

RELIGION

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Christianity in China A Case Study of Indigenous Christianity: The Jesus Family, 1927-1952

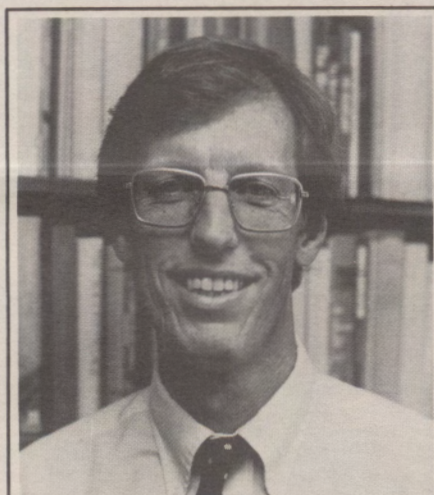
by

Daniel H. Bays

The history of Christianity in China is extremely varied, and in the twentieth century includes many elements of indigenous Christianity as well as the activities of foreign missionaries. In this essay I provide a brief profile of just one of several indigenous Chinese Christian churches that I am studying in my own research. This particular group left almost no written records, but I was able to supplement my information about them with fortuitous interviews in China in fall 1986.

The Jesus Family (Yesu Jiating) existed from the late 1920s until its disbanding under the new Communist regime in 1952. The Jesus Family was an indigenous, communitarian Protestant church which, as much as any other single Chinese church of the pre-1949 period, was a product of the actions of Chinese Christians, not foreign missionaries—although in its origins the Jesus Family was not entirely free of foreign influence. This study will focus mainly on one aspect of this interesting group, that of its appeal to certain people who might be termed “marginal.”

In the 1920s, a peculiar set of circumstances brought together the following: 1) a Chinese family of five brothers named Jing, on their family land at Mazhuang, about 50 kilometers from Taishan (Mount Tai), which itself is south of Jinan, the capital of Shandong province in North China; 2) a zealous commitment to Christianity on the part of one of the brothers, Jing Dianying,



Daniel H. Bays, Professor of History, has been at the University of Kansas since 1971. In recent years his area of research has been Christianity in Chinese History. In 1985 he received a six-year, \$650,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation to administer a project entitled “The History of Christianity in China.” This large project makes postdoctoral awards to scholars around the world, and will have research symposia and resulting publications beginning in 1989. Professor Bays has made many visits to Christian churches in China in recent years, and is available for public presentations on aspects of Christianity and China through the speakers’ bureau of the Kansas Committee for the Humanities.

who ended up establishing a Protestant Christian community on the family land; 3) the example of an unusual U.S. Assemblies of God mission community in nearby Tai’an, the county city at the foot of Taishan, which helped to inspire the programmatic contours of the Chinese community at Mazhuang.

Key Characteristics

The small rural religious community, which took the name Jesus Family in 1927, took a few years to develop the following key features:

1) First and foremost, its identity as a rigorous Christian religious community, with a strong commitment to what in Chinese is called “spiritual gifts” (*ling-en pai*)—essentially Pentecostal beliefs. This religious aspect was very important, indeed it was at the heart of the Jesus Family identity. The Jesus Family had a very strong millenarian appeal and an acute belief in the imminent return of Christ. It cultivated the spiritual gifts of healing, speaking in tongues, and direct revelation from Jesus in the form of trances or dreams, when the believer would be lifted out of the body to have this direct communication. All believers could expect to receive some of these gifts.

2) Another item which had to be worked out early in its history was leadership. A balance was found between on the one hand the egalitarian and diffuse tendencies of anyone, even children, receiving gifts and revelations, and on

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the other hand the strong leadership of Jing Dianying himself, who was acknowledged as the "family head" (*jia-zhang*) and by all accounts was not questioned in that leadership. He, of course, tended to receive the most authoritative revelations.

3) Another aspect of the community which was shaped in the late 1920s and early 1930s was its economic base and social structure. The community built its own buildings, expanded its lands, and gradually developed a whole range of economic activities that permitted it to support and take care of itself. Besides basic agriculture, these included ironwork, shoemaking, a medical department, construction and carpentry, needlework, a noodle factory and fruit orchards. The social structure was remarkably egalitarian and communitarian. Those who joined had to renounce the world and all their goods, and also their primary loyalties to family members; this was part of the religious process as well, not just a socio-economic act. Then they could, unencumbered by other ties, wholeheartedly join and commit themselves to the Jesus Family community. Except for the youngest married couples, men and women lived in separate buildings, nurseries took care of the young children, and all received basic food, clothing and shelter at a subsistence level.

