

# How Many Christians are There in China?

by Paul Hattaway

“Any story sounds true until someone sets the record straight.” (Prov. 18:17, NLT)



*Estimating the size of the Chinese Church poses many unique challenges.*

For centuries, people have been curious to know how many Christians live in China. When Marco Polo made his famous journey to that country 700 years ago, he documented the existence of Nestorian churches and monasteries in various places, to the fascination of the people of Europe. As the Catholic presence in

China grew during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, regular surveys were conducted by the missionaries to try to count how many believers there were. In later years, the Catholic Church kept careful statistics that were sent to Rome annually. In 1948, for example—the year before the Communists came to power—there were 3,258,536 Catholics in China.<sup>1</sup>

Since I started travelling in China in the 1980s, I have found that Christians all around the world are eager to know how many believers there are there. Many people are aware that God is doing a remarkable work in the world's most populous country, but little research has been done to put a figure on this phenomenon.

The religious landscape in China seems to be full of stark contradictions. Many Western believers have told me how utterly confused they are by the conflicting reports coming out of that country. For example, some mission organizations claim there are now more than enough Bibles there, while others insist there is a great shortage. Some Christian publications tell of the harassment, imprisonment, brutal torture and occasionally even martyrdom of believers in China, while others maintain that there is complete religious freedom and persecution is a thing of the past. In recent decades, simply estimating the number of Christians in China has become controversial. Wildly divergent figures have been published, ranging from 20 million to 230 million.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I have attempted to summarize the history of various estimates for the number of Christians in China. I examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of several of the better-known estimates of recent years, and explain the difficulties that attend this kind of research in China's present political environment.

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<sup>1</sup> "How Many Catholics are there in China?" *Sunday Examiner* (September 1997).

<sup>2</sup> The lowest figure generally comes from sources associated with the government-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement or China Christian Council, neither of which acknowledge the unregistered house churches. The unsubstantiated figure of 230 million was published in August 2005 by Chinese news website [www.boxun.com](http://www.boxun.com).

## ***Only God Knows***

The first thing anyone attempting to put a number on the church in China should do, I believe, is to issue a disclaimer. I would like to state at the outset, quite simply, that only God knows how many Christians there are, for “God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” (2 Timothy 2:19). While we can speculate about how many followers of Christ there are in China, I strongly advise the reader to disregard any figure that claims a high degree of precision. Quite simply, it is not possible to conduct an accurate nationwide survey of Christians in the present climate, and those who are looking for unquestionable, proven facts will be disappointed. I believe that the best anyone can do at the moment is offer an honest assessment based on the knowledge we do have, and give a frank account of the methodology they have used to come to their conclusions.

## ***Challenges to Christian Research in China Today***

There are several major challenges facing anyone who wishes to research the number of Christians in China today. Most of these relate to the house churches rather than the registered Protestant and Catholic churches. They include:

(a) *The fear of persecution.* House churches in China are those that refuse to register their congregations with the authorities, or are unable to do so for one of a variety of reasons—for which reason they are also known as ‘underground’ churches. Such churches are the targets of discrimination and persecution, and this means that typically they are secretive about their membership and operations. Consequently, arriving at numbers is often little more than guesswork.

(b) *In China it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.* Over the years many Christians have travelled to this country, met a few local church leaders in one particular place and asked them how many Christians there are in China. This approach is futile, as local leaders have no idea how many believers there are in the whole country. This is especially true of the house churches. There are now hundreds of different house-church movements, many of them geographically

extensive, most of them unconnected to each other. Within each movement, statistical information is usually by only a few individuals in the most senior leadership—it would be a security risk if a greater number knew the size of the movement. Therefore, for any researcher to be in a position to make even an educated guess at the size of the Church in China, they would need to have a relationship with the most senior leaders of all the major house-church networks.

(c) *Being in China does not guarantee knowledge.* I have been aware of some comical situations occurring there that show how difficult it is to get accurate information about the size of the church. A missionary family living in a small town in Henan Province were convinced there were no more than a handful of believers in that town. For more than a year they had been on the lookout for other Christians, but had managed to locate only a few. They had sent several passionate newsletters to their supporters back home, telling them how needy this unreached place was, and giving the impression that they were the sole light shining for Christ in an ocean of darkness.

In 2000, I was invited to speak in a house-church training centre in that same town. Passers-by walked a few feet away from the entrance, and yet it had gone undetected for years while hundreds of evangelists had received instruction there. The people who ran it had many years of experience and knew how to conceal its existence from both the general population and the police. Ironically, this training centre was located just a few hundred metres down the street from where the missionary family lived. Its leaders assured me that at least 10 percent of the people in the town were believers.

(d) *Some Christian leaders in China simply do not know.* A number of house-church leaders have told me they refuse to keep records because they don't want to fall under the judgment of God, as David did when he conducted an unauthorized census to see how big his army was (1 Chronicles 21:1-17). Many of them have the attitude: "If God knows those who belong to him, that is enough." They are content to know, as house-church leader Peter Xu Yongze put it to me,

that massive numbers of people are being saved all over China, and we are sure that heaven is very happy, for Jesus said, "I tell you that in the same way there

will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).<sup>3</sup>

(e) *General problems with counting Christians.* The difficulty of conducting accurate surveys of the number of believers is not confined to China. Even finding out how many there are in a Western city such as Chicago or Manchester presents huge problems. Dozens of factors must be considered and definitions agreed upon before a survey begins, or else large discrepancies will inevitably result. Even estimates of the total number of Christians globally have varied by hundreds of millions. While the *National Review* in 1995 gave a figure of 2.8 billion “biblical believers”,<sup>4</sup> the respected researcher Dr. David Barrett projected that by mid-1995 there were 1,939,419,000 “Christians of all kinds” in the world<sup>5</sup>—a disparity of more than 860 million!

