

Recent Millennial Movements on Mainland China: Three Cases

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Introduction

Christian-based new movements are flourishing in China today to such an extent that *Tian Feng* 天風 (1995 No.6:6-27) the official organ of the Chinese church, found it necessary to focus on “sects and heresies.” According to the magazine, “sects and heresies” are becoming an ever more burning problem for the Chinese church, so much so that she must stand up to the grim situation of “fraudulent religion” in the same way as society must eliminate the fake goods that have flooded the market in recent years.

Some of the sects have arrived from overseas. For example, the church of the “Full Gospel of Blood, Water and Spirit” is said to have been founded by Zuo Kun 左坤 from Taiwan. Based on I John 5:6ff., he argues that the witnesses of the Spirit, water and blood constitute the full gospel. In some places, followers are to undergo three baptisms: by the spirit, water and blood respectively. Most sects, however, are locally born and bred such as the Weepers (*Kupai* 哭派), the Yellers (*Huhanpai* 呼喊派), the Disciples (*Mentuhui* 門徒會), the Wilderness (*Kuangyehui* 曠野會), the All-Scope (*Quan-Fanwai* 全範圍), the Way of Rebirth (*Chongshengtao* 重生道) and many others that are difficult to characterize.

In the wake of reform and openness, religions of all shades, be they ancient sects or newly arisen movements, are ever more prominent despite the intense political pressure for control. The tidal wave of religious fervor sweeping over China is as much thanks to economic prosperity as to weak central government. All in all, as has often been the case in Chinese history, the increasing interest in such movements could well be a reaction to the uncertainties of the times caused by natural calamities and poverty, political tension and a sense of the meaninglessness of life. This historical legacy is hard to shake off. Stern government measures do not seem to work. Indeed,

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the government must be painfully aware that religious excesses are simply an expression of disillusion with its own ideology, corruption and incompetence.

As far as Christianity is concerned, most of these movements tend to predict the imminence of the last day and hold a fundamentalist view of the Bible. Their leaders are believed to possess great powers of healing, and as charismatic leaders they command the loyalty of their followers. Generally speaking, personal experience and private revelation are glorified and Scripture is read allegorically.

As one might expect, these unorthodox movements are condemned by church authorities as divisive and sectarian. In similar fashion the government is busy with its campaign against “feudalism and superstition.” During the *yanda* 嚴打 (“strike hard”, an anti-crime campaign) period in 1996, crackdowns on illegal religious activities received widespread publicity. According to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (6 June, 1996), at least 15,000 unregistered temples, churches and tombs were destroyed by police in Zhejiang between February and June. In the city of Ningbo alone, nearly 3,000 temples were razed. And the *South China Morning Post* (29 August, 1996) reported that a document circulated by the Public Security Bureau (*gong’ an ju* 公安局) revealed that the central government had called upon them to crack down on pseudo-Christian cults in the countryside.

Though indigenous Christian groups are rather common in China today, it is by no means easy to get in touch with them because government repression means that they have to be always on their guard. The Public Security Bureau has certainly collected a lot of relevant materials, but its reports are tailored mainly to government propaganda. Of the three examples given below, only Lin Xiangao 林獻羊 in Guangzhou is accessible to visitors. The story about the “Established King” is based on a report given by the Public Security Bureau, whereas part of the *Lingling Jiao* material is provided by *Tian Feng*.

Case I: Lingling Jiao 靈靈教

Ling 靈 means both the Spirit and the effective working of the Spirit. Indeed, it accuses the old churches of no longer being effective because they do not have the presence of the Spirit. Only people who believe in *Lingling* can be spiritual and saved.

The *Lingling Jiao* is a group that split from the True Jesus Church (*Zhen Yesu Jiaohui* 真耶數教會). The True Jesus Church, founded in 1917, claims that it is the only true church in the world and that its coming into existence directly helped end the First World War. As evidence of their possessing the

Holy Spirit, its members speak in tongues, leap and dance before the Lord, and weep and rejoice in the Holy Spirit. They are baptized face down in living water.

