Collin Kulesha

Big Things Come in Small Packages: The Story of the Chinese Bible

Big Things Come in Small Packages: The Story of the Chinese Bible

Near the end of our Dunham Bible Museum tour, a tour guide described a fascinating part of the history of world Christianity. At an initial glance, the book did not look to be anything special. It was a relatively small leatherbound book with pages that almost looked like index cards, but it was no ordinary book. This tiny book is a collection of traded Bible verses from Christians who were forbidden to publicly practice their faith. It was hand-written in ink in Chinese. This hand-sized book is a great piece of history that the museum is fortunate to have in its possession. It shows how Christianity exists in other places in the world. It shows how Christianity had to function and exist in places hostile to the faith. The Chinese Bible, sitting in its glass box at the end of the tour, shows how Christianity can be alive and strong even under

the direst of conditions.

Though this book is an important part of Christian history, not much is known about it. It is a small, leatherbound book with a fascinating, though mostly unknown, history that was donated from a man's collection. Despite this, however, it still has its own story to tell. It went from risk of destruction by the hands of anti-Christian Chinese officials to eventually being taken to the United States by Chinese Christians finally being given the opportunity to escape. There are likely a number of other books at least similar to the one present in the museum. The underground Chinse Christians had only individual verses out of context, and they would not have all been in one book. It is quite probable that other verses that the group had that did not end up in the specific Bible in the museum's possession. This nearly is impossible to know, however, due to the untranslated nature of the museum's specific Bible. It is currently unknown what contents are present, which adds even more mystery to it than it had already. When this

does eventually get translated, it will give an even greater showing of the absolute scarcity of the Chinese Christians' resources to develop their faith.

Historically speaking, Chinese Christianity has a deep and extended history. Western theology had always had at least some effect on growing Chinese theology. Lai Pain-Chiu writes, "In the past, the relationship between Chinese and western theologies was one-sided or unilateral, involving the translation of western theologies into Chinese but not vice versa" (Pan­ Chiu 96). Western influence entered the minds of the Chinese theologians, and this influence eventually led to the spread of religion in China. For the longest time, though, practicing any religion, let alone Christianity, was a struggle. Practicing citizens would be arrested or even

killed for trying to exercise their faith. Even now, there are only five legal religions in China. Many other religions had tried missions into China to help convert them to their respective religions. D.E. Mungello writes, "As long as China was viewed as a mission field cultivated Western missionaries, the story of Christianity's development in China was merely another chapter in a long series of mission histories emphasizing Western concerns" (Mungello 535). Many had tried before, but they had all failed and had become another entry in an increasing list of mission failures in the country. This tiny book undoubtedly gave a lot of hope, though, for Christians threatened by religious persecution. The book the museum has in its exhibit came from a successful trip to China that ended with bringing several practicing underground Chinese Christians to a place where they could practice their faith freely. The book's presence in the museum is enough to show how Christianity can maintain its spread even in environments that treat it with great hostility. Even in a country where religion is nationally persecuted, a tiny book (and others like it) was able to bring believers together to help widen the scope of global fellowship.

For such a tiny book, it posed a great threat to those who originally had it. China had some fluctuation in its stance on religion, and it had its moments of both passive legality and strict prohibition. The more prohibitive stance was especially antithetical to Christianity. Morton

H. Fried writes, Starting seriously in the 1920s, the Chinese Communist Party establish itself as the best organized anti-Christian force that China had ever seen." There was a time where China was incredibly anti-Christian. It was illegal to own a Bible in the country. This led to Christians gathering in illegal groups to help spread the word by trading verses. They practiced their faith at the risk of their lives. Their solutfon proved successful, considering the group was able to bring their collections of Scripture to their new home. They would eventually be able to also find the full depth of what they desired to read compared to the miniscule fraction of a whole work that they had to use for so long. The story of their struggle turning into a one-way trip to America is represented by the Bible's presence in the museum and the story attached to it.

There is quite apparent historical and theological significance to the Chinese Bible. Despite being written in Chinese, it tells a story everyone can understand. It is both an illegal creation designed to help struggling Christians maintain some sort of constant faith and a symbol of how Christianity can be spread in hostile places. A group of brave Christians helped spread God's Word to each other in a rather dangerous way that could have resulted in their arrests if any of their work was discovered, and their work was fruitful enough for what they were able to access. They were able to come to a country where practicing the faith they believed was openly appreciated, and they could finally finish the book they had been trying to read for so long. With this voyage to America, the Bible they brought along turned into a sign of the work persecuted Christians were willing to do in order to practice their faith. In present day, as a part of the Dunham Bible Museum, this Bible represents persecuted Christians worldwide and the ways

God can still be present in their Iives, even when execution for their faith is a distinct possibility. To answer the question of the exhibit' s name itself (''What language does God speak?"), God speaks enough languages to make His presence available to all those who believe. This presence is why the museum is able to display such a significant part of Christian history today.

Works Cited

Fried, Morton H. "Reflections on Christianity in China," *American Ethnologist,* vol. 14, no. I,

pp. 94-106. Frontiers of Christian Evangelism, June, 2012.

Mungello, D.E. Reinterpreting the History ofC\hristianity in China," *The Historical Journal,*

vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 533-52. Baylor University, February, 1987.

Pan-Chiu, Lai. *Sino-Christian Theology: A Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China,* pp. 83-100. Peter Lang AG, 2010.