(f) *Self-interest and personal motives.* It has been pointed out by some who give a estimate of the number of Christians in China that certain organizations inflate their figures because it suits their fundraising interests. According to the Amity News Service, the provincial state-sanctioned Christian Councils throughout China “certainly tend to make conservative estimates. Why should they be interested in inflating their figures? On the other hand, I suspect that foreign groups smuggling Bibles into China or organizing radio broadcasts tend to give rather high figures to prove the necessity of their work.”<sup>6</sup>

There is undoubtedly a measure of truth in this assertion, but I believe the opposite is also true: that some researchers and organizations deliberately understate the number of Christians in China because it suits their particular stance. Perhaps they have gained a reputation for providing conservative figures and, maybe subconsciously, want to protect that reputation even when contrary facts stare them in the face. The official figures released from time to time by the Three-Self Church and the China Christian Council from time to time are conservative, because they only count the believers under their control. Often

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<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Peter Xu Yongze (October 2003).

<sup>4</sup> *National Review* (23 October 1995).

<sup>5</sup> *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1994).

<sup>6</sup> “How to Count the Number of Christians in China: Questions and Answers,” *Amity News Service* (September 1997).

they only mention in passing the existence of unregistered house churches, and they dismiss these as insignificant. If the TSPM and the CCC acknowledged tens of millions of Christians who are outside their sphere of influence, it would cause them embarrassment and call into question their right to speak for all Christians in China. It suits them, therefore, to claim that most of the Protestants are in their congregations and that the house churches are relatively few in number. This clearly contradicts the actual facts.

Now we will look at each of the major parts of the church in China, and consider some of the specific difficulties in getting accurate information from them.

### ***The Three-Self Church***

On the surface, the government-sanctioned Protestant church in China, known as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, appears to be the most straightforward to gather statistics from. After all, it regularly releases province-level statistics for the number of believers in its churches. In 2004, the Amity News Service reported a total of 18,017,750 million Protestant Christians<sup>7</sup>—a marked increase from a few years before. For years the official number of Christians in China was just four million. This was gradually increased to eight, then 12, and then, in 2003, 15 million.<sup>8</sup>

After the figure of over 18 million was released, Tony Lambert of OMF challenged the government's statistics:

I think I have shown fairly convincingly that the real TSPM/CCC figure should be raised to 21.2 million—which is significantly higher than the TSPM's own 17 million figure or the ANS 2004 estimate of 18 million. However, it is still an extremely conservative estimate, as it also leaves out all youth and children under the age of 18 who are still, officially, discouraged from joining a church.<sup>9</sup>

The figures released by the TSPM or the CCC are routinely quoted around the world, usually without any explanation of their origin or context. Lambert points out they are only include “an estimate of baptized adult believers meeting in

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<sup>7</sup> In 32,000 registered churches and an additional 16,000 'preaching points.' See "How Many Sheep are There in the Chinese Flock?" *Amity News Service* (November-December 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Tony Lambert, "Counting Christians in China: A Cautionary Report," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Vol 27, No 1, January 2003), p7

<sup>9</sup> *China Insight* (August-September 2005).

registered TSPM churches.”<sup>10</sup> He notes that they “do not include children and young people under the age of eighteen, who are forbidden from being baptized and becoming church members before adulthood. These statistics are therefore conservative; also they usually do not include the large numbers of *mudaozhe* (inquirers or seekers), who may well be believers but for various reasons have not yet been baptized.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact, there are millions, if not tens of millions, of people who are genuine believers associated with Three-Self churches who have yet to be baptized, or have been baptized somewhere else (for example, in a house church), or are not registered members of any church. The disparity between the official TSPM figures and the true number of individuals who worship in its churches can therefore be very large. For example, in 1996 a publication associated with the TSPM reported: “In Henan Province the number of baptized Christians is now estimated at about 1.5 million, with an additional 2 million seekers who have yet to be baptized.”<sup>12</sup>

In the course of compiling information for this review, I became convinced that in some provinces the TSPM and CCC have been purposely under-reporting the number of believers in their churches, perhaps because the officials in those provinces do not want to alert the government to how rapidly Christianity is spreading. In Jiangsu, for example, the official TSPM figure is just 1,572,000.<sup>13</sup> However, as I went through years of clippings from the TSPM’s own publications such as *Tianfeng* and the *Amity News Service*, a rather different picture started to emerge. These publications often include stories of Christians in a particular county or city, and sometimes give the number of Three-Self believers in each location. Now, there are 73 counties and cities in Jiangsu, and I was able to find documented sources for the number of Three-Self Christians in 59 of them—and adding these figures together I arrived at a total of almost three million; nearly double the official tally. Let me underline that most of these figures came from

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<sup>10</sup> Tony Lambert, “China—Statistics,” *China Insight* (November-December 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Lambert, “Counting Christians in China,” p7

<sup>12</sup> *Amity News Service* (March 1996).

<sup>13</sup> *Amity News Service* (November-December 2004).

TSPM sources, and yet when added up they conflict with the official figure for the province. which suggests that officials in Jiangsu are deliberately understating the number of Christians in their province. The same applies to TSPM figures for other provinces.

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suspect that the true number of people who worship Jesus Christ in TSPM churches throughout China today is about double the official figure. That is, there may be some 36 million Three-Self Christians in China today. Of these, as many as one-third are people also affiliated with independent house churches in one form or another. They may attend a Three-Self church on Sundays, and a house church meeting during the week. To avoid double-counting such believers, I have included them in my Three-Self statistics and not in house church statistics.