Though influenced by the spiritual revival movement that swept through many churches in the USA around 1900, the True Jesus Church is thoroughly indigenous and independent. After the founding of the People's Republic, however, whether a church was "Three-Self" (self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating) or not was judged purely on the basis of its political attitude towards the cause of the Communist revolution. The new Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuan hui* 三自愛國運動委員會), with the full support of the government, condemned the indigenous church movement of the 1920s as a hoax and cultural poison of American imperialism in Chinese garb, used further to cheat the Chinese Christians. As such, all these movements had to undergo the fateful process of self-criticism, accusation and self-remolding, finally disappearing from Chinese society.

After the Cultural Revolution, many Christians resurfaced. The True Jesus Church, like other churches, is in existence again. The present membership is over one million people, ten times the pre-Liberation figure. Some of them have joined the local Christian *lianghui* 兩會 (Three-Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council *Zhongguo jidu jiao xiehui* 中國基督教協會); others have not, but all of them desire to maintain their own identity. In the so-called post-denominational era in China, they are among those who argue that their name must be properly reinstated. In other words, they want to bear their own name.

With this background in mind, we now turn to the *Lingling Jiao*. Its founder, Hua Xuehe 華雪和, was a teacher at a primary school in Huaiyin county, Jiangsu province. Prior to 1980, he and other True Jesus Church members were active in North Jiangsu. In 1981, the Jiangsu Religious Affairs Bureau and the provincial *lianghui* formed a team to investigate his activities. From then on, he became a fugitive and moved from one place to another. In 1985, he and Li Guiyao 李貴瑤, a head of the True Jesus Church in Shuyang, established the *Lingling Jiao*.

Hua Xuehe was proclaimed the Second Jesus because "there is a difference of only one character between Hua Xuehe and Ye Hehua" [耶和華, the transliteration of Jehovah in Chinese] and, just as Jesus was born in winter, so Hua was born on a day of heavy snow, hence his childhood name Da Xuezi 大雪子 (big snow child). In addition, both Jesus and Hua suffered much on earth. As the second Jesus, Hua was called the "Savior" and January 17 (lunar calendar) was fixed as the "birthday of Hua the Sav-

ior.” In February 1990 representatives from ten provinces, including Xinjiang, came to Huaiyin to celebrate his birthday. Fire-crackers were let off until the next morning.

Lingling Jiao has neither doctrines nor church order. As an offspring of the True Jesus Church, it also attracts followers by healing the sick and casting out demons. Its meetings are frequent and of a great variety. Members generally meet on Wednesdays and Saturdays at what they call “big meetings.” They also meet every evening in small numbers which are called “small meetings.” When they meet, they usually begin by singing spirituals and dancing spiritual dances, and then preach. Preaching is according to inspiration. The one who is inspired preaches. It is therefore not unusual for several men and women to preach in turn. The spirituals they sing are mostly folk melodies. The texts are composed by themselves, such as “The end of the world will come, there are great tribulations: earth-quakes, pestilence, famine and misery with the world at war” or “Fire will burn out the old world, the Kingdom of Heaven will come. We will reign with Jesus in the millennium.”

Indeed, the proclamation of the last day is a characteristic of the *Lingling*. “Tribulations will fall down from heaven; when heaven fails and the earth collapses, the Lord will come and he is Hua Xuehe”; “The world is coming to an end; join the *Lingling Jiao* quickly and escape the tribulation, otherwise you are not able to avoid death.”

Before Hua was finally arrested in 1990, a prophecy spread around North Jiangsu: “On June 27, 1990, the world will be flooded and the whole of humankind is going to perish Do not build houses any longer, for no one will live in them and no one, except foreign soldiers, will come to eat our food.”

After the arrest of Hua, *Lingling Jiao* was declared a reactionary organization and banned, yet it is still very much active in Jiangsu. Recent reports say that it has spread to Yunnan and Gansu. Had Hua’s prophecy been postponed by one year, no one knows what social effects it would have produced, for from May 1991 most parts of North Jiangsu were inundated by floods and he would have been proved right.²

*Case II: Beili wang 被立王*³

On 29 December 1995, the Bengbu (Anhui province) Intermediate People’s Court ordered Wu Yangming 吳揚明, aged 51, to be executed and sentenced three of his followers to three, eight and fifteen years in jail. This was reported the world over.

