



Eyes on China

Meet one of Christianity's newest superpowers

Olympic hopefuls are not the only ones with their eyes on China. The ancient Asian dynasty is today front and center, "striding onto the global stage and acting like a nation that very much intends to become the next great power," says *Time* magazine, which earlier this year declared this to be "China century." *Time* has plenty of company in its assessment. Projections have long been that the 21st century would belong to Asia, particularly China.

While China is increasing in prominence, so is the Church there. Some estimate that as many as 10 percent of China's 1.3 billion people are followers of the Christian faith. "If recent trends continue," observes journalist and professor Marvin Olasky, "the major religious story of the 21st century will be China's becoming the global center of evangelical Christianity."

The Mission Society commissioned its first missionary to this ancient nation in 1993. The following is an interview with one of our missionary couples there (unnamed for security reasons). "We ask people to pray that God will send a flood of His Holy Spirit over China," they offer. "We know He's already there." They share here about the signs of God's presence among the people of this increasingly powerful nation.



What has surprised you the most about China?

We've been here only 19 months, so our impressions are fairly new. But the biggest surprise for me was learning that life in Communist China is not the militaristic, fearful existence I thought it would be. I've learned that when you get to know the Chinese, you realize they are sweet, very humble people. They desire much of the same things we do. Most of their desires are simply to live a life, to get joy out of it and to have peace in it. They are probably most focused on peace, although those in the city now, who live in the midst of an increasingly capitalistic economy, are also looking for the "good life"; they're looking for joy.

You mentioned that the Chinese are very focused on peace. Can you say more about that?

The Chinese have a long history of upheavals, difficulties, and struggles. So finding peace is important to them. In fact, there are a couple of words they use. Their everyday word for peace is *ping jing*, and it basically means to them: If I can get everything in my external world

in a good place, then I can have internal peace. But the focus is on making sure everything is just right.

One of the things that is very important to the Chinese is "saving face"—making sure that they don't embarrass someone else, and making sure that they themselves don't get embarrassed in their relationships. Saving face is part of their trying to make sure that everything in their external world (in this case, relationships) is okay, so they can be at peace inside.

You see this same thing in the United States. We run here and there and everywhere, trying to make sure that the boss is happy, that the family is happy, that everything is going okay, so that at some point, we can take a deep breath and say, "Okay, now I'm at peace."

So Americans and Chinese desire the same thing, but their methods of attaining it are different. In situations where Americans would be very frank and blunt, the Chinese will bend over backward to avoid pointing out that you might have made a mistake, even a little mistake. In fact, I've talked with a businessman who came from the States and is working with the Chinese.

He told me that after a presentation, when he asks if there are any questions, no one will ask a question. They fear that in asking, they will be an embarrassment to themselves, or that their question will embarrass the instructor for not having taught well enough. The Chinese practice of "saving face" is so that there is not that embarrassment, essentially so that there's no emotional tension in relationships, because they are very focused on external peace.

The Chinese have another word for peace, but it's not a common word. It's more of a Christian word, so to speak. The word is *ping an*. You can find this in Scripture, wherever there is reference to peace that is internal, regardless of what is happening on the outside. It's the peace that the Apostle Paul had when he had been beaten, imprisoned, when nothing was going right. Still, Paul had such a peace that he sang praises. *Ping an* is the kind of peace that Peter had that allowed him to actually walk on water.

How do the Chinese pursue that type of peace (*ping an*)?

Again, I'm new in the culture, but from what I can see, the Chinese are so focused

Did Ancient Chinese know about Noah?



As in all ancient cultures, the Chinese too have a story of a great flood covering the earth. The Chinese character for “big boat” or “ark” tells exactly what happened during this great flood. The character is comprised of three

parts: the left side is the symbol for “vessel” (zhou); in the upper right corner is the character for “eight” (ba); and in the lower right corner is the character for “mouth” (kou), which also means “person” or “people.” So the implied meaning of this character is “eight people in a boat.” When the ancient

Chinese wanted to come up with a character to represent a big boat, they thought of the biggest boat that existed up to that time – and that was the boat that held eight people and pairs of all the animals. This correlates precisely with the biblical story of Noah: Noah, his wife, and their three sons and their wives were the eight people who survived the worldwide deluge (Genesis 6:18, 7:7).

– excerpted from *Faith of our Fathers*, by Chan Kei Thong with Charlene L. Fu, former Beijing-based foreign correspondent for the Associated Press.

on relationships, I don't think they do nearly as much thinking about themselves as they do about the relationships they're in.