Expansion in Membership

These elements somehow came together into a workable community which grew to a few dozen and then to a few hundred. After five or six years, i.e. about 1932 or 1933, Jing Dianying himself and some of his chief helpers began to engage in evangelistic trips, and to send out organizers of new Jesus Families. Each community was modeled on the "old home" (*lao jia*) (which it is still called today by many) at Mazhuang, and each had an authoritarian family head, like Jing Dianying at Mazhuang. Through the rest of the 1930s and 1940s the families expanded over north, north-west and east China. I have heard of none farther south than Wuhan and Nanjing. By the late 1940s there were almost certainly over 100 Families, and perhaps as many as 8,000 to 10,000 people in them altogether. The old Mazhuang base was the largest, with about 500 members in the late 1940s. Most were in Shandong province, and most were rural, like Mazhuang. Beginning in the late 1930s, the expanding network of local Jesus Families was held together by semi-

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annual large gatherings of representatives of all the outlying families in Mazhuang for about a ten-day conference. As many as two or three thousand people might be present for these meetings, according to some sources.

Our knowledge of this fascinating group is very limited; it is mainly based on accounts of visitors to Mazhuang. Some data can also be derived from the published records of the coercive "reform" (dispersal, really) imposed on the Jesus Family in the early 1950s. But Jing himself left no writings, and the Family published no books or periodicals. The community school did not even go beyond the elementary level. Over the years only a handful of foreigners visited Mazhuang; one of them, an English medical doctor of the China Inland Mission, stayed there for an extended time in the late 1940s and wrote about the Family years later, in 1959. The main publicist of the Jesus Family was a scholarly Chinese church official with a lively interest in the spiritual gifts movement and also in the Jesus Family. This was Wang Shipeng, who in the late 1940s was rural work secretary of the National Christian Council, the inter-church Chinese liaison unit which had first been established in the 1920s. Wang visited the Mazhuang Family more than once in the 1940s, wrote articles about it for the NCC's Shanghai magazine, and then in 1950 he published a substantial monograph on the Jesus Family. In 1951 an English summary appeared in an ecumenical Western church journal.

Religion in Transition

It is not hard to see why some Chinese Christians were glad to "discover" the Jesus Family at this time. With the transition to Communist rule, the place of religion, of Chris-

tianity in particular, and especially of the foreign mission-run churches in the future people's China was very uncertain. Here was an indigenous church, with absolutely no visible ties to foreign mission boards or individual foreign missionaries, living in a communal socio-economic structure. Lo, the ideal Christian church for the new People's Republic of China, it may have seemed. Distinguished Chinese theologians and Chinese denominational church leaders, including a Methodist bishop, wrote prefaces for Wang Shipeng's 1950 book. And in this book Wang himself made clear his sympathies with the Jesus Family. He portrayed them as a "proletarian church," and indeed Jing Dianying himself took this interpretive stance in dealing with the new government authorities. Local Shandong officials seem actually to have been very sympathetic and favorably disposed towards the Jesus Family as an ideal religious group for the new China, with no foreign ties, an ascetic life style, no private property, etc. All this may account for the fact that, when the decision was made to destroy and disperse the Jesus Family in 1952, a campaign of extreme vilification and wildly exaggerated charges were brought against Jing and the other leaders to discredit the good press they had received since the late 1940s.

On the Margins of Society

Were the recruits to the Jesus Family economically and socially marginal? They clearly were, on the whole. The basic conditions of the central-south Shandong hill country in the years from the 1920s to the 1940s were probably little changed from the precarious conditions we know existed in the 1890s. In many ways the conditions were probably worse. Various accounts assert that the conditions of political unrest, economic hardship, and then the Japanese war created a constant stream of recruits and new members. Several of the old members of the Mazhuang Family whom I met in fall 1986, both in Mazhuang and in Tai'an, had joined in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Some mentioned how there was nothing to eat, and that joining the Family had saved their lives. A man who now lives in Beijing was a child in the Jesus Family near Jinan in the late 1940s, where his father was an evangelist. He told me that one appeal of the Family in the 1940s was the provision of a social and economic place for those who had none elsewhere.

Actually, the original formation of the Jesus Family in the 1920s had an economic welfare aspect from the start. It began with a Christian savings society and a cooperative store about 1921, then there was an attempt to start a silk reeling cooperative in 1926, which became the Jesus Family in 1927. An initial reaction to this pattern might be that these were "rice Christians," getting a handout or a job from a Chinese church instead of from the foreign missionary. But when one considers the subsistence level of life and the unremitting hard toil which seems to have characterized the Jesus Families, this explanation seems quite inadequate.