Wu, a peasant with only three years of primary school education, was accused of being the founder of the *Beili wang*, “Established King” sect. The

name is derived from Luke 2:34 where Simeon blessed the baby Jesus and proclaimed that “this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.” (The word “set” is translated in the Chinese Bible as *beli* 被立 “ordained” or “established”).

According to a report published by the Public Security Bureau, Wu first joined the Yeller sect (outlawed in 1982, a group that split from the Little Flock) in 1983. In October of the same year, he was arrested by the Public Security Bureau and was not released until January 1985. Shortly afterwards, he resurfaced and began to preach again. He was most successful in 1986 when he established four meeting points in Yingshang county, Anhui, with more than 500 followers. His preaching heavily emphasized the coming doomsday. On 12 November 1986, he held a big meeting in his home. Almost a thousand people attended. Wu again preached the end of the world and the coming of Christ's kingdom. On 12 December 1986, Wu was apprehended again and sentenced on 3 November 1987 to three years' imprisonment. The Yeller sect was completely crushed in that locality.

Later, however, Wu was able to slip away from the reform-through-labor farm in 1987. Towards the end of 1988 Wu began to preach in the name of *Beili wang*. He told the Public Security Bureau later that when he read the second chapter of Luke, he was struck by the word “established.” With his level of education he was not able to understand it. So he prayed time and again, and finally he had a dream. He saw Jesus standing by his side, entrusting him with the ministry of evangelization and consecrating him as the “Established King”. When he awoke, he found himself changed completely. When he picked up the Bible again, he understood every word. He understood that he was Jesus resurrected, established to be king. He then publicly proclaimed: “Jesus is outdated. He has been replaced by the Established King. I tell you in advance that the end of the world will be the year 2000. At that time, one third of the world population will pass away. Those who believe in the Established King will escape from the catastrophe; those who do not believe will die and go to hell. The world will belong to the Established King.” He also said “disaster is at hand. Do not take your properties too seriously. Give tithes to God.”

From then on he went around using the story of Eden to tell how God created the world. He also preached about the life of Jesus, especially how he made the dumb speak, the lame walk, and raised the dead to life. Soon he had established six meeting points in Yingshang with more than 300 followers, mainly women.

As soon as the Public Security Bureau noticed his activities he was detained again and sentenced to three years' education-through-labor, but he was again at large in November 1990. The Anhui Public Security Bureau was anxious to apprehend him, for in the meantime Wu had gone to other provinces in the south to set up outposts in many places, such as Jiangxi, Shanghai and Guangdong. A coordinated task force was organized in Anhui to arrest Wu. Networks were established with the Public Security Bureaus of other provinces. A price of up to RMB 10,000 (3-4 years salary for rural workers) was put on his head. It was not until 7 January 1995, however, that Wu was caught in the suburbs of Bengbu during one of his "fellowship meetings."

According to the Public Security Bureau report, the fellowship meetings were generally held at the end or the beginning of a lunar month. They lasted from five to seven days. The procedure was: (1) singing, (2) confession of sin, (3) reports of the workers and offerings, (4) teaching of the Bible and (5) assignments of evangelization work. The places for meeting were usually hidden and camouflaged, preferably in villages without electricity. Members came to the meeting places in the dark and left in the early morning. They were given "spiritual names" and were asked to forget their real names and family backgrounds.

Like the *Lingling*, the *Beili wang* also sang to folk tunes and always used their own texts. For example: "We are the good soldiers of the *Beili wang*, vanguards on the road to the Heavenly Kingdom; we are ready to undergo the most severe trials. The sea may run dry and the rocks may crumble, but our hearts will always remain loyal. Satan will be defeated and the new heaven and new earth will be ours." "We are never willing to go the wrong way. How happy are we who have found the truth. Go to the place of promise. I have no regrets even if I go astray. Life is full of setbacks. Why worry about being imprisoned? If I do not have the pity of the "Heavenly Father", I would never know that difficulties and hardships could be changed into joy. A little trouble does not mean much. Only for a short while and we will be united again."