### ***Protestant House Churches***

The most controversial statistics regarding how many believers there are in China concern the unregistered Protestant house churches. When the People's Republic was established in 1949, there were approximately 750,000 Protestants in the country. Since then, God has done a mighty work and the church has grown rapidly, but just how much it has grown is still hotly disputed.<sup>14</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, there were many observers who believed that Christianity in China had been obliterated, and if that country ever opened up again, the missionaries would need to start afresh. In the late 1970s, however, news began to trickle out that suggested that the church there had survived the extreme brutality of those years, despite having no leaders, few Bibles and no buildings to worship in. By 1980, it was becoming clearer that the house churches not only had survived but were growing in number and needed urgent support, especially with Bibles.

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<sup>14</sup> Many contemporary mission researchers divide Christians into Catholic and "Independent" groupings, but I have decided to use the more traditional 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' breakdown as it still fits most appropriately in the current Chinese context. I have then further analyzed each of these two major divisions by providing statistics for Three-Self Church and house church Protestants; and Catholic Patriotic Association and house church Catholics.

The Chinese Church Research Center, based in Hong Kong, sent researchers into most of China's provinces to conduct clandestine surveys of the number of Christians in each location and to see what needs they had. The researchers returned with startling news after meeting with hundreds of house-church leaders. In most locations, the number of believers appeared to be at least double what it had been before 1949, and in some places, such as southern Henan Province and parts of Anhui, the church seemed to have grown four or fivefold during the decades of persecution.

Since the 1980s, debate has raged over how many believers there are in China. Some have presented large but unsubstantiated figures, but others have urged caution and published much more conservative estimates.

### ***Catholics, Official and Underground***

The Catholic Patriotic Association functions in much the same way as the TSPM does for Protestants. There is a further issue, however, in that it rejects the authority of the Pope and appoints its own bishops and priests, without reference to the Vatican. In 1948, just a year before the Communists came to power, there were 3,258,536 Catholics in China,<sup>15</sup> who through decades of persecution became divided between the CPA and the unregistered, or underground, Catholic church. By the mid-1990s most serious researchers believed there were between 10 and 12 million Catholics in the country, and yet the CPA acknowledged just four million. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the low official figures, by 2005 almost all independent sources put the true number of Catholics in China at least 12 million.<sup>16</sup>

Another factor that confuses the counting of Catholics in China is the refusal of many believers to obey the government's one-child policy. One analyst has written:

The number of children born in China, especially in the countryside, far exceeds the government's recorded figure.... For fear of reprisal parents are very reluctant to register these 'additional' children with the government. Some of

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<sup>15</sup> "How Many Catholics are there in China?" (September 1997).

<sup>16</sup> *Tripod* (Winter 2005).

these are born to Catholic parents. They remain without certificates of birth and their baptisms are not recorded in the parish register. Parents often hesitate to have the names of their children included in the parish registers because these records are open to the government.<sup>17</sup>

The CPA seems unsure as to what figures it should publish. At one time in the mid-1980s, its secretary in Shanghai stated that there were 100,000 Catholics in that diocese. When the bishop, Jin Luxian, then visited Belgium, he said there were 120,000—but a short while later an official from the Religious Affairs Bureau said: “The real number is more like 160,000 to 180,000.”<sup>18</sup> The CPA, like its Protestant counterparts, does not count believers under the age of 18.

### ***The Most Basic Question is often Overlooked***

All kinds of disparate surveys of Christians in China have been bandied about over the years, but I don’t believe I have ever seen anyone address the most basic question of all: “What qualifies someone as a Christian?” Any worthwhile survey must first define who have been counted as Christians and who have not. It is also crucial to specify which sectors of the church are covered in a survey and which are not. Are Catholics included, for example, or just Protestants? If Catholics are included, are both the members of officially-recognized CPA churches and the millions of ‘underground’ believers being counted?

Another difficulty relates to the existence of pseudo-Christian sects in China. Should these be included in surveys of believers or not? I am referring not to blatant cults such as the Eastern Lightning, who are clearly not Christians by any definition, but to other groups that some Christian leaders in China (as well as the Chinese government) denounce as cults, though others regard their members as true brothers and sisters in the faith. For political reasons, many surveys of Christians in China discount all such groups out of hand. As their combined membership runs into millions, this is not something that can simply be brushed aside. It has to be addressed.

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<sup>17</sup> “How Many Catholics are there in China?”

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Lam, “How Many Chinese Christians are There?” *Tripod* (September-October 1992).

Over the years, many terms have been used to describe and define Christians for the purposes of a survey, including ‘evangelicals,’ ‘born-again Christians,’ ‘true believers,’ ‘Bible-believing Christians,’ ‘Spirit-filled Christians,’ ‘Great Commission Christians,’ and so on. In this study, I have defined a Christian simply as anyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ and calls upon him alone for salvation, regardless of their age or their church affiliation. Any attempt to be more particular immerses one in endless confusion and debate because the Body of Christ in China is so extremely complex. Political and social factors unique to China complicate attempts to gather accurate information on the church there.

I have also included the children of believing parents in this study. In Asian societies, it is common for the whole family to practise one religion—it is practically unheard-of for Muslim parents to have Christian children or for Christian parents to have Buddhist children, and so on.

My survey include estimates for Protestants in both the Three-Self Church and the house churches and for members of both the CPA and the underground Catholic churches.

### ***A Summary of Past Surveys***

Many surveys have been conducted since 1920 in an attempt to establish how many Christians there are in China. In the following pages, I would like to summarize some of the most significant ones.

