Christianity's rise in China: Cover Story

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There are now more Christians in China than members of the Communist party. The state is responding to this resurgence of faith with an escalating campaign of repression

As he stood in the hot sun and watched a dozen earth movers smash through the walls of the Sanjiang church, Mr Dai felt a great sadness and also fear - for himself and for the future of his fellow Christians. "There were so many police blocking the road and surrounding mountains. They had cut off power to the whole area and blacked out mobile phone coverage and they were trying to stop anybody coming near," he says.

By pretending to be part of the demolition crew, Dai managed to get through the outer cordon of riot police and huddle with a small group of believers on a hillside watching the massive building collapse under the onslaught. "Words can't express how traumatic it was," says the devout Christian, who had travelled from another parish to join members of the congregation trying to protect the church. "I just kept thinking of Jesus's words - 'They know not what they do' - they don't realise it but they will surely be judged by God."

The demolition of this towering Protestant cathedral on the outskirts of the coastal Chinese city of Wenzhou on April 28 2014 marked the spectacular launch of a government campaign to curtail the fastest-growing religion in nominally atheist China. There are now about 100 million Christians in the world's most populous nation, eclipsing the 86.7 million-strong membership of the ruling Communist party. According to western intellectual tradition, modernity is supposed to bring secularisation but in modern communist China it has been accompanied by an extraordinary rise of religions formerly banned as "opiates of the masses".

Perhaps most surprising, given its status as a "foreign" religion and its close association with an earlier era of gunboats and imperialism, Christianity (particularly the Protestant variety) has been the big winner in the competition for Chinese souls. If it continues to spread at its current pace, the country is very likely to be home to the world's largest Christian population within the next 15 years. For China's authoritarian leaders, who despise and fear any force not under their direct control, this seemingly unstoppable trend is very disturbing.

"By 2030, China will almost certainly have more Christians than any other country and the Communist party is very alarmed," says Fenggang Yang, director of the centre on religion and Chinese society at Purdue University. "Chinese officials often cite the experience of Poland, where they believe the Catholic Church helped destroy communism and, although the two situations are not really comparable, the party still sees Christianity as a very serious threat that it needs to suppress."

The government demolition in April went ahead despite protests by thousands of local Christians who camped out for weeks in the shadow of the Sanjiang church. Built over six years at a cost of about Rmb30m (GBP3.1m), the building resembled a Mormon tabernacle topped with a giant

red cross. It was destroyed in less than a day. Since then, several more churches have been knocked down and prominent crosses on as many as 300 others throughout Wenzhou and the surrounding Zhejiang Province have been removed by the authorities, sometimes following violent confrontations with parishioners. Hundreds of people have been detained for short periods and some remain in custody, accused under ambiguous crimes more often used to punish political dissidents.

The Wenzhou and Zhejiang governments have publicly claimed the demolitions and cross removals were nothing but enforcement of zoning rules and building codes. But according to dozens of interviews with worshippers, religious scholars, analysts and local officials and documents seen by the Financial Times, it is clear the destruction of the Sanjiang church was the beginning of a concerted year-long campaign to rein in Christianity in the province.

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Known throughout China as the "Jerusalem of the east" because of its huge Christian population, Wenzhou is an obvious target for a government concerned about the spread of this "subversive" religion. Until recently, one of the most striking things about the city was the abundance of giant ornate cathedrals and huge neon-lit crosses dotted around town and the surrounding countryside. Local church groups estimate at least 10 per cent of Wenzhou's population - more than 1.2 million people - attends a Protestant congregation regularly. Just as in the rest of China, the Catholic population is much smaller but still numbers in the hundreds of thousands. They have also been subject to forced cross removals, harassment, increased surveillance and detentions for "illegal" worship this year.