Their heavy focus on relationships is partly because, as a culture, they have had to work together in order to survive – in order to raise enough crops, etc. In America, on the other hand, our history is founded on rugged individualism – on going out into the wilderness and cutting down enough trees to make a homestead. Since the next homestead might be miles and miles away, you had to figure out how to deal with your problems mostly by yourself.

In China, with a population of more than a billion people, there is no space to go off by yourself, to “go it alone,” so everything is associated with relationship. That means, historically, thinking about themselves hasn't been really much of a consideration for the Chinese.

That's one of the changes that is occurring as the cities become more international. People are becoming much more entrepreneurial. They're now asking, “How do I get ahead,” “How can I make a better living,” “How can I make more money,” “How can I improve my job

prospects?” But even so, their thinking is still steeped pretty strongly in relationships. In other words, their thoughts might be more like: “How do I help us out?” “How do we make a step forward, or keep from stepping back in our finances?”

The Westernization of China, then, might come with (or appear to come with) Westernized worldview (i.e., individualism). Is it causing other difficulties as the Chinese are taking on a different way of thinking about things?

It really is changing a lot about China and a lot about the Chinese culture. It's so new that I don't think that it's had a pronounced change on the people as a whole. But you are certainly seeing an international flavor moving into the cities. In many ways I don't care for that. And that's surprising to me. Before I moved to China, I would have thought, “Yes, the more American you can become, the greater it will be for you, because then you'll have freedoms, and you will have choices and can do what you want to do.” And some of that is true. But I personally don't care for the cultural changes that

are happening, because China's people are losing some of the value of family as they move into the cities and are having to focus on themselves and how to get ahead financially. Once they do this, then they begin to enjoy the “rewards” of that, so to speak – newer accommodations, cars, fancy restaurants, etc. Again, in the past I would have said, “Well, that's great; they're at a better level of living.” But now, having spent time there, it looks a lot like just materialism, and it isn't enhancing them as people.

You said earlier that Chinese are so focused on relationships that they're hesitant to ask questions, because they are afraid of shaming themselves or another person. I wonder how you respond to that. I'm sure you want people to feel free to ask questions of you.

When I'm teaching, I tell people at the very beginning, “God is really the teacher here; I'm not. I'm hoping that He works through me, but He works through all of us. In the principles that we will teach, you need to consider your culture and see what God is wanting to do within your

The future in China

In China today there are 16 million officially registered Christians; 40,000 Protestant churches waiting to be registered, and 30,000 Catholic churches waiting to be registered. If the Church in China continues to grow, writes David Aikman, “it is almost certain that a Christian view of the world will be the dominant worldview within China’s political and cultural establishment.”

– **David Aikman** is former senior correspondent for *Time* magazine.



Photo by Heather Mathews

culture with respect to these particular principles.” (In other words, we want God to be able to work freely without being limited by my American worldview.)

So then I’ll ask them, “Is there a tendency in your culture to want to save face?” And everyone nods. And then I say, “I’m going to ask you not to save my face.” They look at me confused. And I say, “If God is really going to have a free hand here, you need to be able to question me, so we can get to His truth.”

Because we’re working with Christian brothers and sisters who are pretty mature in their faith, they are asking questions. And they are saying, “Here is how I see this principle happening in our culture.” And then they’re looking at their own culture and saying, “Is this the direction that we really need to go, culture-wise?” “Does this fit with the Truth?” And sometimes it doesn’t.

It’s a great thing to save face – to care for another person in such a way that you wouldn’t want to embarrass them. But when it’s done to the extent that it may cause greater problems, they’re having to look at that and say, “Okay, maybe we’re

going to have to look at this on an incident-to-incident basis to see what God is wanting to do in this situation: Do I ‘save face’? Or do I gently bring out that maybe there’s another way of doing things that may be a little more healthy?”

That’s a lovely marriage of those two ways of thinking.

Yeah. There’s some great things in the Chinese culture – things I wish we had in America. The Chinese people’s treatment of their parents and their grandparents (with such great respect) is very biblical. “Honor your parents,” the scriptures say, and the Chinese people have that down pat. In the United States, as a country, I think we’ve pretty much lost that. Not on an individual basis, but in general, we don’t do a lot of thinking about our parents. We [Americans] think, “They’re on their own. They know how to live life, and they’ve got retirement and social security, so they’re fine.” For the Chinese, in some ways, their children are their “social security,” because their children will care for them in their old age, when they’re not able to make a living.