There are other kinds of marginality besides that of social and economic status, of course. One is religious. I would argue, first, that the religious identity of the Jesus Family was absolutely central to its existence. It appears that all aspects of life in the Family were centered around and interpreted in terms of its religious vision. Basic here was the theme of millenarian expectation, and also the theme of existing in close contact with, indeed being filled with, the Christian Holy Spirit and having the direct intervention of Jesus in their lives. The day's regimen was ordered around a cycle of religious activities, from pre-dawn prayer to post-dinner exhortation and sharing of testimonies.

Chinese and Western Influences

What seems important here is that this religious identity clearly relates to both a Chinese and a Western religious sectarianism. The Jesus Family's religious beliefs and practices seem similar in some ways to those of syncretic (combination of different beliefs) heterodox sects in late imperial China, from the White Lotus to the Spirit Boxers of the nineteenth century. They also seem very similar to the pre-Taiping God Worship-

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Thus the Jesus Family drew upon a double, cross-cultural set of sectarian traditions, an old Chinese one and a new Western Christian one, but created an unusual, dynamic, and perhaps uniquely Chinese phenomenon.

pers of Guangxi province in the late 1840s in the stress on possession and direct divine revelation; recent work of some sociologists on the early Taipings of the late 1840s is strikingly suggestive of how the Jesus Family behaved almost a century later.

The spiritual biography of the founder of the Jesus Family, Jing Dianying, also hints at syncretism and, if you will, religious marginality. The accounts about his early life are fuzzy, but it seems that after his initial conversion to Christianity about 1913-14, he still flirted with becoming a Buddhist monk, and in 1918 or 1919 may have joined the Shengxian dao, a syncretic sect in the main White Lotus tradition that was prevalent in parts of Shandong even up to the 1960s. Then, in the mid-1920s, Jing was dramatically affected, even reconverted if you will, by the Pentecostal Christianity he encountered through the Americans at a Pentecostal mission in Tai'an, where Jing worked at the time.

American Pentecostalism at this time can also be seen as a syncretic, heterodox sect of Christianity. Pentecostalism burst onto the American religious scene soon after 1900, and soon had repercussions around the world as ardent individual Pentecostal missionaries came

onto the world's mission fields—often to the dismay of their "mainstream" and by now often quite secularized missionary predecessors. There is no doubt that a good many of these early Pentecostal missionaries, who were visible in China by 1907 or so, were "marginal" in many ways. One of these, L. M. Anglin, who came to Tai'an, Shandong, about 1912 as an independent Baptist but who soon had a Pentecostal experience and went off on his own, affiliated with the young Assemblies of God about 1916 (the Assemblies itself was formed only in 1914). He then proceeded to create first an orphanage under the name "The Home of Onesiphorus," then an old people's home, then workshops to support them all. By the mid-1920s, the Home of Onesiphorus included several hundred people of all ages on a substantial tract of land in Tai'an. Clearly it was contact with Anglin's Christian mission commune that gave Jing Dianying both the fervent religious Pentecostalism and the example of a self-sufficient egalitarian Christian community that fed directly into Jing's formation of the Jesus Family in 1927. In fact an American woman worker from the Home of Onesiphorus stayed at Mazhuang for several months just at the time of the formation of the Jesus Family in 1926-27.

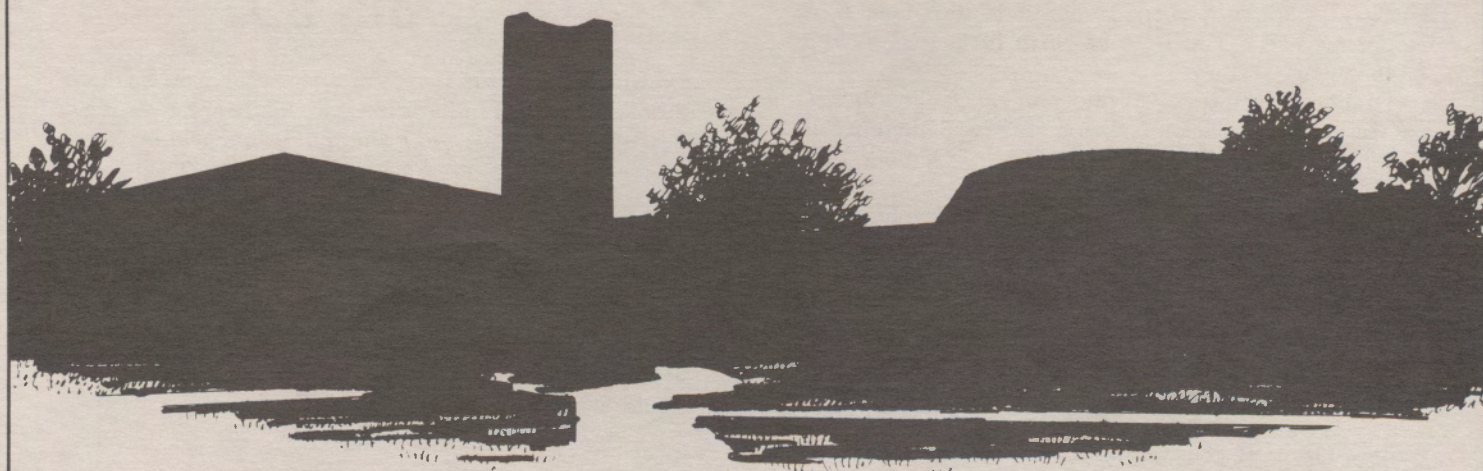
Despite this joint Sino-Western origin, Jing Dianying never allowed any foreign influence on the later development of the group, and foreign contact after 1927 was extremely limited. Thus the Jesus Family drew upon a double, cross-cultural set of sectarian traditions, an old Chinese one and a new Western Christian one, but created an unusual, dynamic, and perhaps uniquely Chinese phenomenon. In having done so, it provides historians of the present with a fascinating case study in the indigenization of Christianity in China. Moreover, small groups in north China even today still call themselves Jesus Family, and retain some of the old group's religious beliefs and practices.