Freedom of religion is technically guaranteed under China's constitution but, in practice, all religious organisations must be approved by the government and their activities strictly regulated and monitored. The first thing overseas visitors notice about officially sanctioned churches in China are the police security cameras conspicuously located inside to keep watch on preachers and their congregations while they worship. Chinese Catholics are only permitted to attend churches controlled by the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which answers directly to the Communist party and does not recognise the Pope or maintain ties with the Vatican. Protestants in China are supposed to only attend churches run by the official "Three Self Patriotic Movement", a "post-denominational" Protestant equivalent.

The government claims China only has about 23 million Protestants and Catholics but even the officials responsible for compiling and publishing these figures acknowledge this is a ludicrous underestimate, concocted mostly for political reasons. Not only are there far more than 23 million worshipping at official "legal" congregations but China also has tens of millions more believers attending underground "house churches" not recognised or approved by the state. These tens of thousands of underground congregations (both Catholic and Protestant but mostly Protestant), while technically illegal, are often tolerated by local officials and sometimes even allowed to operate openly as long as they are not explicitly "political".

Many of China's more charismatic underground churches are also strongly millenarian and actually feed off state persecution and martyrdom, welcoming repression as proof of their

religious sacrifice. This often makes government crackdowns ineffective or even self-defeating. Zhejiang Province, and particularly the city of Wenzhou, had until recently been regarded as a shining example of the government's tolerant attitude towards the flourishing underground churches.

"For a long time Wenzhou was a moderate and tolerant place for us and people from Wenzhou are famous for spreading Christianity all over the country," says the pastor of an underground Wenzhou church with more than 8,000 members. He asked that his identity be kept secret because the authorities have warned he will go to prison if he speaks to the international press. "Until recently, there was a huge amount of trust and co-operation between us and the government and the house congregations were always much larger than those in the official [government-sanctioned] churches."

The middle-aged preacher and two of his younger male followers have agreed to meet with the Financial Times late at night in a safe house in a tiny backstreet on the far outskirts of Wenzhou. The walls in the small, brightly lit, fourth floor walk-up apartment are covered in pictures of church charity projects, hymn sheets and religious icons. In a corner next to the bathroom a giant cockroach scuttles up the wall.

The two younger church members sit nervously shelling and eating sunflower seeds and take turns to jump up and listen at the door every time they hear footsteps outside. The pastor himself drives a new sedan and looks just like an ordinary Chinese businessman but his strongly accented Mandarin has the cadence and intensity of someone accustomed to giving rousing sermons.

He explains how the Protestant God was introduced to Wenzhou by a one-legged "Scottish peasant" missionary called George Stott, who arrived in 1867 and stayed for 23 years.

The growing number of the Wenzhou faithful endured campaigns of repression by successive governments and anti-foreign movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but faced their biggest trials after the atheist communists came to power in 1949. In 1958, Zhejiang Province and Wenzhou were singled out as a testing ground for the elimination of all religion, a campaign that reached a crescendo during the bloody and chaotic Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976.

Many in Wenzhou worry the current campaign to pull down crosses and demolish churches is a revival of the 1950s policy, with Zhejiang once again being used as a trial run for a much larger programme of religious repression.

The man directly responsible for the current campaign is Zhejiang Provincial Communist party boss Xia Baolong, who is said to enjoy close ties with Chinese President Xi Jinping. According to local officials and several people who claim to have knowledge of the matter, Xia is a Buddhist and was personally offended by the prominence of giant churches and crosses springing up across the province. But several experts on China's religious policies say such a large-scale and co-ordinated campaign would never be allowed to happen without the explicit approval of the central authorities in Beijing.

That conclusion is supported by the fact the demolished Sanjiang church was not built by "illegal" underground worshippers but by an approved branch of the government's official Three Self Patriotic Movement. "It's quite clear this campaign represents the beginning of a major policy shift toward religion at the national level, with Zhejiang and Wenzhou chosen as an experiment to see what the domestic and international response will be," says Bob Fu, a former dissident preacher and founder of ChinaAid, a Texas-based Christian NGO devoted to fighting for religious freedom in China. "There have been thousands of believers detained across the country in the last year and I think in its scale and brutality we have not seen a worse campaign against Christianity since the Cultural Revolution."

