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# THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH IN TAIWAN

Resilience, community, and the centrality of  
truth in a Chinese Christian movement

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The True Jesus Church (真耶穌教會) was founded in 1917 by a Chinese silk merchant named Wei Enbo (魏恩波). Later taking the Christian name Baoluo (保羅, Paul), Wei claimed to have received a vision in which Jesus personally baptized him, and called on him to restore Christianity to its original purity.

What developed from his vision is a charismatic faith marked by exceptionalism, with deep seated beliefs about the realities of the world, the meaning of human life and its relation to the metaphysical, and a calculable distinction between good and evil. Believers hold that the True Jesus Church is the one true form of Christianity worldwide, and the only church in possession of the biblical interpretation and rites through which a person's soul is saved.

Today, the True Jesus Church is one of largest independent churches in the world, and is among the most distinctive branches of Protestant Christianity in China and Taiwan. Congregations can be found worldwide, from Canada to South Africa, fortified by the global Chinese-speaking diaspora.

The story of the True Jesus Church is a story of the creation of an international community focused on collective life, moral regulation and mutual assistance. The movement celebrated its one-hundredth year in 2017, thanks to careful efforts to protect, sustain and expand the charismatic spark that first birthed the church in the early 20th century. That the church has endured enormous political and social shifts during this time is nothing short of remarkable.

Over the course of several months in 2023, Religioscope interviewed TJC leaders and congregants throughout Taiwan, from large city congregations to coastal indigenous communities. The following report is an account of the historical context of this unique branch of Christianity, and the experiences of its members in Taiwan today.

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## Early Beginnings of the True Jesus Church

Though one of the best known Chinese-born Christian movements, the True Jesus Church is certainly not the first of its kind. Indeed, China's earliest encounter with a localized charismatic Christian movement took place nearly 200 years ago, in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (太平天國).

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was a Chinese Christian rebellion from 1850 to 1864, and is now considered one of the most deadly civil conflicts in recorded history, and a major factor in the demise of the ruling Qing dynasty.<sup>1</sup> The movement was led by Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全) the self-described Heavenly King, born in a rural backwater and transformed by a vision of God the Father and Christ the Son in which he was given a sword and told to destroy devils.

At the rebellion's peak, Hong's armies numbered in the millions, and conquered large swathes of the southern and central regions of the Qing empire. It captured some of China's wealthiest cities, established a Heavenly Capital (天京, tianjing) with an egalitarian society governed by Christian texts and doctrines, and looked set to transform China into a Christian theocracy.<sup>2</sup> Worshippers gathered in "indigenous" services without guidance from Western missionaries, with rites crafted from an integration of Western worship liturgy and traditional Chinese religious rites.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually quashed by imperial forces and Western mercenary troops, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was China's first major homegrown Christian movement, setting the precedent for twentieth-century native Chinese Christian movements.

Less than a century later, in 1917, a man named Wei Enbo would similarly receive a vision from God, and battle against devils with a heavenly sword. Wei

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<sup>1</sup> Mao, B. (2021) Mob Ideology or Democracy: Analyzing Taiping Rebellion's Defeat and Revolution of 1911's Triumph in Ending the Qing Dynasty, *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal* 2 (1) <https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj/vol2/iss1/2>, p.17.

<sup>2</sup> Leung, Y.H. (2015) *An Overview of the Liturgy in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* [Master's thesis, Chinese University of Hong Kong] <https://www.abhin.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/taipingsEnglish.pdf>, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Leung, Y.H. (2015) p.19; Anderson, A. (2011) *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia Revised Edition* (2nd ed.) 1517 Media. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcrbt>.

would also build a new religious movement that would rapidly spread across China and even, within a few short decades, the world: the True Jesus Church.



### **WEI ENBO**

Born in 1879 in the rural village of Wufang (午方), in what is now Hebei Province, Wei Enbo grew up poor and without access to education.<sup>4</sup> After his father died when he was thirteen, Wei began to work as a farm laborer, and became a street vendor the following year. At the age of sixteen, he traveled to Beijing for a three-year apprenticeship with a papermaker.<sup>5</sup>

As an adult, the married Wei was introduced to the London Missionary Society Christian congregation at Ciqikou.<sup>6</sup>

*Wei Enbo (魏保羅), the founder of the True Jesus Church (source: 中文百科全書 (n.d.) 真耶穌教會, 中文百科全書, <https://www.newton.com.tw/wiki/%E7%9C%9F%E8%80%B6%E7%A9%8C%E6%95%99%E6%9C%83>*

He was baptized in 1904, and quickly became an active participant in church activities.<sup>7</sup> There, he learnt how to read, and benefitted from the vast network of social and business connections available through China's transnational Christian

organizations of the time. He also began to develop his leadership skills through his involvement in preaching and worship activities.