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What's Going On

Essay Contest Topic: "Religion and the Economy"

Deadlines for submission of essays of
January 15 and February 15, 1989



The 1989 KSR essay topic for high school students, "Religion and the Economy," was announced recently. Essays should be typed, double-spaced and between 1,000 and 1,500 words long.

Essays should be submitted to local ministerial groups by January 15, where they will be judged on their originality, relevance to the theme, scholarship and clarity.

Essays of the county winners will then be submitted to the KSR by February 15 for final judging. The county first-place winners and the three state winners will then be announced.

Winners at the county level will receive \$25; some local groups have increased the prize with their own funds. The first-place state winner will receive \$300 and the second- and third-place winners will receive \$200 and \$100 respectively.

At the state level, the authors' names do not appear on the essay to preserve anonymity in judging.

For more information, write the Kansas School of Religion at 1300 Oread Ave., Lawrence, Kansas, 66045, or call (913) 843-7257.

Excellent Response to KSR Fall Conferences

There was an enthusiastic response to the four KSR Conferences on "The Role of Faith in Crisis" held at the following locations:

Hutchinson Hospital Auditorium	September 9
Marymount College in Salina	September 30
Washburn University in Topeka	October 1
Labette Community College in Parsons	October 14

The Reverend Vincent E. Krische, Director of the St. Lawrence Catholic Campus Center at the University of Kansas, was the major presenter. The Conferences were organized by the State KSR Committee with the assistance of local chairs in each city. Members of the State KSR Committee are the Reverend Stephen E. Fletcher (Chair) of Yates Center United Methodist Church, Alice Young—Dean of the Washburn University School of Nursing, and Faith Spencer—Area Director of the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

Lyle E. Schaller to present Annual KSR Lecture at Annual Meeting, March 8, 1989

Lyle E. Schaller, a Parish Consultant at Yokefellow Institute in Richmond, Indiana, will present the annual KSR lecture for 1989 at the annual meeting on Wednesday, March 8. The subject of his address will be "A New Generation of Young Adults?"

Author, Church planner, and consultant, the Reverend Schaller has five academic degrees, including his M.S. in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin and his B.D. degree from Garrett Theological Seminary. He has served as a city planner, Methodist minister, Director of the Regional Church Planning Office for fourteen Protestant denominations in Ohio, and Director of the Planning and Research Center for Parish Development at Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville, Illinois, before joining the staff of Yokefellow Institute.

Among his published books, in addition to over 100 articles, are *The Churches' War on Poverty*, *Planning for Protestantism in Urban America*, *Community Organization: Conflict and Reconciliation*, *The Local Church Looks to the Future*, *The Impact of the Future*, and *The Change Agent: The Strategy of Innovative Leadership*.

While on the University of Kansas campus, he will also discuss with other groups "The Emergence of the Megachurches," "Demands for Post Seminary Training for the Clergy," and "The Changing Role of the Christian Day School."

KSR Scholar for 1988-89

Linda J. Jenkins is a graduate student in Religious Studies, with an emphasis in Church History, focusing on the Roman Catholic and Protestant Episcopal nineteenth-century churches in America. Her thesis will be on Elizabeth Bayley Seton, the first American born Roman Catholic Saint.

Jenkins received a bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas in Religious Studies in December, 1987 and entered the Graduate Program in January, 1988. She will complete her master's program in May, 1989 and hopes to pursue a doctorate degree upon graduation. She would like to teach at the college level.

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