



China is Open to the Gospel¹

Ted Ward

The old questions are gone. We no longer ask if China will ever again be open to the Gospel. No longer is it a matter of *if* or even of *when*. The when is *now*, and wondering if God can find ways to reach people proves, as usual, to have been more a matter of small faith than of much understanding. The articles and speeches about “China, maybe, sometime” are out of date.

China is open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This declaration, though true, demands explanation. Surely Mao Tse-tung knows that he has lowered the bars to Christianity. But just as surely, the church person in the United States has great difficulty understanding what Mao has done, and why he has done it.

A period of insulation from the outside world was needed so that the Red Revolution could work its course in transforming a massive nation. From its venerable traditions of philosophical mysticism and political feudalism, China needed time—time for pragmatic socialism and political responsibility to develop. Whatever may be his flaws, Mao is a realist; his visions are lofty, but his procedures are practical. Despite the earlier Western view of a united “world communism,” Mao’s major concern is Russia. Mounting anxiety over their sweeping common boundary, disputed frontier lands, and the nuclear stand-off, causes China to seek friends among former enemies. His new China needs broader involvements within the family of nations and, because he feels that his people are finally ready, Mao has opened the windows to the outer world. Former President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger were less the initiators than the respondents—they merely happened to have been the first sizeable American birds to fly through those Chinese windows. It is Mao’s plans and decisions that count. As a by-product, Mao has opened China to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and certainly he is aware that he has done so.

Before you rush to the telephone to call your friendly local mission board, be advised that they will not be able to report any success in their efforts to place missionaries in China. China is still closed to missionaries. You may need to look again at the title of this article. It is important to distinguish between the influence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the presence of classical missionaries!

What, then, does it mean that China is “open?” In our prayers for China, we have asked God to allow missionaries to return to China. In the visions underlying these prayers, we have seen the same loyal men and women stepping off ships and airplanes in Shanghai, Tientsin, and Canton—smiling in triumph as they set foot once again on the Asian soil that sucked up the blood of Christians martyred by the regime that now welcomes them back. But these visions are based more on feeble speculations than on real trust that God is able to work his will in his own ways.

The sovereign power of God in human is surely adequate to open China once again to missionary presence. But it may not be God’s plan this time to use the classical missionary to evangelize China. Even as the classical Western missionary is different from Barnabas and Paul, so the future bearer of the Gospel to the more than three-quarters of a billion people of China is apt to be different from the familiar image of “missionary.”

¹ Ted Ward. China is Open to the Gospel. In *Evangelical Perspectives on China*, Donald E. Douglas (ed.), Farmington Hills, Michigan. Evangelical China Committee, Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association, Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, 1976. Used with permission. (IFMA/EFMA is now MissioNexus.)

Barring some totally unforeseen development, the mainland Chinese are beyond the arm's reach of organized missions; Mao has opened the windows, but not the floodgates! Indeed, Mao has deep faith in the power of his system; otherwise he would not be allowing the interaction of his people with outsiders. But he is unwilling to accept the embarrassment and hassles that would accompany official recognition of the presence of Christian missionaries.

Since the day in 1971 when American journalists and scholars began visiting China, the traffic of Americans has been small but steady. The number of Christians among these travelers, visitors, and scientists is known only to God. We know only that through these people and through the English, Canadian, West European, and African Christians, as well, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is again walking the historic highways and byways of China's heartland.

What has happened to the Christians left behind as the missionaries were forced out in the late 1940s? Is there any church left in China? We may wait many more years for clear answers. What is known now is a great testimony to the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a great tribute to the persistence of the Chinese Christians: a vast number of Chinese Christians moved out of their country ahead of the Communist sweep, bringing a strong Christian influence into many parts of southeast Asia, wherever these refugees from religious persecution have taken root. Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines have felt their influence. Some Chinese Christians elected to stay behind and bravely hold out in the face of the communist purges of Christian influence. Of these, little is known. From time to time, encouraging stories have trickled under the bamboo curtain, particularly through that curious leak-point—Hong Kong. But the stories are guarded and sometimes hard to believe. The safety of these pockets of Christian influence is still in jeopardy. No one would intentionally expose them, so the best stories tend to lack proof. Christianity will likely remain an underground movement in China in the foreseeable future.

