

The Jesus Family in Communist China - Part 7

by Dr. D. Vaughan Rees

The indigenous church in China is a unique and powerful expression of Christianity that is characterized by its local autonomy, individuality, and decentralized structure, and is a source of hope and inspiration for the surrounding community.

Scripture: Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 3:6, 2 Corinthians 3:5, Ephesians 4:11, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 1:18, 1 Thessalonians 1:8, 1 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:2

Topics: "Indigenous Churches", "Missionary Work"

Description

Dr. D. Vaughan Rees preaches about the rise of indigenous church movements in China, initiated by foreign ladies like Miss Barbour and Miss Dillenbeck, leading to the establishment of independent Chinese churches. The sermon highlights the importance of indigenous churches being self-sustaining and free from foreign control, contrasting the indigenous church model with the centralized hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. It emphasizes the resilience and unique characteristics of the indigenous Chinese churches in the face of Communist opposition and the need for missionaries to humbly support and empower local church leaders for true apostolic work.

Transcript

The Indigenous Church My arrival for the first time in China in 1921 almost coincided with the beginning of the two largest indigenous church movements in that country. The former was the Ye-Su Chia-ting; the latter is oftenest called The Little flock. It is a very heartening fact that both these movements which began independently of one another, owe their genesis to two foreign ladies. Miss Barbour, an English worker with the Church Missionary Society was the force behind Mr.

Watchman Nee, the founder of The Little flock movement. Miss Dillenbeck of the American Methodists had great influence on Mr. Ching, the founder of the Ye-Su Chia-ting. Her grave is in MaChuang, which she helped to establish and to which she gave her life. From the early 20's, missionaries began to see with increasing clarity the necessity for the establishment of Chinese churches which were independent of foreign support. How frequently I heard Mr. Gibb, the General Director of the China Inland Mission, say, "A foreigner cannot be the pastor of a Chinese church."

In 1928, Mr. Gibb undertook a world tour, and everywhere at missionary p114 conferences he expressed this view and the new policy of the C.I.M. to establish indigenous Chinese churches. "All church control," he said, "must pass to Chinese leaders." Thank God, from that time on the C.I.M. rigorously pursued this

policy and so did other missionary societies. If this had not been so, how doubly hopeless had the present situation been. A young commissar told me that in his opinion, the Chinese church was a foreign thing.

It only carried on because of foreign help. Remove this help, and the supposed church would collapse, without any policy or effort on the part of the Communists themselves. How nearly right he was! The Roman church, of all that claim to be Christian, has been swept away most completely by the Communists. It is instructive to take a glance at the Romanists. There is no such thing as the indigenous principle in their dealings with native churches. How then do they maintain themselves?

The force principle enters very largely into their theological philosophy. Their vows, their obedience, their submission, and so on, bind them with iron chains, not to God the Father and His Son our Lord Jesus Christ, but to a centralized hierarchy, which is their final standard and court of appeal. Communists fear the Roman system because they understand it. They are utterly at a loss when they meet the Ye-Su Chia-ting. Their puerile accusations against it prove their bewilderment.

It is not so with their accusations against Rome, which they all believe. Are they true? I want to deal with some of them, because of the light they throw on this problem of p115 the indigenous church and its relationship to the Communists. _ While I was in hospital in Tsinan under Communist control, the Communists permitted Roman Catholic priests, two at a time, to pay visits. Among other things they said, "Christianity is finished in North China, and then they revealed the havoc which had been wrought among the Roman Catholics.

I was not ignorant of this, but how delighted I was to tell them they could set their hearts at rest, for Christianity had not been wiped out. I had just been at a conference at which there were seventy Chinese leaders from Shantung alone. Their system was so foreign to the indigenous church idea that I could see they completely failed to comprehend me. That they did not believe me is not relevant. They could understand neither my words nor what was happening. The Roman Catholic mind has a very terrible twist, which has been mentioned by Lord Hatherley, who writes of men "imbued with the deadly taint of Romanism."