And that gets into the whole issue of the one-child policy. The reason the Chinese want boys is because the boys are the ones who support the parents. So let’s say you have a girl. She will get married. Then she and her husband will support his parents. And if the couple has the opportunity, then they might be able to also help the girl’s parents. That means, if you only have a girl, you fear for your future. That’s the traditional Chinese mindset anyway.

The situation wasn’t that much different in America if you lived on the farm. It was believed that boys could handle raising crops, moving animals around, and doing all the harder labor. So if you lived on a farm, you certainly wanted to have a few boys.

With China’s one-child policy, you get one shot (although there are some exceptions to that). And according to the traditional Chinese thinking, when you only get one shot, you want to make it count, and a boy counts more than a girl.

Is the one-child policy still pretty much intact, or is it changing?

I think the government is looking at how they can loosen or change that policy.

Signs of understanding of one, true God discovered in ancient Chinese texts

2006 book release touts that the Chinese worshipped a monotheistic, Old Testament-style God long before they encountered Buddhism or Islam.

The rapid growth of the Church in China is one of the startling trends in Christianity in the 21st century. But the millions of Chinese believers who are accepting the Truth of the Gospel are not embracing a “Western religion” planted by missionaries. Rather, says author Chan Kei Thong, they are rediscovering the story of God that has been a constant presence in China’s history and culture for more than four millennia.

Chan Kei Thong’s book, *Faith of Our Fathers: God in Ancient China*, is the result of research and study of the most ancient Chinese historical texts. In it, Thong establishes that the earliest Chinese form of worship was in veneration of a monotheistic God recognizable by His attributes as the God Yahweh of the Old Testament. This God, known as Shang Di, is the one for whom the famed Temple of Heaven in Beijing was built. It was here that Chinese emperors through the centuries offered the annual sacrifices in ceremonies that parallel rituals related to blood covenants in the Old Testament. These imperial ceremonies suggest an understanding of the problem of sin, of the need for salvation, and of the inability of any sacrifice to fulfill God’s judgment.

Through the retelling of some of the most significant stories in China’s history, the 2006 release *Faith of Our Fathers* reveals God’s guiding hand upon the Chinese people from the beginning of their existence. The Chinese language reflects knowledge of the first events of human history as told in the Bible. Even the early name the Chinese people used for their

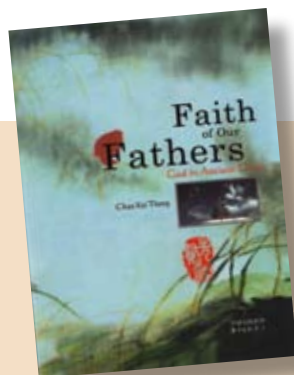
country is revealing: Shen Zhou, which means God’s Country.

David Aikman, former Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine and author of *Jesus in Beijing*, writes: “In *Faith of Our Fathers*, Chan Kei Thong reveals a persistent thread of Chinese theistic longing that parallels in a remarkable way the search of ancient Israel for a covenant with the true God. He also demonstrates that Chinese classical literature is entirely

consistent with Christian revelation. This book is already having a profound impact in China in a Chinese version. Everyone interested in Christianity in China should read it.”

Faith of Our Fathers: God in Ancient China, by Chan Kei Thong with Charlene L. Fu, Beijing: Dong Fang Publishing House/China Publishing Group, 327 pp., ISBN 7801865065, \$23.10 (This book may be purchased through the authors’ website.)

The story of a monotheistic God “has been a constant presence in China’s history and culture for more than four millennia,” says author Chan Kei Thong.



Faith of Our Fathers follows Chan Kei Thong’s own personal journey of discovery. He comes to realize that when he accepted Shang Di, the God of the Old Testament, as Lord (despite rejection from family and friends), he was, in fact, choosing to worship alongside China’s most venerated ancients!

Histories line up

Imperial Chinese astronomers logged interesting parallels to Jesus' birth and death

	Chinese History	Hebrew History
5-4 B.C	Comet in Alpha Aquilae recorded by imperial astronomers	Birth of Jesus Christ
A.D. 31	Major solar and lunar eclipse recorded by imperial astronomers, halo follows three days later	Death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

– excerpted from comparative timeline from *Faith of our Fathers* by Chan Kei Thong with Charlene L. Fu

China has a huge problem. They have 1.3 billion people. And there's no way that you can get 1.3 billion people to a moderate level of living – a middle class, so to speak. China has huge numbers of poor who go hungry and who do not receive medical treatment. It's not that the government doesn't want them to have that care. We have a problem with poverty in the States, too. If we can't end poverty with the population that we have, think what an issue China has.