After the first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, arrived in the Orient in 1807, progress was painfully slow and discouraging. However, just as a huge avalanche may begin with the dislodgement of a single small stone, so the church in China slowly gathered momentum. According to one source, “In the year 1843 there were only six communicants connected with Protestant missions. In 1853 there were 350; in 1865, 2,000; in 1876, 13,000; in 1886, 28,000; in 1889, 37,000; in 1893, 55,000; and at the present [1901] there are between 80,000 and 90,000 communicants.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> J. Campbell Gibson, *Mission Problems and Mission Methods in South China* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1901), p233

Despite such exponential growth, in the late 1880s some British church leaders launched an attack on the missionary enterprise in China. They called for it to be wound up on the grounds that it was an abject failure. One statistician said that, at the rate the gospel was advancing there, it would take another 27,000 years before the conversion rate caught up with the birth rate. Even if the population remained static, he worked out, it would take 1,680,000 years to convert the whole country!<sup>20</sup> In 1901, a “traveller in China announced that he had formed a low opinion of the prospects of missions there, and presented a calculation to the effect that the harvest reaped by the missionaries might be described as ‘amounting to a fraction more than two Chinamen per missionary per annum.’”<sup>21</sup>

The size of the Chinese church was indeed miniscule in the early decades of missionary work, but the soil was so thoroughly prepared that a great harvest was one day to be reaped.

### ***1920 – The China Continuation Committee’s 2.3 million***

Between 1918 and 1920 an exercise took place that was described as “a general survey of the numerical strength and geographical distribution of the Christian forces in China.”<sup>22</sup> This huge undertaking, assisted by more than 150 Protestant missionary organizations under the auspices of the China Continuation Committee, mapped the progress of the church in China. It culminated in the publishing in 1922 of a large book titled *The Christian Occupation of China*. Without doubt, this remains the most comprehensive and accurate survey of Christians in China in history.

In 1920, the China Continuation Committee published a figure of 366,524 Protestant believers, which represented a 330-percent increase since 1900.<sup>23</sup> The number of believers had risen dramatically over the preceding three decades, as the following table and graph show:

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<sup>20</sup> *North China Herald* (1 June 1888), p513

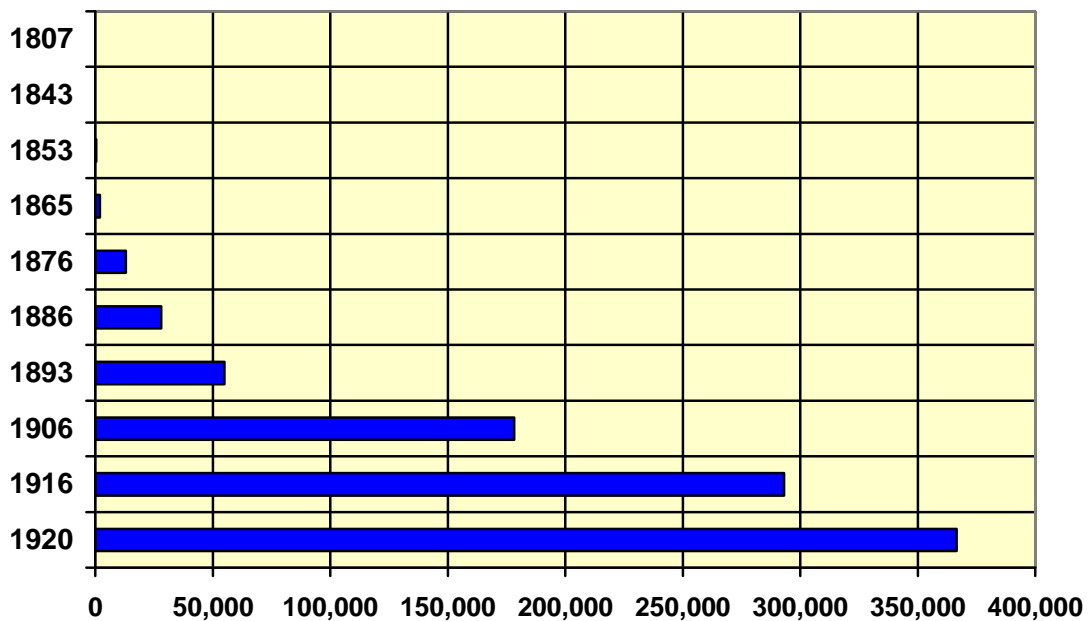
<sup>21</sup> Gibson, *Mission Problems*, p233

<sup>22</sup> Stauffer, *The Christian Occupation of China*, subtitle of book.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p38

## PROTESTANTS IN CHINA (1807 – 1920)

Year:	Protestant Communicants:	Net Change:
1807	0	
1843	6	+6
1853	350	+294
1865	2,000	+1,650
1876	13,000	+11,000
1886	28,000	+15,000
1893	55,000	+27,000
1906	178,251	+123,251
1916	293,139	+114,888
1920	366,524	+73,385



In addition, the China Continuation Committee reported a figure of 1,971,189 Catholics in China in 1920,<sup>24</sup> plus 5,587 Russian Orthodox Christians.<sup>25</sup> Overall, this exhaustive survey counted a grand total of 2,343,300 Christians of all descriptions in China in 1920.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p461

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p464

The chaos and civil war that ravaged the country in the 1920s, '30s and '40s made accurate research impossible, and no further comprehensive statistics on the church in China were published before the Communists too control in 1949. There was, therefore, a huge gap of some 70 tumultuous years before the next detailed account on the size of the Chinese church emerged.

### ***1992 – Jonathan Chao's 75 million***

In September 1992, the Hong Kong-based Chinese Church Research Center, under the leadership of the late missionary statesman Jonathan Chao, caused a stir around the world when it announced that an informant had seen a document produced by China's State Statistical Bureau that said there were 63 million Protestants and 12 million Catholics in the country as of June that year.<sup>26</sup> Earlier in 1992, the TSPM had published a figure of just five million Christians under its supervision, while the official figure for Catholics at the time was four million.