"I mean," he says, "that poison which perverts the uprightness and candour of the mind, and allows people to think themselves honest, when they are speaking only half their real thought, and then in such a way as to mislead those who are not aware of their concealed purpose." Take this as an illustration. I quote from a passage taken from a French publication {Annales de la Propagation de la Foi 238}: "This house has already this year received four hundred and ninety-two children, and three hundred and fifty-six have already flown to Heaven immediately after their baptism.

Out of more than twelve thousand baptized in this orphan establishment . . . not more than one hundred p116 and twenty-four or one hundred and twenty-five lived more than a year." These statements, made so naively, are without a suspicion of evil, and show how grievously tainted is Roman mission work. When I read this I was truly startled, because it is one of their own statements, not a piece of Communist propaganda. My Chinese friends all know this, and they commonly accuse the Roman Catholic orphanages of taking no care at all of the children because of their twisted beliefs in baptismal regeneration.

But the Roman Catholics think they are unjustly condemned. The same holds true of their enormous land holdings in China, but I need not pursue the subject further. The Communists have made use of all these things against the indigenous church. "This is Christianity," they say. Only God-given wisdom has guided

the Christians through these shoals. I have touched only the fringe of what the Chinese know and fear about what is called "foreign mission work." I have been describing what a Roman Catholic non-indigenous church is like.

This is the antithesis of true apostolic work. The Communist hope that the church would collapse has not materialized, as is shown by the various shifts they have used for controlling church organization. The "Plenary" conference of church leaders in 1949 in Peking, although claiming to be representative, was, of course, not so. How easy it is for the Communists to get control of anything that is organized on human lines, an organization, not an organism. It is very remarkable that the very weakness of Protestantism is its strength.

A subversive power cannot undermine its local autonomy or its individuality. p117 And this is so with the indigenous churches in China. In the last chapter I mentioned the question put by the Communist commissar in Taian to Heng-shin, "I want a statement of your numbers, your distribution, and your organization." It was easy for him to give a completely evasive but quite truthful reply. When the centre of control of a number of churches is in Heaven, what can the Communists do?

But when it is on earth what can they not do? This is the position. The Communists cannot put a subverter in every tiny village church, but they only need one for a centralized organization -- and how easily the churches are controlled, and that through their own machinery! The leader of The Little Flock told me that groups of their churches carried on all over Manchuria during the Japanese occupation, wholly untouched by attempts at Japanese control. On the other hand, churches much larger in number, but with a centralized control like most of our home churches, were controlled from the outset by a Japanese oligarchy.

How difficult the Communists will find the problem of controlling the numbers of hidden, small, and scattered Chia-ting churches! They have no central organization, their only bond is the love and fear of God, and their worship of the Trinity. Frequently there are no church buildings, and there is no doubt that in the present circumstances, fewer and fewer special buildings will be put up. Many groups meet only in Chinese houses. The only officials in the local churches are elders and deacons.

I heard of a communion service, told by the one who led p118 it, in a long-established Communist area. An elder and a deacon officiated. The communicants came singly, in order, but not in a pre-arranged order, simply by watching and going after the last had left. Thus three were present each time; they prayed and wept together, the narrator said, and then partook of the elements. Just before I arrived in MaChuang, Shantung had passed through a very severe famine. Money was pouring in from abroad, especially from the U.S.A., so that by the time I reached MaChuang, conditions had almost returned to normal.

What rather amazed me was that the Chia-ting churches would not touch any of this money. The wisdom of this did not appear until the Communists had full power in 1949. Then they minutely went through all accounts, and found what moneys had been received from abroad. Any church in receipt of foreign funds was liquidated. It mattered not at what time nor for what purpose those funds had been given. Mr. Ching had just received a letter from a group of churches in America. He showed it to me when I arrived.

If the Chia-ting churches would take the name of this foreign group, then this group of churches would assume all the Chia-ting financial responsibilities. It was a kindly act -- "No more financial worries." But Mr. Ching's attitude was different. He said, "They do not know our spirit. Those foreign churches would rob us of one of our sheet anchors. It is our financial need which drives us to our knees, and forces us to cry unto

Him." I met this attitude in action again later on.

