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“Hope Found Through a Book”: A Bible During Communist China

## “Hope Found Through a Book”: A Bible During Communist China

In China, hours before the sunrise, a small group of people huddled in a cave. They have nothing but the light from a candle to guide their eyes reading through a small book, one of the rare Chinese translations of the Bible. The men and women hovering around the book flip through the delicate pages, praying and taking in the Word of God, tears running down their eyes. Suddenly, they hear footsteps. The leader quickly blows out the candle as the rest huddle together in the back, not daring to breathe. If caught, they knew death and even torture could be a possibility.

Walking along the Dunham Bible Museum, the “Manuscript of Scripture portion in Chinese” caught my eye. The handwritten Chinese characters filling the margins of the small pamphlet reminded me of the way my mother used to write out Bible passages for me in Chinese characters when I was young. Upon reading its description, I learned this Bible came from a time in Communist China, where it was illegal to own a Bible. Intrigued, I wanted to explore more of the history behind this book.

Originally, when the Communist Party of China was formed in 1949, their first constitution stated that all adult citizens would have the freedom of religious belief, but with certain restrictions.<sup>1</sup> Because the communist party wanted to create a national system based on self-support and self-government, the Chinese Protestant church was able to function as long as they did not skew away from the Chinese government. Many Christians decided to accommodate and joined the church of the People’s Republic of China, called the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement”. Through this, the government could eliminate a large number of churches and

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<sup>1</sup> Lamb, electronic resource.

condense them into one central church run by the government. Christians were able to practice their faith based on the three principles of “self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation.” The principles of “Self” stood for rejection of foreign influence on the church leadership, and “Patriotic” stood for the church’s loyalty to China.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese feared any form of foreign influence, including missionaries from the West, in fear they would manipulate society and shorten their power. Before the start of the Communist party, hundreds of Christian missionaries were killed during the Boxer Rebellion in 1899, also known as the “China Martyrs of 1900.”<sup>3</sup> Because the Chinese government had complete control of Christianity, they imposed harsh laws limiting the church, stating that importing and printing Bibles were illegal, even if given away for free. They feared the Bibles, imported from the West, would serve as a tool to impose their outlook upon their citizens. As a result, many Chinese believers began forming their own illegal underground churches to practice their faith through reading Scripture themselves. This handwritten Bible is a testament to the struggle needed to attain a portion of the Word at this time.

Sadly, Christians in China would soon face persecution to an even greater degree. From 1966 until 1976, the cultural revolution of China shook up the roots of the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> Through centuries of missionary work, the Christian population in China grew to over one million people, and China began to fear its power. With the ruler, Mao Zedong’s intent of preserving a true communist ideology in the country, religion was banned, leaving Christians faced with persecution. Instead of the Bible, the “Red Little Book” written by Chairman Mao was widely distributed to everyone and consisted of propaganda using quotes from Mao.<sup>5</sup> The purpose was to get rid of all the impurities in Chinese society and bring the nation back to the

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<sup>2</sup> “Three-Self Church”, electronic resource

<sup>3</sup> “Martyrs of the 1900 Boxer Rebellion”, electronic resource

<sup>4</sup> History.com Staff. “Cultural Revolution”, electronic resource

<sup>5</sup> “Who, What, Why: What Is the Little Red Book?”, electronic resource

revolutionary spirit that created the Chinese Republic in 1911. During that time, several thousand Christians were sent to prison, and Bible's, churches, and homes of Christians were destroyed. An even greater amount of illegal underground churches, also known as "Home Churches", were created. Because these churches were considered a threat to the government, it was not unusual for members to be arrested without trial and even killed.

Bibles, like the one in the museum, had to be smuggled into home churches. Normally, only a pastor or ordained person was allowed to even touch it, because of its rarity and the consequences of getting caught. Jiang Yuchun is a man who experienced the struggle being able to read a Bible during the Cultural Revolution. According to him, "The first Bible I saw was very precious because it was during the Cultural Revolution when the Christian faith was prohibited, and Bibles were not permitted."<sup>6</sup> Although the Bible he used was worn like the one from the museum, he describes the experience as an "indescribable feeling of reverent awe and joy". The preacher who brought the Bible was a middle-aged man who would travel to different places every day to share the gospel using the illegal Bible. Unfortunately, he was caught on October 14, 1975, and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. By the grace of God, he was released at the end of the Cultural Revolution. The task of delivering the Gospel came at a high price but at little pay.<sup>7</sup>

As the Bible spread throughout underground churches in China, people began copying the Word, so it could be passed on to other believers. The persecution they faced was what held the Christian faith together and strengthened the foundation for more evangelism in the east. Today, Christianity is not illegal, but many people in rural communities still remain closed from

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<sup>6</sup> "A Bible During the Cultural Revolution.", electronic resource

the message of Jesus. The painstaking job of delivering Bibles to these places still continue with millions of people unaware of salvation.

This small book, only a couple inches long, has impacted the lives of many Christians living in China during the Cultural Revolution. It stands for the perseverance of the Christian faith as brave believers continue to cling to God's Word. This book was once held by someone who risked death to be able to discover the truth that lay behind the markings on the page. I could never understand the joy they felt when receiving a Bible for the first time because of how fortunate I am to be born into an open environment. Now, with an understanding of the rich cultural history it holds, I will remind myself to never take for granted the freedom I have to express my faith and freely share the Word many have died for.

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