How can we say, then, that China is open to the Gospel? To the extent that the Gospel is a living influence and is carried in the life and walk of the child of God, China *is* open to the Gospel. Indeed, only in the sense of China's forbidding of certain Westerners has it ever truly been "closed" to the Gospel.

What sorts of Christians from the Western world are, and will be, carrying the Gospel into China? Scientists, agricultural specialists, medical scientists and practitioners, educators, secretaries, scholars, airline crewmen and stewardesses, diplomats, radio technicians, chauffeurs, journalists, bankers, and telephone operators are the new "missionaries." And they don't all have white faces! Their roles and costumes are so varied as to defy any hopes of the Communist regime to keep them out on the basis of their Christian distinctiveness.

As these people are faithful in their witness to the Gospel, God can work through them to bring blessing and redemption. But the Chinese are, by cultural background and by reinforcements of the little Red Book, suspicious and relatively closed to outside ideological interference. The influence of pale-faced long-noses in the old China was resisted and in new China would seem even less welcome. God may have yet another way.

Who will go into the countryside? Who will live in Chinese villages and communes? Who will speak the language of the common person? Who will be so Chinese that they will win the confidence of the Maoists? Who will disappear from an outsider's passport to melt into the massive tapestry of the Chinese society? Who, indeed, but the Chinese—of whom there are millions outside China today. The vast majority of these have maintained their Chinese ways and their Mandarin and Cantonese linguistic skills. Thousands upon thousands of Chinese living outside China are devout Christians and, of these, a substantial corps is sacrificially poised, learned in the points of contact between Maoism and Christianity, alert to the strategic "soft spots" where the new ideology has failed to meet crucial human needs. Chinese Christians, resident as expatriates in America, England, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere, may one day soon begin to converge on their ancestral

homeland. These Chinese, many of whom are second and third generation missionaries to God's earlier work in China through missionaries, are the major hope for evangelizing China today.

Indeed, there are potentially many who could take up God's cause in China, as was true with Gideon's army of 32,000 against the army of the Midianites and Amalekites. In the case of Gideon's army, God wanted the glory for himself, so he reduced the army to a meager company of 300, and through their faithfulness to God's "improbable" plan, the Midianites were overcome. Even as God screened out 100 for each one he put to his work against the enemy in the valley near Moreh, so there is a factor at work reducing the "available" Chinese to a meager handful who are most likely to become God's company for China. Not many who have been outside the nation during the period of the Communist transformation are ideologically suited to deal directly with the mind of the new Chinese. Some of the Chinese Christians in the "free world" are deeply committed to mercantile capitalism. Many "outer Chinese," Christians included, are inclined to think in terms of "freeing" China from Communism. Their message for today's China would be more a matter of political regression than of the liberation of the soul through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Gideon's army for China," to coin a phrase, will more likely be drawn from that handful who have accepted the reality of the changes in China; these who have come to value the worth of a soul above the political issues, to minimize their own prejudices, to accept the disdain and suspicion of their mainland cousins, and to tolerate the criticisms of selfishness and greed which are part of the Maoist response to outsiders.

The *China Exchange Newsletter* of the National Academy of Sciences contains a continuing record of scholarly visitors to and from China. There are all sorts of names on the list from Benjamin Spock to Linus Pauling. (China has even welcomed a few arch-capitalists such as the Rockefellers!) But the most important insight to be gained from the list is that more than one-third of the Americans visiting China are Chinese-Americans. These are the people whose language skills and contacts with close relatives in China play an important part in getting beyond the tourist centers. These are the people who already are occasionally able to get into rural China as non-VIPs, some for visits of six months, participating actively in the life of a Chinese farming village or factory community.