In July, 1949, I attended a meeting of more than 120 leaders of these churches. One of the subjects on the agenda was the p119 financial help needed by lately opened churches. This caused much discussion and prayer. They reviewed all the way along which they had come, and the great question at issue was, would they rob these churches of spiritual experience by giving them another source of supply, which might not be direct from God? The New Testament attitude and St. Paul's statements were fully brought under review.

A body of believers is tested and proved by their relation to finance, and in this matter these churches constantly sought God's face. "There is a reason," they said, "why finance is so little mentioned in the Acts, although St. Paul must have needed much money on his travels. Who can uncover the mighty acts of God so peculiar and so individually precious?" Mr. Ballet of the C.I.M. used to say that the Chinese character shows two extremes. If the rest of their nation has often shown corruption in money matters, then these Christians have arrived at a wonderful financial maturity.

Mr. Hoste of the C.I.M. often said to me, "Remember, Doctor, the Chinese are an imperial people." In many spheres of human endeavour, the Chinese actually have great cause for complacency. The ethical and philosophical systems of Confucius and Mencius adumbrate much that is best in Western thought, while such thinkers as Chuang-Tzi and Men-Tzi contain thoughts so surprisingly modern that they might be culled from Einstein or Marx. Truly their land is favoured; its rivers, its mountains, its natural products and scenery astonish Western travellers.

Where the Chinese fall short is in human relationships, in integrity, and in mutual help. p120 These Chinese Christians recognize the shortcomings of their nation, and God has enlightened their eyes to see the Fountain whence these things come. Sun-Yat-Sen called his countrymen, "A plate of sand." There can be in a nation or group of people either one of two cementing links; love and integrity on the one hand, or force and dictatorship on the other. The Chinese have been forced to submit to the latter, and one of the most significant events in history has taken place; the mission church has been forced out of China.

Either directly or indirectly as a result of foreign missionary work, an indigenous Chinese church is left to be a witness in the midst of Communism. Therefore we can praise God and take courage. I have been asked not infrequently, "How can an indigenous church be brought into being?" or "How is one to recognize an indigenous church?" I can only say, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! Suddenly one is conscious that it is in our midst.

It is like the seed that a man cast into the ground. Day and night he observed and watched it; but it grew he knew not how." The Communists have the impression that the church is something foreign by nature. "Restrict preaching and this exotic thing will soon die out," say they. To their astonishment they find something in their midst that is not in the least foreign. It is in its essence Chinese, and they cannot deny it. It is so essentially so in all its "flavours and colours" that they cannot but recognize it as theirs.

Frequently we missionaries are so foreign and insular, that we imagine our own type of Christianity to be the only legitimate variety. How difficult it is for us to be Chinese p121 or Indians or Africans. Yet we must truly endeavour to harmonize very closely with them, if we are to have true fellowship with those whom God has converted through our ministry. These things being so, it is not to be wondered at that many missionary societies did not recognize the local churches that had sprung up in their midst.

Naturally, it is difficult to recognize something so entirely new as an indigenous movement can be. Let me instance the united praying aloud of all the individuals in a congregation. To our ears the noise is tremendous and most distracting. But this is just what the Chinese like. They have it in their schools, and it has advantages. "It is not distracting to God," they say, "and look how it encourages the timid ones." These suddenly burst out into prayer, when they have never prayed before.

Take the case of Chinese hymns. Most of the hymns in foreign mission hymnbooks are translations, often by foreigners. We missionaries sing them with easy understanding; we have sung them in our own language from our youth up. But what of the Chinese? How, for instance, does a new convert get on with the translation of "Rock of Ages," and many other similar foreign conceptions? No doubt he understands them later on, but a heathen Chinese gets a very doubtful impression, so different from what he gets when he looks into one of their very own hymn-books.

Let us look at one belonging to a local native church. We notice immediately how different it is. The style is different. It is a style of Chinese with which a missionary often does not become familiar. Three or four thousand years of history produce many styles. It is abbreviated, classical, p122 and often has no rhyme. The thought is Chinese and may be very idiomatic, topical, and local. It is sometimes incomprehensible to us, yet it is very precious to the Chinese who sing it.