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<sup>4</sup> Wei Enbo 魏恩波, Shengling zhen jianzheng shu [shang] 聖靈真見證書【上】 [The True Testimony of the Holy Spirit, vol. I] (True Jesus Church, date of publication unclear) (hereafter True Testimony), via Inouye, M. (2020). *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church*. Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Wei, True Testimony, 2B.

<sup>6</sup> Introvigne, M. (2019, October 10) *True Jesus Church: A Chinese Pentecostal Movement*, Bitter Winter, <https://bitterwinter.org/true-jesus-church-a-chinese-pentecostal-movement/>.

<sup>7</sup> Wei, True Testimony, 2B.

Within a year of his baptism, Wei was the successful owner of his own store, En Xin Yong 恩信永 [Grace Faith Eternal].<sup>8</sup>

### ***CHARISMATIC REVIVAL***

While Wei was undergoing a personal transformation, a number of charismatic revivals were sweeping through Chinese Protestant congregations, wherein Christians gathered to “seek the gifts of the Holy Spirit” and face their sins.<sup>9</sup>

In her annual report for 1905, missionary Edith Murray wrote: “But what shall we say of a crowded meeting of men and women, all weeping and wrestling in prayer together, confessing their sins, and calling out for the Holy Spirit to fill their hearts? Truly one can never forget such sights and sounds; surely the Lord was in that place!”<sup>10</sup>

In fact, these charismatic revivals across China coincided with similar waves across the world, from Korea to Wales.<sup>11</sup> The best known of these, the revival at Azusa Street, saw members of a prayer meeting in Los Angeles begin worshipping in an unknown language. The group saw the “gift of tongues” as evidence of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” necessary for salvation.<sup>12</sup> One of the Pentecostal missionaries from Azusa Street, Bernt Berntsen, would later guide Wei Enbo through his first experience speaking in tongues.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, in comparison to earlier charismatic revivals, this movement was buoyed by large strides being made in international communication and transportation. Whereas earlier missionaries received extensive formal training

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Evans Meech, Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1905, CWM/LMS/North China/Reports, MF 692, via Inouye, M. (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Inouye, M. (2020), p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Edith S. Murray, Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1905, Cangzhou, CWM/LMS/North China/Reports, MF 694, via Inouye, M. (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Lee, Y.H. “The Korean Holy Spirit Movement in Relation to Pentecostalism,” in Anderson, A. (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Inouye, M. (2020), p. 60 and Wacker, G. (2001), *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*, Harvard University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Inouye, M. (2017) “Charismatic Crossings: The Transnational, Transdenominational Friendship of Bernt Berntsen and Wei Enbo,” in *Global Chinese Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*. Brill, p. 92.

and navigated diplomatic barriers with the support of large sending institutions, revivalist “faith missionaries” were typically self supported, and relied on cheap printing technology and the lower price of steamship travel.<sup>14</sup> It was now possible to share charismatic narratives and charismatic experiences faster and more cheaply than ever before.

### ***THE BIRTH OF THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH***

In 1915, ten years after his baptism, Wei was a wealthy businessman and valued patron of several churches in the Beijing Christian community.<sup>15</sup> That year, he was introduced to Pentecostal missionary Bernt Berntsen, and saw “[Berntsen’s] morals were better than pastors of other churches.”<sup>16</sup>

“Berntsen washed Wei’s feet, and Wei was extremely moved. From that time on they became intimate friends, and Berntsen helped Wei understand the truths of the Bible,” reads Wei’s account of the meeting.