Those who watched the early leaks in the iron curtain and the slowly creaking door into Russia in the mid-1950s are impressed with the relative ease with which Mao has opened up his country. We expected it to be much slower. Surely, Mao feels more secure than Khrushchev did.

And just as surely, the influence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is crossing that border. Evangelism is feasible, but it won't be with parades and drums and tambourines; it won't be with blaring loudspeakers on street corners or massive rallies. In ways unfamiliar to the public image of evangelism in America, the Gospel is up against a deeply held common philosophy. What can Christianity offer? Have the Chinese found adequate humanistic answers for their spiritual needs? Christianity will move forward only on its realities.

No Christian will make a positive impact on China with displays of affluence; the new ethics of China are similar to those of early Christianity in this respect. No Christian will attract people to Christ with anti-communist "Christian" messages. (The broadcasters should learn this quickly.) Communism has done much to benefit these people, and they know it.

Well over 100 scholars from the People's Republic of China have visited the United States since the windows opened. We must ask ourselves what they might have seen of Christians and Christianity in our country. The track record of evangelism among foreign scholars and students is far from impressive, but the list of new opportunities for Christians to relate themselves to the spiritual needs of China should not overlook the rapidly increasing contacts with visiting scholars and technicians from the People's Republic. Here, too, it seems most likely that the Chinese-Americans will be the frontline of outreach.

In a strange way, the Chinese have been prepared for the Gospel. The claims of the personal Savior were remote and alien to the ways of old China, rooted in the teachings of Confucius and Buddha. The new Chinese understand the vitality and strength that derives from belonging to something important. The family clan system has given way to a larger concept of community. In the old system, the society was family-oriented—one's ancestral family together with all the aunts, uncles, cousins, and miscellaneous relatives provided for each other's needs as a matter of shared common concern. This system tends to produce stronger communities than does American individualism; but greed, suspicion, rivalry, and pride turn family against family until, from time to time, the whole community breaks down into hate, bloodshed, and death. Such was a central weakness of old China. But the Communists have shown a new sort of super-family in which the whole nation shares purposes, resources, and benefits. On the basis of their new concept of society, the mainland Chinese are more likely to appreciate the vitality of the Biblical concept of church as community than are typical North Americans! Today's Chinese have seen the value of a shared identity in a political structure wherein the *whole* family is a matter of concern to every individual—more important than self-centered individualism.

Further preparation for the Christian message has been brought about, quite unintentionally, by Mao's own emphasis on himself. Mao's commanding personality and tremendous leadership skills have impressed the Chinese with the value of a single head. Though Americans find it hard to believe, this single head generally has been seen as a kind and benevolent father-figure—a living father who is actually involved with the needs of his people. How different this is from China's former religious orientation toward ancestors and spirits—a religion of tradition, yesterday, and remoteness!

But soon the Chinese will have to come to grips with the death of their god. Accustomed as they are to a living god who is involved with their needs, the competitions, bitterness, and likely bloodshed that will follow Mao's death will come as a profound cultural shock. Their trust in a monotheistic system will suffer a severe jolt. Consider what the claims of Christ could mean at such a moment: Jesus Christ also claims to be the light of the world; Mao is dead, Jesus Christ lives! Here is the timely message of the Gospel. Surely it will be heard in China at this crucial time. Its transforming power in individual lives is well known; perhaps many of us will live to see its influence transform a whole nation. "God works in strange ways His wonders to perform!"

The basic assumption of this article is that Mao Tse-tung is thoroughly aware of the inevitability of new Christian influence in China. His risk in opening China to increased Western involvement is calculated and deliberate. He does not fear Christianity. As he sees it, his system is stronger and his people are ready. His confidence is being used of God to create again an open window for the influence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the most populous nation on earth.