The Public Security Bureau accused Wu of using the fellowship meeting to seduce and rape young women. It was alleged that he did so by comparing himself to the resurrected Jesus. As such he was the husband of the church and in that capacity he was able to bring them, mainly women, to salvation if they became one body with him. At the interrogation, Wu stated that he taught according to the Bible. He was called by God to cleanse the sins of the people. To find favor with the Lord, one must come

close to him. There was nothing closer than to be united in body and spirit. The women “called” *mengzhao* 蒙召 to do this must present their bodies as a living sacrifice with willingness and gladness.

According to the Public Security Bureau report, Wu appointed 16 “lords”, all young women around 20 years of age, to be the office-bearers of the *Beili wang* sect at a fellowship meeting in Xuzhou in 1993. The rank of their authority followed the order of their being “called” by Wu. The first one so “called” was the “Lord Mother” who was the queen. The second one was “Lord Pure Gold” and the third one “Lord Pearl”, both of whom had to run errands for the “Heavenly Father”. The fourth one was “Lord Truth” whose duty was to collect offerings and to bring back young recruits. The fifth one was “Lord Offering” and the sixth one “Lord Rose”, with the duty of serving the “Lord Mother” and her children. The seventh one was “Lord Hope”, who did odds and ends for the sect, and so on. Each one had a particular assignment in the community.

According to one victim who revealed the whereabouts of Wu to the police, at the Xuzhou meeting there were about 50-60 participants, all young women, from Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hunan, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang, Yunnan, Guizhou, Shanxi, Shandong, Henan, Hebei and Anhui. Most were from Anhui. Only those who had been “called” by Wu were accepted as members and sent out to other places to evangelize. She recalled that there were seven meetings points in Xuzhou and that in the one year she stayed there about 70-80 young women, all virgins, were “called” by Wu.

However, when reading Chinese documents one has to bear in mind that there is a tradition in China of nullifying the enemy by exposing his/her sexual debauchery, whether real or imagined. Not only *Beili wang*, but also *Lingling* and *Mentuhui* (Disciple sect), another widespread heretical movement, were accused of “raping women and swindling money in the name of evangelization.”⁴ One reason for these accusations is that these sects have to hold their meetings in secret, mainly after dark. Another is that they use the means of “passing the Scripture”, “passing the Spirit” and “working with God” in a very crowded environment, implying sexual activity. Outsiders might think that there must be “something” there in the ritual. In fact, if the Public Security Bureau report is true, Wu must have had sexual intercourse two or three times every evening for five to seven consecutive nights of the fellowship meeting.

*Case III: Lin Xiangao 林獻羔*⁵

Lin Xian' gao, known in the West as Samuel Lamb, is one of the most famous opponents of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He has a meeting point in his home in Guangzhou which is open to all and which is always packed with members of his congregation. Lin is also one of the few home-group leaders who have studied any theology at all. His father was a Baptist pastor, and he was enrolled in the Alliance Bible School in Wuzhou, Guangxi during the Second World War. After the founding of the People's Republic, he was arrested twice before the Cultural Revolution. The first time was in September 1955, in connection with the case of Wang Mingdao 王明道 a staunch adversary of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Lin was dubbed as the Wang Mindao of the south). He was released in January 1957, but in May 1958 he was arrested a second time and did not come out of prison until May 1978. Shortly after his release he started holding meetings in his home. His church now has a Sunday attendance of more than a thousand people.

Lin's church is not basically a charismatic movement, though he does pray for the sick and cast out demons. In recent years, however, he has come to show a great interest in the numbers connected with the return of the Lord. From his writings we get glimpses of the way in which certain Chinese Christians calculate. There is, to be sure, foreign input in their calculations. Some Christians, whether inside the Three-Self Patriotic Movement or not, like to begin with the rebirth of the nation Israel. They think that the date 14 May 1948 is not accidental, but was prophesied in the Bible.