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So what has prompted this "pilot project" to rein in the rising influence of Christianity in China? The Zhejiang campaign comes in the context of a much broader policy of repression, which has seen scores of moderate intellectuals and critics detained and a harsh crackdown on all forms of dissent since President Xi Jinping came to power two years ago. Some analysts point to Xi's prominent promotion of "Chinese" religions and traditions such as Buddhism and Confucianism and say the current anti-Christian campaign is related to his mistrust of the west and perhaps even a secret belief in Buddhism.

Beijing's intention is not to suppress Christianity or religion altogether - an impossible task even if it was the goal - but to slow its very rapid rise and bring it more under control. Apart from the speed of growth, the party is very concerned about the type of person being converted. In the 1980s, as the government removed restrictions on religion and the country saw a revival in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Christians were overwhelmingly poor, rural, uneducated, female and elderly. In the late 1980s, eight out of 10 Chinese Christians lived in poor rural areas.

These days, most conversions happen in the burgeoning cities and new believers are increasingly well-educated, influential and demanding when it comes to their personal freedom and individual rights. These are the very same middle-class constituents the party has relied on for support in the past three decades, since it abandoned utopian communism and the cult of personality centred on Mao Zedong. In the early 1980s, the party made a wrenching change, from trying to wipe out religion and ancient culture to telling its people "to get rich is glorious". Today, after decades of rampant consumerism and rapidly rising inequality, even China's top leaders lament the cynicism, materialism and lack of idealism or ethics in modern Chinese society.

In its attempts to fill this moral vacuum, the party under Xi Jinping has reached for old methods and symbols, stirring up nationalist hatred against past invaders such as Japan and Britain and recycling familiar propaganda from the 1960s. Ordinary citizens are once again bombarded with images of communist saints such as the tireless oil worker "Iron man" Wang Jinxi or Lei Feng, the model soldier who washed his comrades' socks in secret. But for an increasingly sophisticated and worldly urban middle class, these efforts to instil "traditional" values only highlight how hollow and bankrupt the official ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has become. For many, these images draw attention to the contradictions of a

nominally communist system struggling to provide even basic social services and dominated at the top by a tiny, autocratic political elite accumulating enormous personal wealth.

Chu Yanqing is a pastor at the Zhongyuan house church, which started in a hotel on the outskirts of Beijing in 2004. The church's two-dozen members are mostly political activists who face constant surveillance and harassment from the authorities. Chu was a student demonstrator in the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement that ended in a massacre. The experience left him traumatised and deeply disillusioned and contributed to his eventual conversion to Protestantism in 2003. He and his small Protestant cell are exactly the type of well-organised Christian political activists the Communist party fears most.

He eloquently describes the disintegration in Chinese society that has helped bring about what he calls the current golden age for Christianity in China. "China has become much richer and most people now have enough food to eat and clothes to wear but there is no nourishment of the spirit; now our physical needs are met we want freedom of speech, human rights and cultural and spiritual nourishment, which is what Christianity provides," Chu says. "In fact, the only force that can rival the Communist party's power is Christianity and Christianity is the only hope for China."

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Christianity first reached China in the 7th century AD, brought by Nestorian Eastern Syriac believers. Roman Catholicism arrived in the 13th century and Protestantism in 1807, but most emperors banned Christianity and punished proselytisers with death, while many Chinese saw this strange religion as a tool of western imperialism.

When the communists won their revolution in 1949 there were about 800,000 Protestants, compared with some three million Catholics in a country of 540 million people. In 2010, the Pew Research Center estimated there were about nine million Catholics and more than 58 million Protestants in China. Using a conservative annual growth rate of 10 per cent, Professor Yang and others estimate the total number of Christians in China is now about 100 million. While Catholic numbers are rising much more slowly, Protestant congregations, particularly "illegal" house churches, have exploded across the country and Protestantism is growing even faster than Buddhism, the dominant religion in China.