Reactions to the CCRC's statement varied widely. Those who had promoted a high estimate of the number of Christians in China felt vindicated. Others expressed scepticism or outright disbelief and demanded more evidence. One publication commented:

The informant was not able to give any further details, such as the definition of Protestant and Catholic Christian used by the survey, the Christian population of each province, or the gender proportion and average educational level of the Christian community.<sup>27</sup>

The Amity News Service noted that the CCRC had "never published a copy of this document, and there has been no independent confirmation of its existence."<sup>28</sup>

The Chinese authorities never did release the figures the CCRC claimed to have seen, and so they remain unsubstantiated.

### ***1997 – Amity News Service's 13.5 million***

The strongest opposition to the CCRC's claim came from organizations and individuals aligned with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China

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<sup>26</sup> See *China News and Church Report* (25 September 1992).

<sup>27</sup> "Report of Mainland Survey of Religion," *China Study Journal* (Vol.17, No.3, December 1992), p40

<sup>28</sup> "How to Count the Number of Christians" (September 1997).

Christian Council. If there were indeed 63 million Protestant Christians in China, it would mean that the official authorities controlled only about 20 percent of them. In 1997, the Amity News Service released an estimate of 9.8—13.5 million Protestant Christians. This figure was double that of what the TSPM claimed five years earlier. Incredibly, it insisted that its total included “all [Protestant] Christians in China, whether they worship in churches or homes, whether their congregations are part of a Christian Council or not.”<sup>29</sup>

Many house church leaders ridiculed these figures, asserting that the true number of Christians in China was between 50 and 80 million.

### ***2001 – Operation World’s 91 million***

British mission strategist Patrick Johnstone first wrote *Operation World* in 1974. Further editions were published every several years, and by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had become one of the best-selling and most influential mission books in history. *Operation World* profiles each country in the world, providing reliable analysis of various demographics including the state of Christianity, and highlighting the present spiritual climate and prayer needs of each region.

Johnstone teamed up with Jason Mandryk to produce the 2001 edition of the book. Utilizing numerous sources and researchers, Johnstone and Mandryk listed a total of 91.575 million Christian adherents in China.<sup>30</sup> This figure was comprised of 23 million TSPM believers, 11.7 million Catholics, and the rest comprised of various Protestant groups, including house church networks.

Although I believe statistics provided in the provincial summaries to be askew, overall I believe their research of the size of the Chinese church is among the most accurate and reliable to emerge in recent decades. In their own words, they “sought to painstakingly piece together the biggest picture from every scrap of evidence available.”<sup>31</sup> The authors’ desire to listen and learn from numerous sources has given their survey a ring of authenticity.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Johnstone & Mandryk, *Operation World* (2001), p160

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## ***2006 – Tony Lambert’s 60 million***

Tony Lambert is a British researcher and author. A former diplomat to China, his work has been a great blessing to many who love that country. From the time he began to publish articles on the Chinese church in the 1980s, Lambert has been an advocate for caution. He has stressed that the bigger claims for the number of Christians in China are unsubstantiated and has suggested that it would be wise to propagate only figures for which there is firm proof. Some of his criticisms have been strongly worded—for example: “These statistics are impressive, but they simply cannot stand up under closer analysis, for they are backed by no reliable, documented evidence.... It is high time such castles in the air were brought down to earth!”<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, he has admitted, “Quantifying Christian belief in China is fraught with difficulty. The avowedly atheist authorities try to prevent surveys by foreign or Chinese researchers that might challenge the official view that Christianity is still a marginal phenomenon.”<sup>33</sup>

At first sight, his insistence on documented evidence appears sound, but it is something of a nonsense in China’s current political and religious environment. At present, it is impossible for anyone to establish accurate figures for the Protestant house churches and underground Catholic churches, whose very existence is illegal. Furthermore, what “documentation” would be needed to satisfy such a requirement? Inevitably, most of the house churches conceal their operations from outside eyes, which means that the kind of evidence academics demand is simply impossible to obtain. As Lambert himself has said, “Counting Christians in China is notoriously difficult.”<sup>34</sup>

Lambert has written two excellent books, as well as numerous articles on the Church in China. His own estimate of its size has grown. In 2000, for example, he wrote: “It seems safe to conclude that the total number of Protestants in China

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<sup>32</sup> Lambert, “Counting Christians in China,” pp6-7

<sup>33</sup> *Global Chinese Ministries* (September 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Lambert, “Counting Christians in China,” p6

[both Three-Self and house churches] may be around 50 million.”<sup>35</sup> Six years later, his revised and updated book *China's Christian Millions* went further: “The real figure which includes the house-church believers may well be over 60 million.”<sup>36</sup>

His caution in this matter has many merits, but in the opinion of some he takes it too far. Attempts to share with him information on church growth in various parts of China have sometimes met with frustration.

For some provinces, his statistics are substantially lower than other, reliable estimates. Whereas he has published a figure of just 50,000 Protestants on Hainan Island,<sup>37</sup> house church leaders state 360,000. He is also adrift when it comes to the Beijing Municipality (which includes 14 counties in addition to the official city area). In 2006, he lamented: “It is a sobering thought that only some 130,000 people (40,000 TSPM + c. 90,000 house-church) meet as Protestant Christians in China's capital—or just under 1 percent.”<sup>38</sup> However, the leaders of several local house church networks agree on a figure of 500,000—around four times higher than Lambert's estimate. (It should be pointed out that this still represents only about 4 percent of the Municipality's population.)

In summary, Lambert has provided a tremendous service to the Body of Christ worldwide over many years. He is a meticulous researcher, but in trying to avoid any hint of sensationalism, he was too cautious. His reliance on published evidence would then fail to enumerate many low-profile house church networks, and this results in a considerable reduction in some provincial totals.