How would you enjoy a service in which most of the congregation know the hymnbook and the Psalms by heart? Let us sing Psalm 84, or 100, or 38, as the case might be. Voices are immediately raised with very few in the congregation looking at a book. Frequently the song leader does not even announce the number of a hymn, and it is sung as we sing a chorus, although there may be many verses in it. "Let us sing first Corinthians, chapter 13," says the preacher, and without hesitation the congregation sings.

How would you like to sit through a meeting which began at 6 p.m., and ended at 5 a.m. the next morning? Almost the whole of the meeting was taken up with testimonies, and comments by the chairman or pastor. No-one who testified was limited in time and no-one was bored. The congregation finishes these long, long services refreshed and full of enthusiasm. I have said "long, long," because that is how they seemed to me. The Chinese considered that this was my foreign-ness, and since they are the important ones, it is I who must change my point of view, not they.

The indigenous church is in a position to react in a wonderful way to its foreign friends. These dear brethren faced death for me, and when the Communists called me for an interview, I was never alone. When I travelled I always had companionship, somebody to ease the toils and broils, and those who have travelled in China will know what I mean by this. How often I have heard Mr. Hoste of the C.I.M., praying for a party setting out for the p123 interior, say, "And protect them, Lord, from unreasonable and wicked men."

Travel in China makes these toils and difficulties very great. Never shall I forget what Heng-shin did for me, when we were interned by the Japanese. He came through the Japanese guards, while Dr. Harry Taylor and I were shut up, and brought us quite a large gift of money. This came from the Chia-ting churches in North China, just when we had no money. The Japanese, though keeping us interned, made us supply our own needs. Once, while I was staying in MaChuang, I complained about one of the brethren to Heng-shin.

"Do you know," he said, "that that brother would lay down his life for you?" It was not long before this brother gave me the opportunity to know that it was so. That was the end of my complaints. The relation

between a foreign missionary and an indigenous church must of necessity be different from the usual missionary relationship, even though the missionary was the instrument raised up by God to bring that church into being. It is so easy for a missionary to take a position which is artificial and which depends on his foreign prestige.

The missionary movement and the indigenous movement are bound together in the bonds of life. It is for the missionary to be in constant prayer and humility, that leaders in the native churches may be recognized and given their rightful authority. The missionary must be careful to place himself in the background. The native church will see that he does not remain there long, if he is worthy. The fruits borne by the indigenous church will be immediately and constantly seen in the amelioration of the whole social structure of the surrounding country.

It is p124 a truism that it is not laws that are needed in a land, but good citizens who will obey the laws, those who fear God and keep His commandments. All around the Homes of the Christians the roads, the bridges and the public services are good. They are constantly kept in repair without any sign from the government. Our roads, our bridges, our public amenities, all depend upon public morality. Why do such amenities as bridges soon disappear from country rivers in East Asia?

Simply because of the beachcombing tendencies of the local people, who steal the wood and iron contained therein. The most beautiful buildings are soon destroyed by looters. Famine relief was poured into China, bridges were built on the roads in the North-West. Why is not a vestige left? Why do the officials line their own pockets? If we do not do these things too, it is not because of the greater efficacy of our laws, but simply because there are more lawkeepers, in other words, more "salt", to use our Lord's words.

All around the Chia-ting settlements roads are improved, bridges are built and kept in repair, the breeding of cattle is studied, and crops improved. There is an eagerness to learn, an enterprising spirit. When his incubators were full and he still had more eggs for hatching, Ru-Shun climbed the trees at the back and placed an egg in each rook's nest, and he lost very few. When they couldn't procure petrol, they worked for three days on one of their big engines and made it go on charcoal gas.

When they found I didn't have a pocket-knife, one of the boys made me one, which I still use. To the Communists, Sunday as a day of rest is illegal. Yet these Christians carry on their services as usual. They p125 do it by means of sending out working parties to help anyone who is in need in the district. The services are held when they are off duty, and the Communists know this. It needs no one to tell you which are Chia-ting fields, just as a smiling, healthy Chia-ting face can be distinguished in a crowd.