The evidence is found in Ezekiel 4:3-6: "Then lie down on your left side, and I will place on you the guilt of the nation of Israel. For 390 days you will stay there and suffer because of guilt. I have sentenced you to one year for each day of the punishment. When you have finished that, turn over on your right side and suffer for the guilt of Judah for 40 days – one year for each day of their punishment." 390 plus 40 days equals 430 days and "one year for each day" yields 430 years. That is the same length of time the Israelites spent in Egypt (Ex.12:40-41; Gal.3:17).

This 430 years can also be taken to mean the period from captivity to restoration. Now the Jews were captive in Babylon for 70 years and returned in 536 B.C. That means they still had 360 years to suffer (430 minus 70 equals 360). However, they continued to sin and God punished them seven times over (Lev. 26:18, 21, 23f., 27f.). By calculating according to the Israelite calendar year which has 360 days, the punishment lasted

$360 \times 7 \times 360 = 907,200$ days. Converting to the solar system (907,200 divided by 365.25) it equals 2484 years. So from the year they returned to Israel (536 B.C.) to the end of their wandering is $2484 - 536 = 1948$ years. And according to Flavius Joseph, it was on the first day of the month Nisan in spring (Ezra 1:1 ff.; Jer 29:10 ff.) that they returned from Babylon. The month Nisan (Abib) was around May in 1948. The restoration of Israel as a nation on 14 May 1948 is therefore by the will of God!

The rebirth of Israel is the first step, a very important step for the coming of Jesus. In both Matthew and Mark it is said that he is already “at the very gates.” Lin agrees that one should not “predict” which day, month or year Jesus will come back (Mt. 24:36) and all those dates predicting the Lord’s return are heresies. Yet he reminds his followers to look out for the signs.

Lin finds the number 2520 miraculous. It is the product by multiplication of 3, 7, 10 and 12, where 3 is perfect in holiness, 7 perfect in Spirit, 10 perfect in sequence and 12 perfect in God’s rule. As such, it is the date of the greatest prophecy. He argues that it is a significant date for both the Israelites and the Gentiles.

I. Confirmation by Israel.

(1) As mentioned above, from Israel’s destruction to its rebirth, there were 907,200 days. Since one year consists of 360 days, this amount to exactly 2520 “Israel years”.

(2) from Israel’s entry into the promised land in 1450 B.C. until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70, there were 1520 years. But because the millennium in which Israel leads is counted,⁶ so 1520 plus 1000 equals 2520.

(3) from the building of the second temple in 520 B.C. (Ha. 1:4,8; 2:18ff.) to the year A.D. 2000, there are also 2520 years. It is very likely, therefore, that the Lord will cleanse the temple in the year 2000.

II Confirmation by the Gentiles

(1) From the return of the Jews in 536 B.C. to the rebirth of Israel in 1948: 536 plus 1948 equals 2484 years, which is equal to 2520 “Israel years.”

(2) In the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, he was told that “seven years will pass over him” (Dan.4:22). i.e., 2520 days. This means the time of the gentiles is 2520 Israel years (2484 solar years).

After the time from the captivity of the Jews in 606 B.C. to A.D. 1878 (2484 minus 606 equals 1878), the time of the gentiles should end. How-

ever, God is seen as having extended the life span of the people to 120 years as it was in Noah's days (Gen. 6:3). Indeed, the flood itself is a sign of the seven years' tribulation. Thus 120 Bible years = 118.3 solar years and $1878 + 118.32 = 1996.3$ years. This is why some people predict that the Lord will come back in 1997. (Lk 21:29ff).

Lin's own calculation is based on Mt.24:32ff. He says that "the fig tree" represents Israel (Jer. 24: 1-9; Mk 1 1:12ff.), "its branch becomes tender" means progress. Now Jesus prophesied that he would come again and "this generation will not pass away." As "this generation" was said after the parable of the fig tree, it must mean the time after the rebirth of Israel as a nation.

In Israel, a generation can be 40 years, 50 years, or 70 years. In other words, the return of the Lord can be in any of these time slots.