Benoit Vermander is a Jesuit scholar who teaches as a tenured professor in the school of philosophy at Fudan University in Shanghai. He talks like an economist as he discusses China's "market of meanings" and the reasons why Protestant churches have been so successful at meeting religious demand in this market.

"Protestantism to a large extent is the new popular religion of China; it appeals to Chinese traditions of ritual and community but it also allows people to feel international, like they are members of a global community," he says. "Catholicism is based much more on clerical power so believers feel less responsible for the growth of the community, whereas Protestantism is more entrepreneurial, it provides more freedom and power to the faithful and church groups can be started by anyone." Unlike underground Catholic groups, which need to establish secret ties

with the Vatican, Protestants are able to start their own church with just a copy of the Bible and a couple of other people, a concept that fits neatly with the rise of Chinese civil society and empowerment of the individual.

At the oldest surviving Protestant church in Beijing, 20-year-old designer Han Chuang describes how he reconnected with his peasant grandmother's Protestant faith after moving to the Chinese capital a year ago. "When I was small I got very sick and very nearly died but my grandmother prayed very hard and I survived - my grandmother and mother are peasant farmers and they believe it was a miracle, that Christianity brings good fortune, health and success in business," Han says. "I started going to church when I moved to Beijing and I feel like it provides a moral foundation in a messy and corrupt modern society and helps cultivate a sense of self-respect."

Han says he looked into Catholicism but felt it was stricter and more serious than Protestantism, which is more popular and tends to attract younger people who don't necessarily have a family history of Christian faith. This flexibility of Protestantism also leaves a lot of room for individual interpretation. So it is no surprise most of China's many heterodox movements and cults tend to grow out of the charismatic fringes of the underground Protestant churches.

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In mid-October, Zhang Fan, 29, and her father Zhang Lidong, 55, were sentenced to death for the brutal murder of a woman in a McDonald's outlet in eastern China after their victim refused to join them in worshipping the "Church of Almighty God". This apocalyptic millenarian group, which also goes by the name "Eastern Lightning", claims millions of followers, who all believe Jesus has already come back to earth as a Chinese woman and lived in central China until recently. The group also considers the Communist party, which it refers to as the "Great Red Dragon", to be its mortal enemy and tells adherents it is their duty to fight and slay "demons". The whole country was shocked in May when a cellphone video circulated online showing the Zhangs and four others, including a 12-year-old, beating the woman to death with a chair and a pole while other customers watched or fled. In response, the government launched a nationwide crackdown on the group and paraded Zhang Lidong on state television, where he admitted his crime and pleaded self-defence, saying the woman was a "demon" that attacked him with supernatural powers.

Of the 14 cults Beijing placed on a watch list in 2009, 12 of them were based on some form of Christianity. And China has a long and tumultuous relationship with crypto-Christian religions taking root in the superstitious and restive rural hinterland. To this day, the Rebellion of Taiping Tianguo - the "heavenly kingdom of great peace" - which lasted from 1850 to 1864, remains the bloodiest civil war in history, with more than 25 million killed.

Hong Xiuquan, the founder of the movement, was a frustrated intellectual who failed the imperial Mandarin examinations four times. On one of his trips to sit the exams, Hong picked up a Chinese translation of the Bible from an American missionary. Following a nervous breakdown brought on by stress and disappointment, Hong had an epiphany and decided he was actually the younger brother of Jesus, sent to earth to create a "heavenly kingdom" and destroy the Manchu "demons" who then ruled China. After nearly two decades of war, Hong and his followers were

finally defeated by the Qing empire, with help from British and French colonial forces. At its height, the Taiping kingdom covered half of southern China and made its capital in the great southern city of Nanjing. The fear China's current rulers hold of mass religious movements like the underground churches stems partly from the memory of the Taiping slaughter. Officially, however, the Communist party has adopted a curiously tolerant and even romantic view of Hong and his followers.