And all this flows from one Source only. They honour, fear and love God. They honour the Son even as they honour the Father. They believe, with the Nicean Creed, that the Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life, who with the Father and Son together, is to be worshipped and glorified. The Scriptures are their final court of appeal, and they take them literally. When seeing some of the things they do, I could not but glorify God in them. I found myself saying with a catch in my voice, "Why, all the Bible is true; I have only believed it in theory up till now."

A SEQUEL In 1952 my wife and I decided that the time had arrived for us to return to our missionary calling. I was doing the work of a ship's surgeon and my ship was in Melbourn. I had just enough money to take me to Borneo. Unknown to me, but with the same urge to preach to the Chinese in the islands of S.E. Asia, was the Rev. John Chen, trained in the China Inland Mission Changsha Bible Institute. He had left

Hong Kong on a temporary pass and we arrived almost simultaneously in Labuan, the island off North Borneo on which the air-strip is.

It was Sunday morning and we met in the little Church of England Chinese church. In this church there was a very faithful lay reader, Mr. C. T. Liang. We discussed with him how p126 best the Chinese workers, rubber planters and traders could be reached. They live mostly on the numerous rivers which flow from central Borneo, like the irregular spokes of a huge wheel. . We mapped out our itinerary and began. In the two months allowed by John Chen's pass we gathered together a handful of Chinese believers at a little place called Lawas (nearby is the headquarters station of the Borneo Evangelical Mission, which ministers to the native Dyaks and Malays).

Little knowing what the future held, this little handful were left to their own devices, while John and I returned to our homelands, I to England, John to China. We had planned a concerted attack upon the Chinese of North Borneo. I returned in 1955 to Hong Kong with the object of helping John get a passport to Borneo. Time passed rapidly. Various objections were raised by the authorities and John's passport was held up. We mourned about the few believers; how we wanted to help them, and establish as we imagined, a strong Chinese church.

While we waited in Hong Kong I opened two clinics there. It became obvious after waiting two years that it was doubtful whether the British authorities would allow John Chen or any other Chinese into Sarawak or North Borneo. I am afraid we gave up hope and, of course, thought that without our help our few Chinese believers would by now be scattered; the little work we had done was worthless and finished. But why? Had we not begun as an act of faith? Did not St. Paul do work in this way? p127 I thought of the believers at Derbe and Lystra.

How long did Paul and Barnabus work among them? How soon the two apostles passed on, and when they left, far from the believers begging them to stay and build a church-building there, on the contrary they were filled with joy and the Holy Ghost at their departure. Why did not this happen to us? Why did it not happen as I had seen it happen in North China, while I was with the Ye-Su Chia-ting? Why did it not happen? But it did. In November, 1956, I received a letter from the Chairman of the Borneo Evangelical Mission at Lawas.

He wrote, "We now have here a Chinese church of more than thirty believers, meeting regularly and managing all their own affairs." How had God wrought in our absence, and how contrary to all our expectations, exceeding abundantly above all we asked or thought! How John and I bless God that we could not return, or we might have spoiled the work of God! I knew all this in theory; I knew that believers must be left to the Holy Spirit, if they are to grow, but still we wanted to do it and take the place of the Holy Spirit, "It is God that worketh in us both to will and do of His good pleasure."

So here is the answer to those who have asked me: "How to preach that an indigenous church may be formed." Here is a church which knows nothing of foreign money, but needs the help that St. Paul gave of prayer and written epistles. Mr. Belcher also adds that the faithful Mr. Liang, the lay reader from Labuan, also goes across on occasion p128 to minister to them. This is necessary, as his is the Chinese dialect that is common in the district. Thus by following apostolic example the establishment of an indigenous church is still possible to us missionaries at this point in world and church history. May it become a common practice, a normal missionary operation.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/dr-d-vaughan-rees/the-jesus-family-in-communist-china-part-7/>

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