(a) Forty Years.

The Bible mentions 40 years and 40 days more than 10 times respectively. The following verse is especially illustrative: "Your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for 40 years. Therefore I was provoked by that generation" (Heb. 3:9f.). "Generation" here must refer to a few decades and not a few thousand years (of. Lk 17:25). But since the establishment of Israel as a nation, more than 40 years have passed. The hypothesis of 40 years is therefore no longer valid.

(b) Fifty Years.

The 50th year is "a year of Jubilee" (Lev. 25: 10f.): each person shall return to his own property and the land should rest; also, debts should be cancelled and slaves freed. Fifty years is also the retirement year for Israel's males. If "this generation" refers to the 50-year period, the end should come before 1998.

(c) Seventy Years.

The Bible mentions 70 years many times; for example, the Jews were taken captive to Babylon for 70 years (606-536 B.C.), Judea was left barren for 70 years (590-520 B.C.), and from the rebuilding of the second temple in 515 B.C. to the Persian King Artaxerxes' ordering the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in 445 B.C. was exactly 70 years. If the 70-year period is the correct one, then "all these things shall take place" before 2018. That means, from now on, we should be awake and wait for His coming (James 5:7f).

Concluding Remarks

Millennialism is an integral part of Biblical teaching. The belief that we can transcend a corrupt world and reach a higher state is always attractive. Chinese millennialists accordingly sometimes feel contempt for the values of

a this-worldly life. Because there is nothing to hope for in this life, they discipline themselves in order to overcome their attachment to “the things of this world.”

Furthermore, in China the change of the seasons or dramatic celestial events may trigger off apocalyptic fever. A couple of years ago, when Goto Ben’s book, *The Prophecies of Nostradamus* was translated from Japanese into Chinese, it immediately captured the attention of quite a number of people who held it in awe and reverence. *Tian Feng* (1990 No. 5:2-3) had to organize a symposium to dispel the apprehension concerning a possible “human disaster” predicted for 1999. *Tian Feng* (1990 No. 8:25) also invited an astronomer to explain that natural phenomena had nothing to do with the “big cross” in the Book of Revelation.

But as the Chinese are wont to say: “When you are in utter deprivation and isolation, you cry out to heaven.” In fact, in recent Chinese history, apocalyptic predictions abounded in the interval between the disastrous “great Leap Forward” in the late 50’s and the Cultural Revolution. When Nanjing college re-opened in 1981, more than a few students who came to study theology wanted to know more exactly when the Lord would return. They were disappointed when no course on calculating the date was offered to them.

The recent millennial boom in the countryside may also have something to do with the increasing gap between the urban rich and the rural poor. People tend to look for a re-incarnation in some other dimension when they no longer see any future in the present world.

NOTES

1. See *Bridge*, No.62, 1993, p. 16ff. There are two issues of *Bridge* that give the history of the TJC, nos.62 and 63.
2. Prophecies of flooding are frequent in China. For example, in summer 1989, a woman in Guangxi preached that she had a revelation from God and built an ark for refuge (see *Bridge*, No.47, 1991).
3. Ai Qun 艾羣 and Wu Xiaolong 吳小龍, *Ying S’he Zhi Zhan* 鷹蛇之戰 (The Battle Between the Hawk and the Snake): *Zhenbo Xiejiao ‘Beiliwang’ Jishi* 偵捕邪教「被立王」記實 (A report on the Tracking Down and Arrest of the Heretical ‘Beiliwang’) in *Zhuomunia* 啄木鳥 No.5,1996, Beijing. For the story of the “Little Flock” and the “Yellers”, see *Bridge* No. 56 and 57, 1992-93.
4. See *Bridge*, No. 75, 1996, p.12f
5. Lin Ziangao, *Miracles in Numerals* 奇妙的數字 mimeograph, English and Chinese versions,1995, Guangzhou.
6. *ibid.* p.13 Chinese version: 「千禧年是以色列為首」 Both the English and the Chinese versions are somewhat unclear as to why the 1000 should be added.