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CHINA: Why can't all Christian bookshops sell Bibles?

By Hans Petersen, Forum 18

The anachronistic official system of publishing, censorship and printing controls fails to meet Chinese Christian publishing needs, Forum 18 News Service has been told. One example of this, amongst others noted by Forum 18, is the severe restrictions on Bible publishing, which right is restricted to the state-controlled Catholic and Protestant religious associations. Despite the considerable achievement of the China Christian Council (CCC) in Bible publishing, continuing rapid church growth has resulted in an ongoing considerable shortage of Bibles and other Christian literature. This is exacerbated by CCC refusal to allow other Chinese publishers to publish Bibles, to the extent of threatening to sue rival publishers, and the astonishing ban on legal Christian bookshops outside the CCC legally selling the Bible. This situation causes both Christian and non-Christian Chinese people to use imaginative ways of bypassing the official system to distribute Christian literature, including Bibles.

Cai Zhuohua is a Chinese house-church pastor who, in September 2004, was arrested for printing Bibles and Christian literature without government permission. His trial was originally scheduled to be held in June 2005, but has been postponed. According to prosecution papers obtained by his family, Cai was to be prosecuted for "illegal business management" for printing over 200,000 copies of Bibles and other Christian literature. Cai has always protested that his venture was not a business proposition but that, in response to the desperate shortage of Christian books in China, he was planning to distribute his books free.

Recognising the importance of the case, five prominent lawyers have volunteered to defend Cai, including Professor Fan Yafeng who is an associate researcher at the prestigious Institute of Legal Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The government is embarrassed by the international attention being given to Cai's case, as it does not wish to further tarnish its poor image in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

Cai's case highlights the severe restrictions Christian publishing is forced to operate within in China. Firstly, the publishing of Bibles is restricted to the two state-recognised "patriotic" religious associations, the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Catholic Patriotic Association. Over the last 20 years or so the former, through the Amity Press based in Nanjing, and with help from overseas from the United Bible Societies, has printed over 35 million copies of the Bible and New Testament. This is a considerable achievement. (The Catholic Patriotic Association has also published far fewer copies of a Chinese Catholic edition of the Bible.) It means that in most cities the Bible is available at low-cost to the Protestant community – even unregistered house-church Christians are now able to purchase Bibles. The CCC has a network of 70 urban distribution points, according to its 2004 Christian Diary, and also operates a number of vans to take Scriptures into the rural areas.

However, the rapid growth of the church in rural areas means that there is always a shortfall in the availability of Bibles there. Poverty and poor transport combine to prevent new rural converts from easily obtaining Scriptures. The shortfall is made up by large numbers of Bibles "smuggled" in from such places as Hong Kong, and by those printed illegally within the country by such concerned people as Pastor Cai. One of the most prominent cases involving the smuggling of Christian literature in recent years took place in 2001, when a Hong Kong businessman allegedly smuggled thousands of Bibles to the "Shouters," an underground Christian sect in China with reportedly 500,000 adherents. The Hong Kong businessman was sentenced to two years in prison for illegal trading.

However, despite the clear need for more Bibles than the existing system can supply, the CCC is jealous of its monopoly: some years ago they threatened to sue another Chinese company which planned to publish the Bible. Still, according to some reports, some entities, including universities, that are unaffiliated with the CCC continue to print and sell Christian literature with the private consent of state authorities.

The CCC appears to regard itself as the legal successor of all the various denominations and Christian organisations, including publishing houses which were forcibly unified under Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) control in 1958. The CCC and the TSPM are known in China as the lianghui (the two organisations); these twins control all Protestant activities. In practice, the TSPM, which is overtly a political tool of the Communist Party, controls the CCC which is responsible for religious activities such as re-opening churches or printing Bibles.

In addition to Bibles, the CCC sells a very limited range of Christian literature at major city churches across the country. In practice,

those Christians attending church on Sundays are able to make purchases of Bibles or Christian books for an hour or two after services. A few of the major church book-rooms are open during the week.

This network also sells the CCC/TSPM magazine Tianfeng (Heavenly Wind), which is the only national Protestant Christian magazine available in the whole country. The government states that there are over 15 million registered Protestants, with 20,000 pastors. Many Chinese and foreign observers believe that the total number of registered and unregistered Protestants is over 50 million. No one knows the exact numbers, but it is truly scandalous that this thriving community should only be allowed to publish one national magazine. (There are a number of academic Protestant seminary magazines, which have a restricted and local circulation.)

Tianfeng has become increasingly taken up in recent years with propagating the official theology of Theological Reconstruction, under which the church and its doctrines must be "compatible with socialism." And although the CCC range of Christian literature includes a number of titles by revered evangelical pastors such as Jia Yuming, there are also a large number of titles which openly dispense TSPM and Communist Party propaganda. A good example is a book by a former head of the TSPM, Luo Guanzong, sub-titled "A Critique of How Imperialism Used Christianity to Invade China," published in 2003.

Books by authors as Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao, which are popular among the overseas Chinese Christian community, are totally banned inside China. The reason is that these leaders resisted Communist Party domination of the church in the 1950s and were sent to labour-camps.