### ***2006 – Ye Xiaowen's 130 million***

Many observers were shocked when, at the end of 2006, the most senior religious official in China was reported by the Xinhua News Agency as revealing that the

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<sup>35</sup> Lambert, “China—Statistics.”

<sup>36</sup> Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (2006), p19

<sup>37</sup> OMF, “Survey of the Chinese Church: Part II,” (April 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (2006), p237

number of Christians in China had reached 130 million.<sup>39</sup> Ye Xiaowen,<sup>40</sup> the director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, an arm of the Chinese government, made the statement at two closed meetings held at Beijing University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His figure included approximately 20 million Catholics. Ye is the same man who, in June 1997, described all unregistered house church groups as “evil, illegal organizations that undermine social order.”<sup>41</sup> Ironically, such a high figure as 130 million must include a very large component of members of the very groups he so strongly condemned.

This was the first time that any Chinese official had come out with such a high figure, but it seems to be quite consistent—allowing for growth in the interim—with the CCRC’s claim 14 years earlier that a government report indicated that there were then 75 million Christians in the country. Ye’s announcement likewise got a mixed reaction. Some people welcomed it as a vindication of what they had been saying for years, others made light of it and demanded evidence, while others chose simply to ignore it.

### ***2007 – Werner Bürklin’s 39 million***

Werner Bürklin was born in China to German missionary parents. They were obliged to leave the country in 1950, but he returned to the land of his birth in 1981 and has worked with Christians in China ever since. He leads China Partner, an organization that does much good work among the registered churches in many parts of the country.

In 2007, Bürklin announced the results of a survey he and his colleagues had conducted into how many Christians lived in China. According to one report,

To get the facts, China Partner sent teams to every province, municipality and autonomous region in China—31 in all. The only region they did not survey was Tibet. Over a 13-month period, his team interviewed 5,430 people ranging in

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<sup>39</sup> This was reported widely, including by China Aid Association, ‘China: Persecution of Protestant Christians in the Approach to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games,’ June 2008, p3

<sup>40</sup> His name is not Yie Xiaowen, as was commonly reported in English accounts at the time. Ye Xiaowen is a native of Guizhou Province, born in 1950. He excelled as an academic in sociology and philosophy, before going to work for the Bureau of Religious Affairs, where he rose through the ranks to become director.

<sup>41</sup> Aikman, “A Church Grows in China.”

age from 16-92 from a wide variety of occupations. The surveys took place in parks, markets, subways, buses, on the streets, and in numerous other locales.

Based on their polling, Bürklin believes there are 39 million Protestant Christians in China, with a three percent margin of error. He estimates roughly half are in the underground church, and the other half are in government-approved churches.... 'I'm very disappointed with evangelical leaders who readily accept numbers they want to be true without going into depth,' Bürklin says.<sup>42</sup>

The same article said that Bürklin “disputes” the much higher figure of 130 million Christians announced by Ye the previous year.

His survey impressed some people because the methodology employed seemed professional. However, in his 2005 book, *Jesus Never Left China*, he wrote, “I regret that I cannot speak for the many house churches that did not register with the local authorities.”<sup>43</sup> This honest admission points out a fundamental flaw in Bürklin’s survey. Given his close relationship with the government’s religious institutions, it is difficult to see how Bürklin could have gained any accurate insight into the size and extent of China’s house churches. Other statements in his book reveal an extraordinary naivety regarding the situation of many of their members. For example, he confidently declared: “For most well-informed believers in China, it is not persecution but prosecution that Christians may experience. The state prosecutes people, including Christians, for breaking the laws of the land. They do not prosecute them for being followers of Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

He even stated: “In my many years of ministry in China I have yet to find a Christian who has been incarcerated because of his or her beliefs. I do not say that this has never happened in China. Others insist that this has happened many times. If it is done, however, believers do have legal rights to defend themselves.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Ellis, “China Survey Reveals Fewer Christians than Some Evangelicals want to Believe,” *Assist News Service* (1 October 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Bürklin, *Jesus Never Left China*, p126

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p77

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p114

These observations are astonishing. On many occasions I have been in meetings at which every house church leader present has experienced imprisonment, beating, torture and deprivation, all because of their faith in Jesus Christ. In 2002, the Fangcheng Church leader Zhang Rongliang—who was again behind bars when this book went to press)—told me: “In one leaders’ meeting a few years ago I joked before lunch that only those who had been in prison were allowed to eat. But then everyone sat down to eat! Every single person in the room (approximately 120 brothers and sisters) had spent time in prison.”<sup>46</sup> Chinese house church Christians regard Bürklin’s assertion that they are not persecuted for their faith with incredulity. Persecution is not something from a bygone era but the contemporary experiences of many believers.

As for Bürklin’s survey, I believe his findings are sincerely derived from the information his colleagues were able to gather from their sources. Those sources, however, appear to have been, almost exclusively, Three-Self church leaders and others associated with the registered church. Moreover, house church leaders are notoriously reluctant to share information with outsiders, especially those who work closely with the government-sanctioned churches.

Ironically, just two years before his survey was completed, Bürklin had warned readers of his book: “Do not make unsubstantiated claims as to how many Christians live in China today. No one knows!”<sup>47</sup> It is remarkable, then, that his survey claimed to have a margin of error of just 3 percent.

When he released the results of his survey, Bürklin also noted: “Many say there are more Christians in the rural areas than in the urban centres. We were surprised our research didn’t prove that to be true, but more research is needed.”<sup>48</sup> This reveals another fundamental flaw in the survey. Every other researcher I am aware of agrees that the overwhelming majority of Christians in China live in the countryside—and this is still the case, even if the large-scale migration to the cities in recent years has evened the balance a little.