So the Chinese government has tried to deal with their population issue through the one-child policy, but that's [led to] a culture of wanting boys versus girls. Now, we're coming to a time (during the next generation) when there will not be enough girls to marry the number of boys there will be. So it [the one-child policy] will create some pretty significant changes in the Chinese culture in the next couple of decades, because of the difference in numbers between boys and girls.

You have mentioned some things about Chinese culture that you admire (and wish we had in the United

States), specifically the high regard Chinese hold for relationships and for the elderly. Are there other things you immediately admire about the Chinese culture?

Yes. Generally speaking, the Chinese are very hard working. It doesn't matter if they are street cleaners or executives. Part of that, again, is culture. When you have 1.3 billion people, you have to work hard to make sure you have enough money to live.

The Christian brothers and sisters we work with – goodness, they work hard. They are very focused on learning, on studying, and they take Scripture very seriously.

If you asked Chinese Christians, "Where's your Bible?" 10 out of 10 would know exactly where their Bible is. Whereas in America, we might say, "Um, I think it's upstairs." (Of course, we have so many Bibles, we don't have to really keep track of one; we'll just pick up another one.) But the Chinese are very committed to knowing Scripture and to applying it in their lives. And that's one of the ways that the Chinese may be different from us. Again, I think culture has some bearing

on this. As Americans, we have a system in place to deal with almost everything in our lives, so our day-to-day dependence on God isn't very strong. But the Chinese Christians (the ones who are not internationalized) are very much aware of their day-to-day dependence on God. They're challenging me in that regard.

What contributions to our understanding of the Gospel do you think the Chinese offer to the global Christian community?

I would go back again to relationship. We were making plans to do a year of teaching about different issues (like anger, abuse, and addiction). The next year, we would teach how to apply those issues within relationships – marriage, family, etc. But one of the workers asked, "How can you teach about issues without relationships?" And I sat back and said, "Well, you know, in this culture, this would not make sense at all." So we're re-doing the plan so that we'll look at relationships, and then deal with issues within those relationships.

So the Chinese bring the component of relationship to the Gospel. And again,



Photo by Heather Mathews

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I say this not to put down the American culture, because our culture has been designed around individualism – blazing a trail through the country. But it is very enjoyable to see a culture with such a strong emphasis on relationship. For the Chinese, the first filter a thought or decision goes through is, “How will this affect my relationship?”

What does God seem to be doing in China?

(Laughing) Well, with 1.3 billion people, it’s very hard to say. But I’ll speak about the little corner that I can see.

Generally, the Chinese Christians know how to do evangelism very well. Most missionaries who came to China early on focused on evangelism. And I am extremely humbled by the daily lives of Chinese Christians – their boldness, and how seriously they take evangelism. They get out there, sometimes at risk to their welfare. It’s very much like looking at the Apostle Paul, who, at times, preached the Gospel at great risk.

But there hasn’t been as much of an emphasis in missionary work on

discipleship. So when it comes to dealing with anger, or addiction, or alcoholism, or abuse, they’re really not sure how to apply the Scripture to those issues as well as they would with evangelism. So a Christian will come in with past habits or problems, and the leaders will sometimes struggle with how to respond, other than to say, “Stop,” or “Don’t do that,” or “That’s not right.” They know what’s right and what’s wrong, but they don’t really know how to help a person process through those things.

The Christians we work with are very hungry to learn. Most of them are leaders in their areas, so they’re the ones being asked the questions. They ask us questions like, “What does Scripture have to say about how a Christian wife should deal with an abusive husband and father, when he’s not a Christian?” or “How does a person in an abusive situation work to change that when the abuse has become habit?”

So we’re having a great time learning together how the scriptural principles work within the Chinese culture to answer the questions of their culture. †

Christianity: A major engine for China?

“China is moving towards having the largest Christian population in the world. ... We’re not only dealing with numerical expansion, but also cultural fascination. Considerable numbers of Chinese working in academic religious studies and social studies have become intrigued by, and sympathetic to, the Christian tradition, and particularly the interweaving of theology and culture in the history of Western Europe. ... After the collapse of a strongly isolationist and top-down system, post-Cultural Revolution, after the reconstruction that followed, many Chinese people seem to have become aware of a void of motivation. ... A great many Chinese people have said Christianity is one of the major engines for social motivation and we need ways of drawing that energy into the social enterprise.”

– Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in *China Review*, Autumn 2007