Many Chinese Christians resent the diversion of scarce church resources onto blatant official propaganda. This resentment is increased by the derision with which many non-Christian intellectuals regard what they see as the increasingly anachronistic nature of the TSPM and CCC's approach to Christianity.

As the CCC is unable - or unwilling - to provide all the Christian literature needed, it is not surprising that Christians turn to other means. In this they are aided by the economics of the free market.

Many non-Christian publishers have realised that books with Christian content are eminently saleable. Such activity can be risky. A non-Christian printer in Shanghai was some years ago found by the police to have printed a large number of illegal copies of "Streams in the Desert," a popular daily devotional work. He was fined a large sum of money, some of which went into the pockets of the police rather than to the government.

Over the last decade, more and more publishers have (with varying legality) produced Christian books. Just this year, in Beijing airport, Forum 18 came across a collection of Bible stories. A large number of Bible stories have been published and as they only contain extracts from the biblical text they get round the CCC's monopoly of the complete Bible. Many are illustrated – there is even a rather expensive selection decorated with the Biblical prints of the French painter Gustave Dore.

Many Christian titles, particularly academic books, are now printed quite legally in China with their own ISBN number. The print-run is usually quite small – about 4,000-10,000 - and popular titles sell quickly. State censorship makes it easier to publish "soft" titles which do not immediately advertise their Christian content. For this reason a number of books dealing with "self-help," the family and child care from a Christian viewpoint have been approved. Occasionally, books with overt Christian content slip by the censor. For example, a book containing sermons by Billy Graham was published some years ago by the Yunnan Peoples' Publishing House. In such cases, one suspects that Christians, or those with Christian sympathies, have the right contacts in high places to print such titles.

There are various creative ways to help avoid drawing attention to certain Christian books being published. St. Augustine's "Confessions" is stocked as "ancient Latin literature"; John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" as "classical English literature." These descriptions are, of course, accurate descriptions of these books. There are also a number of other ways used to enable Christian book publishing. For example, small publishers and printing factories will do small print-runs of illegal Christian titles at night to make a profit. The books are collected by van and distributed quickly. The Protestant house-churches operate a number of underground printing factories printing books and even regularly published Christian magazines. On occasion, these factories have been discovered by the authorities and those involved severely punished with large fines and imprisonment.

It is also not unknown for CCC outlets to stock illegal Christian books "under the counter." Once in south-east China, Forum 18 looked over a young man's shoulder as he read a book brought out from a cupboard by the sales assistant in a CCC church bookroom. It was a pirated Chinese edition of the well-known evangelical Christian book "Knowing God" by J.I. Packer. On another occasion the CCC outlet was selling crudely bound books produced underground by house-churches in Henan.

To meet the growing demand for Christian books, legal Christian bookshops outside the CCC system are springing up all over China. Unconfirmed reports state there may be as many as 50 now operating in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Forum 18 has visited two such in east China. These are completely legal outlets, often run by house-church Christians, with the necessary municipal permits displayed on the walls. In one city customers are attracted by general titles dealing with family and child-care issues on the ground floor. Serious theology is kept on the first floor. There was even a shelf of Chinese Christian books brought in

from Hong Kong for resale. Their expense, however, would make purchase prohibitive for most Mainlanders. The locally printed books generally retail for between 10-60 Renminbi (8-49 Norwegian Kroner, 1-6 Euros, or 1-7 US Dollars). The explosive growth of Christianity among students and urban intellectuals ensures a growing market for serious Christian books of all kinds.

These private Christian bookstores sell as many legal Christian titles with ISBN numbers as they can find. This means having a system of "scouts" who comb publishers catalogues and the larger state bookstores to order the more obscure Christian titles as soon as they are published. Perusal of a 2004 catalogue of a Christian bookshop in eastern China shows that about 200 titles are on sale there, and that they cover the range of subjects that might be found in many Christian bookshops elsewhere in the world. They also sell Christian stationery and giftware.

It is encouraging that these Christian outlets are now permitted. However, under China's present anachronistic system of restrictions and censorship on Christian publishing, they must be the only Christian bookstores in the world that are forbidden to stock Bibles. The Christian community shows every sign of continuing growth, but the range of Christian books permitted still remains very limited. With a few exceptions, such as the Bible and one or two other titles, print runs still remain pitifully low – a few thousand in a population of 1.3 billion people.

In the three years remaining before the Olympic Games in Beijing, China should loosen the increasingly anachronistic censorship and controls on religious publishing. It is not seriously possible to argue that the present system can meet the increasing publishing needs of China's rapidly growing numbers of Protestant and Catholic Christians.

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For more background information see Forum 18's surveys of:

the prospects for religious freedom in China at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292;

the Chinese legal system and religious freedom at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=309;

internet censorship of religious websites at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366;

public security system control of religious affairs at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=422;

"Religious distortion" & religious freedom at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462;

how believers resist state religious policy at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=491;

and state attempts to control religious leaderships at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=584.

For religious freedom in Xinjiang see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414

A printer-friendly map of China is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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