of the expanding Tianshui City.

Marketization is now well underway in most of China, which has led to further relaxation of state control over the private life of citizens. In the more market-driven coastal provinces, Christians and others seem to enjoy greater freedom in practicing their religion. Moreover, to follow international norms, the authorities have made 'rule by law' or 'rule of law' an official goal in deepening reforms. Although these reforms have been 'two steps forward and one step backward,' things seem to have been moving in the desired direction. Taking a broad and long-term view, we have seen, and will likely see more, progress toward greater freedom of religion in China.

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