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<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Zhang Rongliang (August 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Bürklin, *Jesus Never Left China*, p155

<sup>48</sup> Ellis, “China Survey Reveals Fewer Christians.”

Finally, if there are indeed only 39 million Protestants in China today, one has to wonder why there should be more Bibles in that country than there are Christians. According to its latest figures, the Amity Press in Nanjing has printed and distributed 46 million Bibles since its launch in 1987.<sup>49</sup> In addition to these, at least 10 million have been smuggled into the country by various foreign Christian groups, and millions more have been printed illicitly inside the country. And yet it is clear that multitudes of Chinese Christians living in rural areas are still without Bibles today. It does not make sense if there are only 39 million Protestants in the country.

Bürklin's intentions appear to have been sincere, but the methods he used to reach his conclusions were seriously inadequate.

Indeed, the Communist government itself has contradicted Bürklin's low figures. In 2009 the national *China Daily* newspaper stated there are at least 50 million house church Christians in China,<sup>50</sup> in addition to the official number of 21 million registered believers who attend Three-Self churches.

### ***2,370 Cities and Counties***

In the following tables, I give my own estimates of the number of Christians in China. My interest in this subject started over 20 years ago, and I have been collecting data since. My survey provides figures for Christians of every description, in four main categories: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the Protestant house churches, the Catholic Patriotic Association, and the Catholic house churches. I supply statistics for all 2,370 cities and counties in every province, municipality, and autonomous region of China.

I have gathered this information from a wide variety of sources. First, more than 2,000 published sources have been noted in the tables, including a multitude of books, journals, magazine articles and internet reports that I have been collating

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<sup>49</sup> *World Report* (April 2007). The 40-million milestone was celebrated by the Amity Press on 17 January 2006. *Amity News Service* (March-April 2006).

<sup>50</sup> *China Daily* (3 December 2009).

for years. Second, my coworkers and I have also conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with house church leaders from many different groups, responsible for work in practically every part of China. We have found that while some house church networks do not keep statistics on their congregations, other large networks do keep detailed records about numbers of fellowships and believers, which we have had the great privilege to access.

### ***Ground Zero***

Before I started entering data into my tables, I decided to begin with this assumption: that in any given place in the country there are no Christians at all unless I have a figure from a documented source or can make an intelligent estimate of their number based on information gathered from Christian leaders in China. In other words, I wanted to put aside all pre-conceptions and expectations, input the information I had and see what the totals came to the end.

I hope that readers will acknowledge that my findings, though imperfect, have been reached with the sincere intention to draw as accurate a picture as possible of the Chinese church. You may not agree with my conclusions, but I hope you will sense that this survey has been conducted without any ulterior motive or hidden agenda. Ironically, some people who previewed my figures were exasperated to find that they were so high, while others were upset because they were “too low”.

These tables will be updated regularly as new information comes to hand. You can follow their progress in each successive volume of the *Fire and Blood* series, which will contain exhaustive figures for the particular province it profiles. The most up-to-date tables for the whole country can also always be viewed on our Asia Harvest website: [www.asiaharvest.org](http://www.asiaharvest.org)

Although I have gone to every length to make this survey as complete as it can be, I acknowledge nonetheless that, owing to the difficulties of conducting such a survey in China today—not the least of which is the sheer size of the country—there is a margin of error of 20 percent. If errors are indeed found, I suspect that generally it will prove to be the case that my estimates were too low.

I am glad to receive feedback and input from anyone with knowledge about Christians in any part of China. I can be contacted by letter or email via the Asia Harvest website. All communications will be kept in strict confidence.

### ***A Note about Security***

Some people may ask whether it is appropriate to publish any estimates for the true number of Christians in China, if such information might lead to more persecution from the authorities. It is important to note the following points:

(a) None of the information provided in these tables will be new to the government. It has clearly already thoroughly researched the spread of Christianity in every part of the country, as is shown by Ye Xiaowen's announcement in 2006 that there were then 130 million Christians in China. In December 2009 the national newspaper *China Daily* interviewed scholar Liu Peng who has spent years researching religion for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Liu claimed the "house churches...have at least 50 million followers nationwide." This figure is consistent with our research.

(b) The tables contain more than 2,000 references from numerous published sources, including various books and articles by Tony Lambert, *Tianfeng*, *Amity News Service*, and several Catholic publications. On the whole, I am merely collating information that is already in the public domain.

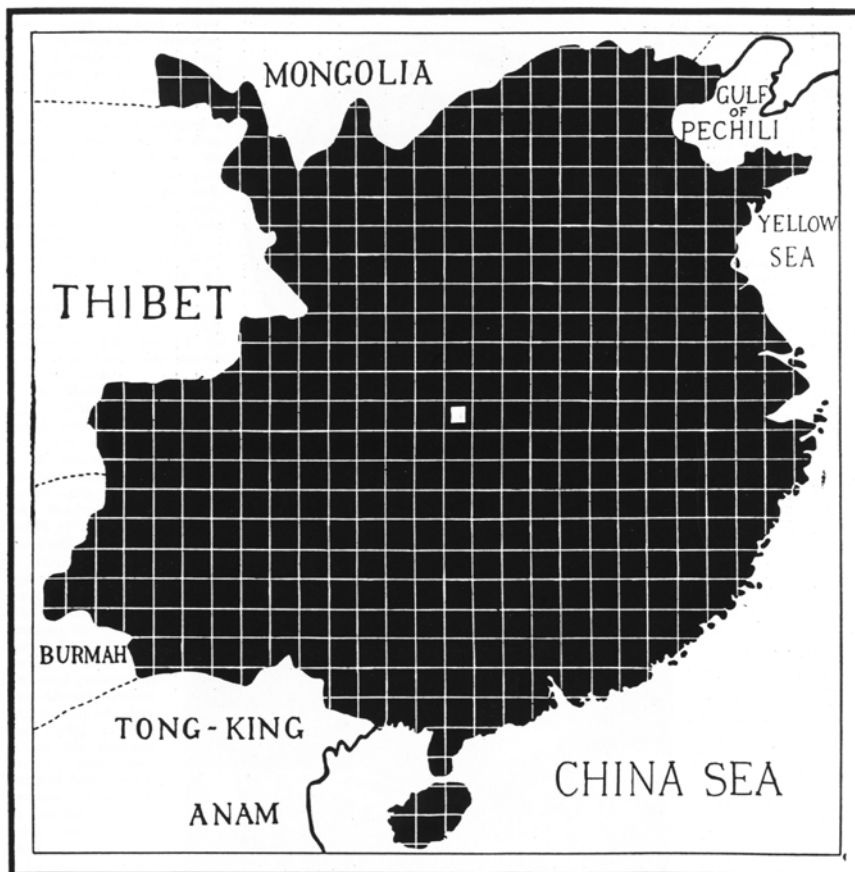
(c) I have consulted various house church leaders in China and all of them were content that this information should be published, as long as the survey focuses on statistics and avoids specific information such as the names and locations of Christian leaders, as it has. In fact, church leaders very glad for this study—albeit disappointed that my total figure came out lower than they expected.

