

“China”

This is the second of two articles on China.

I dislike travel. I dread getting into a metal box and spending hours on the highways. I know that some of you enjoy driving. The automobile spells freedom for you. For me it means confinement. It means I am trapped for hours in a tiny space, unable to stretch my legs, needing regular stops, etc. Worse is being trapped in an aluminum tube traveling at 550 mph for 12-15 hours. Okay, it's a first-world problem. I'm not working in the fields or a coal mine (like my grandfather) for 12 hours a day or living on a subsistence diet. I'm just saying traveling to distant places not my first choice. I'd rather not. Then why do it? Why not just stay home? Then I could quit assaulting others with my gripes. Good question. Here's why. I go on these trips (Lima, Kiev, Taipei, St. Petersburg, Chengdu, Shenzhen, Shanghai) because I perceive an obligation to do so. If career missionaries are willing to pick up their roots and spend decades overseas in an unfamiliar country with an unfamiliar culture, how can I possibly say no when asked to go to distant parts for a week or two? My answer is, I can't.

Lectures

The study of worship is my avocation, one might say. I have pushed myself to learn all that I can about the history and practice of worship, especially as understood in the Reformed church. I've written books on the subject. So I get asked to give lectures on the contents of my books for the sake of burgeoning Reformed churches that lack resources. In August 2018 I travelled to Chengdu in order to teach at the Western China Theological Seminary, sponsored by the *Early Rain Presbyterian Church*. Their pastor, *Wang Yi*, now serving a nine-year sentence for daring to resist the Communist government's attempts to control Chinese Christianity, is one of the leading "house church" ministers in mainland China. House churches may or may not actually meet in a house. Instead the label is how churches that are not approved by the Communist government are identified. Most of them began in houses, hence the name. Yet many have grown into large congregations. There were about 700 in attendance and membership at Early Rain prior to being broken-up by the government. I taught a class of 19 with a translator. Most of the class was made up of future pastors and some of their wives. A Chinese edition of my *Reformed Worship* was available, but most of what I had to say was new to them. We met for six hours a day for five days, or 30 hours in total. Given the crackdown by the government four months later (December 2018), my time there was providential.

Jet lag was a problem for me. The time difference between Eastern Standard Time and Chengdu is 12 hours. That is the most that it can be anywhere in the world. In other words, Chengdu is as far away from the United States' Eastern Time Zone as one can get. I started my journey at 6:30 AM on Friday from Savannah International Airport and my head hit the pillow in the Holiday Inn Express in Chengdu at 2:30 AM on Sunday morning. I was upside down for days. The return flight started at 10:00 AM on Saturday with a stop in Beijing and a total of over 15 hours flying, arriving in Newark at 4:00 PM *on Saturday!* The world is a strange place.

A similar pattern held for my third trip in January 2020, first to teach the Westminster Confession of Faith in Shenzhen, and then Reformed worship in Shanghai.

Chinese Christianity

I was again very impressed with Chinese Christianity. The house churches are under constant threat. The police send officers to their services which they observe and take notes and photographs. My original translator in Chengdu in 2018, Ben Chen, was not allowed back into China to work with me because of his religious activity. A few days later he was readmitted. Four months later came the crackdown. However, I could not observe even a hint of fear. They refused to be intimidated. After Early Rain's pastor met with President George W. Bush back in 2006, he was roughed up upon returning for allegedly having brought shame to China. Then in December 2018 came the arrest. Yet they are unfazed. They regard the authorities with contempt. In August of 2015 the Early Rain church published their own "95 theses," addressing the church-state relations in China and what they call the compromised "sinicization" of Chinese Christianity. My January 2020 travel within China resembled a spy movie: changing cars mid-trip, wearing hats and masks, even ducking so as to avoid facial-recognition technology.

Chinese Calvinism

Pastor Wang draws from Calvin, Augustine, Samuel Rutherford, and the *Westminster Confession* in the above document, directly rebuking the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" of government-approved churches. Wang calls it a "movement of Antichrist." Calvinism is growing among the 100 million Chinese Christians, and Reformed titles are selling "like hot cakes," according to one account. Early Rain started a classical Christian day school, "Covenant Reformed School," one of 200 to 300 Christian schools now operating in China. Plans were in the works to start the country's first Christian liberal arts college (now on hold). Chinese Christians are manifesting an instinctive sense of Christians all through the centuries: we must educate our own. How can a house church start a college? Not with a large campus, but with a few committed leaders and 20 students. They even have a growing pro-life movement. They have developed a "book of church order" and a hymnal with a number of metrical psalms.

Reformed worship

The service I attended at Early Rain in 2018 was recognizably Reformed. It used several fixed forms: the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the doxology and the Gloria Patri. It featured good hymns, substantial Bible readings, free prayer, a 70-minute sermon. I was pleased by what I saw, and what I might add, I have for years encouraged: the unity of the international church in its worship. I sought to highlight this in my lectures. In the course of our five days together we sang 32 psalms and hymns. How did we do that? The seminary had a Chinese hymnal with over 800 selections, including a psalter in the back. I thumbed through it on the first day and was able to identify from the few bits and pieces of English at the headings about 50 that overlapped with

our own hymns. I sang in English, they, of course, in Chinese. For example, we sang such favorites as these:

Holy, Holy, Holy
Now Thank We All Our God
Great is Thy Faithfulness
Rock of Ages
When Peace Like a River
Like a River Glorious
Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah
A Mighty Fortress,
Etc.

We also sang, to the same tunes as we use in the *Trinity Psalter*, Psalms 1, 23, 42, 100, 103, 110, 122, and 145. This same pattern was repeated in Shenzhen and Shanghai, and indeed in Taipei. Good music is good music and good hymn/psalm tunes are good hymn/psalm tunes in every culture. It is not without reason that so many Asian children are learning Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven on their violins and pianos. This Asian sense of the beautiful bodes well for the future of historic Reformed worship.

Rudyard Kipling wrote, “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” In one sense he was right. China is a very different place than Savannah, GA. On the other hand, he was utterly wrong. East and West do meet. Where? In Christ. East and West, Chinese and American, red and yellow, black and white, are all one in Christ.

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