Case Study:

A Close Look into an Immigrant Workers’ Church in Beijing

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This paper is based on my two-year’s participant observation in a protestant home church for immigrant workers in Beijing.

Christianity, though a world-wide religion, is counted as “minority” in China, both by the believers themselves and by the outsiders. Home church, being illegal and underground, is the “minority in minority”. Based on my ethnography, I will give a full description of the beliefs as well as the ritual system of this immigrant workers’ home church. In my opinion, miracle and suffering are the two key concepts to understand their belief. I will argue that the way that they value and emphasize miracles of Christianity is drawn from the way they believed China’s popular religions before they converted to be Christians. And their glorification of suffering gives them inner strength to face the world.

I am now moving on to the details.

This is a so called “home church”. As most people know, soon after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, the communist party launched “the Three Self Patriotic Movement”. Most Chinese Christians, led by Yaozong Wu, followed this movement, admitted the central government instead of Jesus Christ as the “head” of the church. However, some Christians did not agree with this policy, and they refused to sign on the “Three Self Patriotic Statement”. These minorities separated themselves from the legitimate church, and set up their own illegal church. Since then, there have been two coexisting church systems: one is the “Three Self church”, or public church open to everyone, the other is the underground church. For the latter, the situation is tough: they cannot build a church of their own, and have to hold their service at the believers’ home (that’s where the name “home church” comes from). Besides, They have to hide from the police, who always have the right to drop a sudden visit and dismiss them.

The church where I did my research is a home church in Beijing, or rather, to call
it more exactly, a home church system. Though having not been officially admitted, there are five biggest home church systems in China, four of them were originated in Henan province, and one in Anhui province, each has thousands of believers and hundreds of churches. In 2001, the leaders of the big church system in Anhui decided to send some “workers” to Beijing to set up new churches there, so, three Christian couples, aged between 30 and 40, who had had some theological training at home, were chosen and sent. They came to Beijing with nothing, after 5 years, they set up a huge church system with 27 branches and more than 1,000 believers, most of which are immigrant workers. The speed of their expansion is really fast and somewhat unbelievable.

The 27 branches in this church has believers from 12 to more than 100 each own. For the small ones, they hold the service at one of the believers’ home, who is willing to “serve the church”. For the big ones, the church helps them to rent a large room to hold the service. Their routine rituals include a service on every Sunday, a pray meeting on the middle of the week, say, Wednesday, and a bible study group on Thursday or so. One person in each branch is chosen by the church leaders to organize and lead the branch’s routine rituals, as well as to attend the larger rituals that the church holds, usually every month, getting theological training while getting to know the recent situation of the whole church.

What is the reason for the conversion of the believers in this church? I have done over 50 interviews, and the answers I have got are consistent: miracle. Let me quote a paragraph one believer said:

“When we (means the interviewee and his wife) took our first step to Christianity, our son was still in the hospital, having a high fever, near to death. Then we participated in a service and said to God we would believe in him. If he cures our son, we would make a testimony and offer him 50 Chinese yuan. We just said that. Then the miracle happened. The service was on Sunday, since then, our son got better and better, on Wednesday, the fever had gone, on Saturday, he left the hospital and came home. Then we made our testimony and offered God 50 yuan.”

Actually, before this paragraph, the interviewee talked a lot about how the doctors in hospital couldn’t do anything to help, how they came to the Gods they used to believe, and how both the doctors and the Gods declared death to their son with no way to avoid. Desperate and hopeless, they came across a Christian, who persuaded them believing in “the only God”. They had nothing better to do than to have a try, so the story quoted above happened. After that, they converted to Christianity.

This case is representative of most conversions. The immigrant workers in this church were born farmers, and grew up in rural areas in China, where the influence of popular religion seemed to be everywhere. Before they came to Beijing, they almost all believed in some idols, either it was Guanyin Pusa (the bodhisattva of compassion), or Fo (Buddha), or some local deities. The primarily comparison they draw between Christianity and the belief they used to have is about the efficacy of the deity, in their word, “ling”. When I asked them to explain why miracle happened, the overwhelming answer was “Because Jesus Christ is more Ling (has a higher efficacy) than the other
Gods.” For example, we can see clearly their practical way to judge a belief in the following paragraph. When a sister in this church was blamed by the church leaders of practicing Qigong (a mysterious Chinese way for self-cultivation and curing disease), she said to me:

“You cannot say that Qigong is bad, it cured my disease. Believing in God will bring me internal life, of course, this is good. But Qigong can cure my disease, so it is also good. They are good in different aspects. I have been practicing Qigong for half a month, and I do get benefits from that. People who receive benefits from Qigong cannot say that is bad, right? But Qigong is not good in this aspect—it can’t give me internal life.”