### ***Putting the Chinese Church into a Proper Perspective***

We have seen that estimates for the number of Christians in China vary widely and that the issue is sometimes clouded by the personal prejudices of those conducting the survey. It is important to note, however, that even the lowest estimates confirm a tremendous growth rate for the church in China. It is

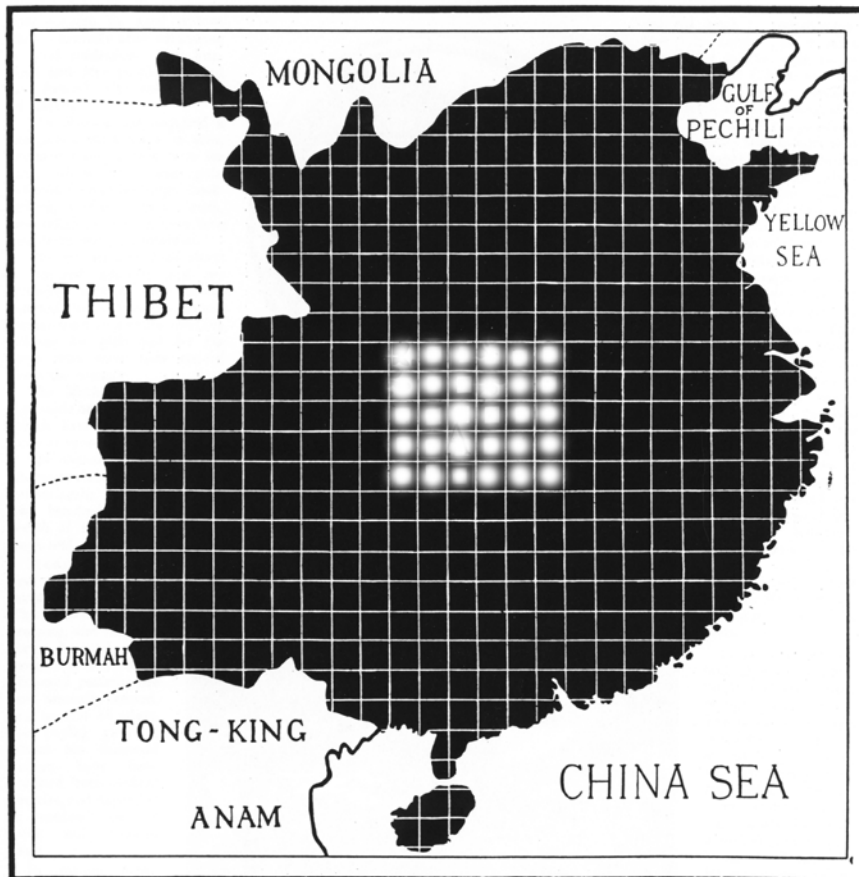
generally agreed that there were 750,000 Protestant believers in the country in 1949, and so even if there are just 30 million now it would represent a 40-fold increase in the nearly six decades of Communist rule. This is extraordinary and should be the cause of much rejoicing and thanks to God. There are very few countries on earth that could claim a similar explosion of faith over a similar length of time.

The picture below was published in the magazine *China's Millions* in 1903. It shows a map of China at the time, divided into squares. Each black square represents "souls living in spiritual darkness, while the small white square represents the total number of Church members, all the scholars in Mission Schools and all other adherents of the Christian Church in China."<sup>51</sup> Christians at the time were a fraction of 1 percent of the country's population.



<sup>51</sup> "Diagrammatic Map of China," *China's Millions* (September 1903).

This second map, which we have created, represents the approximate number of Christians in China today, compared with the total population. Today, Christians make up more than 7 percent of the population. As the picture shows, there is much to thank God for, but also much more to be done.



All discussion of how many Christians there are in China should be tempered by the realization that more than 90 percent of its present population face a Christless eternity. Hundreds of millions of individuals have yet to hear the gospel. House church leaders in China often tell me how ashamed and burdened they feel that so many of their countrymen and women have yet to know Jesus Christ. This awareness motivates them to do whatever it takes to preach the gospel to every ethnic group and in every city, town and village—to every individual—in China, and to do whatever necessary to see Christ exalted throughout the land.

May we, too, have such a heart for the lost whenever we are tempted to bicker about how many Christians there are in China! God has done, and continues to do, an incredible thing in that country. May we humbly give thanks to him, and recognize that we are living in the days prophesied by the Prophet Habakkuk: “Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told” (Habakkuk 1:5).