

The China President Obama Didn't See

Dissident intellectuals have been attracted to Christianity.

By **LESLIE HOOK**

Beijing

In the northeast part of this city, not far from the old Friendship Hotel, stands a boxy little cinema specializing in anime. A nondescript building on a nondescript thoroughfare, it's hardly a place a tourist would notice, much less a visiting president. Yet had Barack Obama wanted to understand something of the real China, his time would have been better spent here than at the various state dinners, Forbidden City photo-ops, and carefully managed town-hall events that consumed the balance of his trip this week.

At 10 a.m. Sunday, more than 500 members of Shouwang church gathered at the cinema for a service. Shouwang, founded in 1993 by pastor Jin Tianming, is one of the city's largest unregistered churches and counts around 800 regular members. But until last weekend, they had never once been able to meet in such large numbers in an indoor space in Beijing.

Shouwang is what is known in China as a "house" church, meaning that it is an unregistered entity in a country where all religious groups are supposed to report to the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Officially, the Chinese government counts some 10 million Protestants and four million Catholics belonging to registered churches, which proscribe evangelical activity and preach a patriotic dogma.

But Chinese and foreign observers alike believe the number of Chinese belonging to underground churches may now exceed 100 million people. That figure has grown rapidly as more and more Chinese, particularly well-educated city dwellers, turn away from Communist Party atheism.

Life has never been easy for the underground churches, and recently it has gotten a lot harder. This is the result, according to the Christian charity group China Aid, of a state directive handed down in August. Why do China's powerful leaders fear these churches, most of which steer clear of politics? It may be that they have grown increasingly paranoid about the political power of religion given the unrest they have faced in Buddhist Tibet and Muslim Xinjiang. Or it could be because dissident intellectuals, such as jailed human-rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, have sometimes tended toward Christianity.

Whatever the reason, Shouwang in recent weeks has been forced to hold its services outdoors, including during a snowstorm, as attempts to find an indoor space were repeatedly rebuffed. Twenty minutes into Sunday's service, Pastor Tianming announced that "some of our brothers and sisters are being held at their homes and have not been able to come to church. But we are all one body in Christ, so we will wait for them to start the service."

After another hour of singing and praying, the congregation suddenly broke into applause—one of the detained members had apparently talked his way out and arrived. The service got underway; by the time it ended a second detained elder had arrived. The previous Sunday, it was Pastor Tianming who had been detained.

This story is hardly unique to Beijing. Earlier this month, police sealed the doors of the Wanbang church in Shanghai, scattering its congregation of 2,000 people. In Shanxi province the leaders of one of the country's largest house churches, with dozens of branches and tens of thousands of members, have been arrested in a crackdown that has worsened since September. Shouwang itself would not likely have obtained permission to hold its services at the cinema had Mr. Obama's trip not given authorities a reason to avoid ruffling feathers.

Now Mr. Obama is gone, after a visit that was conspicuous for its attentiveness to the sensibilities of China's leaders. In their quest for stability and "harmony," these rulers continue to roll back basic liberties. Shuttering underground churches is part of the trend.

But freedom of faith is something not even history's most repressive governments have ever been fully able to snuff out: not the Romans in their suppression of the earliest Christians; not the communists in their efforts to substitute History for God; not Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong or Kim Il Sung, who attempted to substitute *themselves* for God. So while Shouwang has no place to meet this coming Sunday, the church will still be there, only more deeply steeled in its faith. This is the side of China—the one Mr. Obama opted not to see—that will ultimately determine its future.

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