In addition to the discussion about how miracle played a central role in conversions, let me now pass on to another important aspect of their belief—suffering.

For most believers in this church, their living conditions are very poor. They have a very low educational level, must fight for bare living at Beijing, at the same time encounter the discrimination and social segregation both from the government and the city people. For instance, their children cannot enter the normal primary school provided for city kids, if they truly want to, they have to pay a relatively high quota expense, which is beyond their capacity. So, most of their children have to go to the laborer dependent’s school, with poor facilities and unprofessional teachers. They make everyday living by shabby work, such as ragging and street selling. According to my questionnaire survey in a branch in 2005, more than 60% people earned less than 1,000 Yuan in the last month. Consider that in most cases, only husbands go out to work, wives just stay at home, their monthly single-income has to support the whole family, it is not hard to imagine how hard their lives are.

The houses they live in are usually located in the suburban areas, small and shabby, with the monthly rent ranging from 200 Yuan to 300 Yuan, without any heat utilities in the winter or air-conditioner in the summer. The food they have for meals everyday barely includes any meat, even for the service of the whole church, which usually lasts a day and serves lunch, the lunch consists simply of just steamed bread and some pickled vegetables. However, by creatively using the “suffering theory” of Christianity, those believers put a glorious instead of shameful label on their poor condition.

Here is a paragraph quoted from a sermon given by a church leader:

“Moses tells us in the bible that people in this world have nothing to boast. Is there anything to boast in one’s life? No, there isn’t. There is only toil and vexation, only that it is. Why does Lazarus make such a good testimony when suffering? (According to Luke chapter 16, Lazarus is a beggar covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table, even the dogs would come and lick his sores.) Because he sets his goals of life in God. He knows that people in this world may have lots of sufferings, but he also believes without any doubt that God will help him go into internality. He knows that even if suffering is no where to escape, God will definitely endow him with power to conquer it. Others and sisters,
we have seen that Lazarus has such a good ending only because he has unshaken faith in God. (After Lazarus died, he was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.)

Bothers and sisters, we have seen that it is only through believing in Jesus and relying on Jesus can one escape the fate of death.”

We can see from this paragraph that there is a contrast between the sufferings of this world and the glory of “that world”, namely the world they will go to after death. For them, one way to conquer the sufferings is to devaluate them. Here is another paragraph quoted from another sermon:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ says, we will be where he is. He will never cheat on us. Our faith is not a spiritual refuge, nor is it a stimulus material, it is God’s word, it is true. The heaven is real, it is not an absurd beautiful lie, it is true, because God says so. Jesus says, if there were no heaven, he should have told us, he will not lie to us. We know that in Beijing nowadays, you may use your savings of half life to buy a three-room apartment of your own, that’s the best you can do. You may spend 10,000 Yuan to buy a Beijing Hukou, and that’s all. (Hukou is a Chinese invention, being an evidence to prove registered permanent residence in one place. If one has Beijing Hukou, he is counted as Beijing citizen and has all the benefits which exclude the outsiders.) But brothers and sisters, this is nothing compared to our future. What we will live in is not three-room apartment decorated with fancy wooden floors, which seems to be great at this moment. It is said in Revelation that we will live in a place decorated with pure gold, jasper and agate, the ever best things in the world. Do we still need Beijing Hukou? Not at all! Beijing Hukou, compared to the heaven Hukou, is rather too inferior. We have to spend 10,000 Yuan to get a Beijing Hukou, but the heaven Hukou is free.”