In a beautiful traditional Chinese palace surrounded by stunning classical gardens in an old part of Nanjing, the Taiping Rebellion "patriotic education center" museum presents the party's official verdict on the matter. The entrance is dominated by a heroic bust of Hong Xiuquan and an inscription in Chinese and English lauding the Taiping "heroes and heroines" who "stood up bravely to write a great anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist epic with their blood and lives". The exhibits portray the rebels as patriotic precursors to the communists, approvingly highlighting their half-hearted efforts at land reform and particularly their antipathy to "foreign invaders" such as Britain. In an astonishing bit of historical revisionism, Christianity and the Taiping's religious beliefs are mentioned only once in the entire museum, in a tiny section in a back corridor.

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Across town from the Taiping museum, in a new industrial suburb of Nanjing, the world's biggest Bible factory has just printed its 125 millionth hardback copy of the sheng jing, or "holy text", as it is known in Chinese.

To this day, church groups around the world, and particularly in the US, continue to raise money from their congregations for the express purpose of buying Bibles and smuggling them into benighted heathen China, where they believe the book is still banned. Most of them do not realise the Bibles they buy abroad are quite likely to have been printed in this factory in Nanjing.

The facility is a joint venture between the global United Bible Society and the Amity Foundation, China's first faith-based, government-approved NGO. The venture's biggest client is the government-controlled China Christian Council, which subsidises and distributes Bibles to about 57,000 churches throughout the country. Qiu Zhonghui, vice-chairman of the Amity Foundation, explains why the government decided to allow the venture to open in 1987 to print a book that was banned and burned for decades under communism. "If Chinese churches didn't have Bibles can you imagine how many cults would spring up?" he says. "The government recognises it can't stop people believing in religion so it would rather they have access to Bibles and adhere to mainstream ideas of Christianity."

Qiu represents the most politically acceptable face of Protestantism in China. In order to go quietly about its business of collecting souls for the faith, the Amity Foundation works entirely in co-operation with the government. Using profits from its printing operation and donations from home and abroad, it runs charity projects across the country on everything from poverty alleviation to environmental protection. In the process it takes care not to violate a government ban on religious proselytising. "We don't come with bread in one hand and the Bible in the other as we don't think this is an effective way of spreading the gospel and it is also not allowed," says

Qiu. "If people want to know why we're helping them then we can tell them it is because of our faith."

Qiu says as a Christian he is disturbed by the images of churches being demolished and crosses being torn down in Zhejiang Province and Wenzhou. But in his province of Jiangsu, the government and religious authorities have not yet changed their policies or utilised the more repressive tactics seen in neighbouring Zhejiang.

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Back in Wenzhou, a fully grown orchard has been transplanted on to the spot where the Sanjiang church stood less than six months ago. A middle-aged woman picking her way through the fruit trees points to a few scattered bricks sticking out of the mud: "It was a really big building and you could see the cross on the top from miles away. I heard it made the officials angry and so they knocked it down and got rid of the evidence." The demolition angered even non-believers in the area, who saw it as local bureaucrats trampling the law on the whim of the provincial party boss.

For Christians in the region and people familiar with the government's religious policies, it is clear this campaign is bigger than that - a pilot programme of religious repression that could be replicated elsewhere if it is deemed a success in Zhejiang.

But even if Beijing does expand its struggle against Christianity to the whole country, the very most it could hope for is to slightly delay the moment when China will become the world's largest Christian nation. "The current suppression and the campaign of demolishing churches, pulling down crosses and throwing people in prison won't significantly slow the growth in believers," Professor Yang from Perdue University says. "If anything, it actually adds fuel to the fire of Christian revival in China."

Jamil Anderlini is the FT's Beijing bureau chief.