

UP FRONT WITH WANG YU

Li Shixiong, a religious activist, is the founder of the New York City-based "Committee for Investigation on Persecution of Religion in China." He currently resides in New York City.

Wang Yu Please tell us something about your background growing up. I think it must have something to do with your current work. Were you born into a Christian family?

Li Shixiong My grandparents were devout Christians, but I did not know that for a long time. They both passed away in Taiwan. Like many Chinese families, mine was split by the civil war between Nationalists and Communists, so I had no contact with my grandparents' religious beliefs.

We Chinese often describe childhood as a golden period of life, but mine was one of dark suffering. When I was seven years old my parents were sent to the Shayang Labor Reform Farm in Hubei. It was in the Sixties, the so-called "years of natural calamity." The whole of China was a disaster; most people were hungry except for those who held high positions in the regime. As prisoners on a labor reform farm, our lives were even worse. Death was a daily event. Although I was a little child, the longer I stayed there the more desperate I felt, particularly in the winter.

There were always endless political study sessions in the winter because there was not much farm work to do. During the study sessions people made false charges against one another: it was very ugly. Living under such circumstances day after day filled me with hopelessness. One day I followed the example of some adults and tried to hang myself from a tree. Miraculously, the rather strong branch broke and I fell to the ground. At that time I was eleven years old, still a child.

It was in that labor reform farm that I first learned something about Christianity.

In 1972 I made the acquaintance of an old man, a prisoner on the farm. He told me some stories from the Bible, teaching me about God. Listening to him I felt good, but in my mind there were doubts. If there was a god why did he make our life so miserable? My mother was a very kind person. Surely God could have arranged a much better life for her, so why didn't He?

However, this old man opened the door of the Christian world to me.

WY When did you become a practicing Christian?

LS It is very hard to say. My belief in God developed very gradually and slowly. In 2000 when I helped some Chinese Christians here to apply for political asylum I started to realize the true meaning of being a Christian. That is probably when I became a devout Christian.

WY You grew up on a labor reform farm. Was there any formal education provided for the prisoners' children? What did you do to earn your living? How did you come to the United States?

LS The prisoners' children had some education on the labor reform farm, but it was very poor.

I did various jobs to make a living. Once I worked as a carpenter. You see the chair you're sitting on is very short. I picked it up off the street and cut off the broken parts. I found all the furniture in this room on the street. I repaired each piece and made it useful again.

On the farm, probably because I was a little child, people talked to me more freely. An old Nationalist general used to tell me that America was a free country; people there could do what they liked. Once he even showed me a picture of the Statue of Liberty. Having never tasted freedom, I yearned for it. America became my dream. I decided I would go there one day. I planned for more than ten years to achieve this goal.

In the Eighties I was released from the farm. While working hard to save money I diligently collected information about how to emigrate to America. But as a person with neither a college degree nor special skills, what chance did I have? However, there is always a way out. Finally through the international travel agency where I had been working I found an opportunity to be sent to the United States.

WY How did you get the idea of investigating the persecution of Christians in China?

LS The idea came to me by itself.

In 2000, I was working as a consultant to law firm helping

Chinese overseas apply for political asylum. In August of that year, several people came to my office asking for help in applying for political asylum because of their religious beliefs. They were Christian leaders in China.

This was something new to me. Although I had read the Bible in China, I was not a churchgoer.

These Christian leaders told me that the Chinese authorities had persecuted thousands of Chinese Christians, even though the Chinese constitution permits freedom of religion. I told them I needed time to think about this and asked them to bring in evidence. Several weeks later they appeared in my office again with a stack of handwritten testimonies. In those testimonies, the victims described their arrest, interrogation, torture and imprisonment. Each testimony came with a name, address and photo attached. The contents shocked me deeply.

From then on, I became a religious activist as well as a Christian.

WY Did this same event spur you on to establish the "Committee for Investigation on Persecution of Religion in China?"

LS At first I didn't think of forming an organization.

Those handwritten testimonies I mentioned before were smuggled out of China by some brave people. It could have cost them years in jail, even their lives.

Armed with this strong evidence, we approached official organizations, U.S. Senators and human rights NGOs. We achieved very little with them. Only one Senator who belonged to the "Human Rights Committee" showed concern and gave us support. One human rights NGO showed some interest in the handwritten testimonies, but they already had many projects in hand.

We were disheartened. We did not know what to do. It was at that moment that the thought flashed across my mind. I suggested setting up our own organization.

WY What is the goal of the "Committee for Investigation on Persecution of Religion in China?"

LS We have mobilized Christians here to work with those inside China to collect materials about persecuted religious believers. We have established an archive documenting brutal religious persecutions. We have collected thousands of detailed testimonies from Chinese Christians describing their arrests, interrogations and imprisonment. Some files include not only the believers' photographs but also court records. Our collection includes court transcripts and government documents, including some secret government documents.

We want to use this evidence to expose China's persecution of religious activity. Although the Chinese constitution guarantees religious freedom, the Communist Party actually controls, monitors and restricts religious activities on the grounds of "protecting public security, maintaining public order and ensuring public health."

We hope that by going public with the archive we will help build up international pressure on China's leaders to end their repression of religion.

WY Do you publish any printed matter such as a magazine, books or pamphlets?

LS We don't publish any magazine. It takes a lot of work and time, and besides, we don't have the money.

In the past we published two reports. One is about China's persecution of "house churches" (as opposed to official churches that are government-approved and controlled), and the other is about the secret documents issued by the Chinese government regarding restriction on religious activities.

Our Web site, ReligiousFreedomforChina.org (www.china21.org) carries a lot more information and facts about persecution and related secret government documents. Since October 2002, we have been reporting on a daily basis cases of Chinese police persecuting believers through arrest, extortion or brutal torture. Some of these cases include photos.