There is no doubt that suffering has always been an important theme in Christianity ever since it came into being. Jesus sets up an example of giving up everything and willing to take the sacrifice for other peoples’ sake, and to become a disciple of Jesus is to carry on his cross and walk with him. However, we can see in history that the suffering part of Christian belief has been put most emphasis only during hard times, such as the First and Second World War. For the time of peace, it has been mostly ignored. This is also the case in China. In fact, if we go to the legitimate or public church, we can hardly hear any sermon concerning with suffering, which reflects a sharp contrast to this immigrant workers’ church, where nearly every sermon I have heard is about suffering and how to conquer the suffering. For them, suffering is nowhere to escape, it is not what they have been willing to choose, but has been unavoidable since they were born. The devaluation of sufferings in present and the strong hope for future gives them inner strengths to go through everyday life.

They are immigrant workers, which makes them the minority group compared to the city people. Besides, they are Christians, which makes them the minority group compared both to the normal farmers who usually believe in popular religions instead of “the foreign religion” (yangjiao), and to the well-educated citizens, most of whom are atheists. We can see from above that these two identities are intertwined and mutually strengthened, which consolidate their status as minority group.
Their attitude to this identity seems to be complex and in some way different according to how strong their belief is. For the leaders and the elites of the church, they regard this status as proud and glorious. In my talk with them, I heard them say "we don’t like them" once and once again with a little despise. However, for most of the ordinary believers, though often taught to be more pious in God and more brave with the difficulties, they still expressed their envy to the city people. Christianity, more precisely the Christianity they believe in, gives their inferior living condition reasons and meanings, which is a great consolation for them. On the other hand, the miracles they have experienced make them believe that their sufferings are worthwhile, and there is a God who helps them and will lead them to paradise. If their prayers are not answered, they will say that it is because their faith in God is too weak, not because that God does not exist. This is the typical explanation in any orthodox Christian tradition, somewhat ironically, this is also the typical explanation of most Chinese popular religions.

I have said that until the moment my research ended, this church had over 1,000 members. It has be noted here that in this huge number of people, 80 to 85 percent were the ones who had already become Christians before they came to Beijing, only 15 to 20 percent were the ones who converted in Beijing. The former have set up the prototype of this church, and the latter just consciously or unconsciously follow them, passing the typical ways of conversion as well as maintaining their belief on and on. In this process, their rituals play an important part.

Using Durkheim’s theory, Marshall Douglas has pointed out from the psychological perspective that the practice of ritual often produces two primary outcomes-belief and belonging. He said:" Among group members who already share the relevant beliefs, co-presence produces both intensification and and extremization of those beliefs via the process of ‘group polarization’…Simple contact between individuals is a powerful source of liking and cohesion, playing as it does upon multiple mechanisms of attachment…”(Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice, Sociological Theory 20:3, November 2002)

This is exactly what happens in this church. Notice that most of the believers do not read the bible themselves, even if they do, they can hardly understand anything, they just receive messages given by the leaders, feel the atmosphere in every ritual, for most of the time, they get influenced emotionally instead of rationally. This is the reason as well as the outcome for all the intensely emotionalized rituals that this church holds. Every song they sing, and every prayer they make, they do it with their highest voice, with the roof seeming to be shaken by the sound effects. Sometimes they may even kneel to the ground, lifting their hands up and crying out the unmelodic lyrics or prayers, then repeat that again and again. Throughout the whole ritual, especially the singing and praying part, all the attendants join the leaders whole-heartedly, generating a strong feeling of co-presence. Through this emotional and psychological process (even if they have no idea of what psychology is), their way of expressing the belief endures. Though this church is in a big city, it is rooted in rural areas, making itself different from typical urban churches, while almost the same as the churches we see at the countryside.
At last, I’d like to say a few more words about a special yet small group in this church—the believers with relatively high education and better pay, most of whom have owned Beijing Hukou and their own apartment. Among the 27 branches, only one branch is primarily composed by this kind of believers, with only 10 people or so. For outsiders such as me, the differences between this branch and the others are easy to identify. For instance, members in this branch have lots of rational thoughts about their beliefs, and do not consider miracle and suffering as the basic two parts. Some of them even complain to me that the teachings in this church cannot satisfy their needs, and they are also the ones who usually have some personal connection with the city churches. They create some tension in this church, making the characteristics of this church in a whole become even clearer.