WY Please tell us what kind of information the confidential governmental documents contain. When and where were they issued?

LS All of these documents were issued in order to control and restrict religious activities.

In 2000, the Public Security Bureau of Jilin Province issued a confidential document announcing a severe crackdown on illegal religious organizations.

One of its regulations made clear that leaders and organizers of these illegal organizations should be punished severely and could be detained indefinitely without warrant.

Another regulation targeting Falungong says that the degree of punishment should be increased for any practitioners and instigators of Falungong. Once they are identified, they can be detained without any proper arrest procedures.

The Chinese authorities have no respect for the law. As result, they arrest those who exercise their constitutionally lawful rights, and they arrest people without a warrant.

I particularly want to mention a document issued by the Religious Affairs Department of the Public Security Bureau in Baoding City. It concerns investigating overseas Chinese religious workers. The international community should pay special attention to this.

WY Has China's entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) improved the situation of religious believers?

LS I don't think so.

In 1999 the Chinese government began waging a campaign against "cults." According to officials, the anti-cult campaign was in preparation for the further opening of society as a result of China joining the WTO.

What is a cult? There has never been a clear definition. Therefore the Chinese government can apply the term to any undesirable movement, such as Falungong. Of course, it can also include many house churches.

WY On your Web site I read a very meaningful letter you wrote to the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Could you tell our readers why you wrote the letter?

LS The Olympic Games are a symbol of peace and friendship, and the Olympic torch represents a bright future passed on from generation to generation. Nevertheless, the Nazi party in Germany once used the Olympic Games to conceal the horrible nature of Nazism.

I do want to believe that the Olympic Games will improve human rights in China, as the IOC President pointed out in his speech. However, it was his other remark that provoked me to write him a letter. He said, "... the IOC is a responsible organization and if either security, logistics or human rights are not acted upon to our satisfaction, then we will act." This remark boosted our hopes for justice for underprivileged groups such as house church believers, street vendors and migrant workers. The first group refuses to join the government-controlled "patriotic" churches, and the other two are facing forced removal from Beijing as a means of improving the city's image

for the Olympic Games.

In my letter, I suggested that the IOC establish a final assessment for countries wishing to host the Olympics, and also set up a "Committee to Assess Eligibility for Hosting the Olympics with Regard to Human Rights." Committee members should have the freedom to enter the chosen country without any restrictions, and to visit anyone who is mistreated, imprisoned or waiting to be executed, so that a final decision can be made on the basis of full respect for human dignity.

WY My last question is, how are you funded?

LS Our financial situation is bad. Most of our money comes from our Christian brothers and sisters. In the beginning I had some savings but I have used it all. But it doesn't bother me. As I said before: there is always a way out. I have confidence in God.

New Books in Brief

An Intellectual History of Modern China

By Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-Fan Lee (ed.)
Cambridge University Press, 2002

616 pp.; hardcover, \$90; paperback, \$30
This book provides the first comprehensive look at China's intellectual development from the nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century. Various chapters by historians and social scientists trace the transformation of Confucian ideas and gradual introduction of Western views, in tandem with emerging political movements. Goldman concludes the history with a chapter on the post-Mao era and the intellectual scene since June 4th.

Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System

By Ying Zhu
Praeger, August 2003
248 pp.; hardcover, \$64.95

Ying Zhu describes in detail the political economy and culture of Chinese cinema in the economic reform period, including the stylistic transformation of Chinese cinema from pedagogy to art to commerce.

One China, Many Paths

By Chaohua Wang (ed.)
Verso, December 2003
368 pp.; hardcover, \$30
Edited by a leader of the 1989 student movement, this book presents translations of recent essays and interviews by

a number of leading Chinese intellectuals such as Wang Hui, He Qinglian, Li Changping and Wang Dan. The essays discuss major social issues faced by contemporary China, including growing income disparity, the crisis in the countryside, education, sexual equality and intellectual and cultural trends.

China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997

By Nimrod Baranovitch
University of California Press, August 2003
346 pp.; hardcover, \$65, paperback, \$24.95

This book studies China's rich popular music scene in the 1980s and 1990s, with a focus on Beijing. Baranovitch examines how new technologies and the market economy have enabled marginalized groups to achieve a new and sometimes independent public voice.

Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China's Fifth Generation

By Zhen Ni
Duke University Press, November 2002
240 pp.; hardcover, \$54.95, paperback, \$18.95

Ni Zhen, a screenwriter and teacher at the Beijing Film Academy, provides a scholarly analysis of the origins of China's fabled Fifth Generation of filmmakers, including Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Apart from commenting on styles and themes, Ni Zhen provides first-hand

interviews with a range of filmmakers, including those less well known in the West. He also describes in detail the production processes involved in two pioneering films, "One and Eight" and "Yellow Earth."

Changing Church and State Relations in Hong Kong, 1950-2000

By Beatrice Leung and Shun-Hing Chan
Hong Kong University Press, December 2003

248 pp.; paperback, \$35
The authors examine the changing role of Hong Kong's Catholic and Protestant churches from that of "contractor" or "deputy" to the government early on, to that of monitor and critic assumed by Christian groups more recently. The book reveals how Christian groups have facilitated social and political reform and advanced the process of democracy and civil participation, even following the handover to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

Christianity in Modern China: The Making of the First Native Protestant Church

By David Cheung
Brill Academic Publishers, November 2003
Hardcover, \$124

The author, a teacher at Asian Theological Seminary in the Philippines, analyzes previously unstudied primary materials to depict the origins of Protestantism in South Fujian, and the role of these early mission congregations in the formation of China's indigenous "Three-Self" church.