Thereafter, Wei and Berntsen were participants of the Apostolic Faith Church, where charismatic meetings involved faith healings, exorcism, and speaking in tongues. It was at one of these meetings in December 1915 that Wei spoke in tongues for the first time.<sup>17</sup>

By 1917, a soured business deal between Bernsten and Wei saw the latter defect from Berntsen’s Apostolic Faith Church, leave his wife Liu Ai to manage his silk store, and found the True Jesus Church.<sup>18</sup> Wei sold his house and land in his rural village in order to raise funds for missionaries’ traveling expenses,

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<sup>14</sup> Inouye, M. (2020), p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Tang, H.B. 唐红飙 (2006) *A Survey of the History of the True Jesus Church 真耶稣教会历史史迹考*, <https://1917-1951-tc.cw.center/%E5%8F%82%E8%80%83%E4%B9%A6%E7%9B%AE/>

<sup>16</sup> True Testimony 3B, 4A. This section of Wei’s diary is written in the third person, although the other sections are written in the first person.

<sup>17</sup> Popular Gospel Truth, August 1916, via Inouye, M. (2020).

<sup>18</sup> Wang, P. 王彼得 Thirtieth Anniversary Commemorative Volume, M6, Section Nine, via Inouye, M. (2020).

printing costs for publications, and the first volume of his autobiographical True Testimony of the Holy Spirit 聖靈真見證書 (上).<sup>19</sup>

“As soon as he heard the call from God, Wei cut off [his business activities] like ‘a quick blade through tangled hemp’ [快刀斷麻],” wrote Wei’s religious associate Peter Wang.

### ***WEI’S VISION AND BAPTISM***

In late May 1917, Wei heard a voice as he prayed in the midst of a thirty-nine-day fast.

“You must receive the baptism of Jesus,” the voice said.<sup>20</sup> Walking a few kilometers south of the city of Beijing, Wei found a river. He waded out into the water and knelt. He heard the voice again, “You must be baptized facedown.”

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Wei proceeded to document errors of doctrine and practice that had led European Christianity astray in a list of “Six Covenants and Five Ordinances of Correction” that was soon published and widely distributed.<sup>21</sup> His first religious text criticized Chinese Christians for sprinkling instead of practicing immersion baptism in living water (活水, huoshui), seeking doctors instead of calling on God, and for failing to observe the “true Sabbath” on a Saturday:

“Speak and write to all those false preachers, false teachers, false seekers of the Way, and the false learned men who have been sent out by the churches: Woe unto you! You have closed the gates of Heaven. There are people who want to get in, but you are obstructing them. You draw near to me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me. Is not your worship also empty? You have erred in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Wanguo gengzheng jiao bao 萬國更正教報 Global Church Correction (hereafter Global Church Correction) no. 1, February 1, 1919, p. 1 (“A True Testimony Summarizing Wei Paul’s Experience 魏保羅經歷略表真見證”) and no. 2, July 27, 1919, p. 4 (“In the War in the Spirit World, Wei Paul Relied on the Holy Spirit 靈界大戰魏保羅靠聖靈論”), via Inouye, M. (2020).

<sup>21</sup> True Testimony, 25B, 17B–20A.

your preaching. Like the blind leading the blind, you shall fall into a bottomless pit.”<sup>22</sup>

Wei’s message sparked a revival, and people, largely Christians, flocked to the True Jesus Church.<sup>23</sup> Though he would die just two years later, Wei’s religious movement managed to gain enough traction to not only survive, but grow, under new leadership in the following decades.

### ***TJC EXCEPTIONALISM***

The early popularity of the True Jesus Church stemmed in no small part from its demonstrating that it adhered to the Bible more closely than other contemporary Christian churches, including those led by foreign missionaries. That message remains a powerful one for believers today.

In fact, Wei’s criticism of existing Chinese churches for failing to properly emulate the acts of Jesus and the apostles aligned with Christian restoration movements over centuries.<sup>24</sup> Movements such as Mormonism and Seventh-day Adventism, both emerging in the nineteenth century, push the basic message that the doctrines and practices of the early Christian church have become corrupted over time, requiring restoration of original doctrines and practices, and closer alignment with biblical texts. The True Jesus Church makes the same claim.

In addition to appealing to the Bible’s authority, Wei also held he had received direct revelation from God. This claim puts him in the same group as the biblical prophets and apostles, an individual with a special line of communication with God, and on a divinely ordained mission.<sup>25</sup>

Wei headed south to the town of Huangcun (黃村) soon after his vision. There, he held a thirty-nine-day fast, one which became a “public spectacle,” attracting

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<sup>22</sup> True Testimony, 4B, 5A.

<sup>23</sup> Xi, L. (2010) *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, Yale University Press, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p.90.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



a growing audience from the town and beyond, and purportedly led to an instant religious revival.<sup>26</sup> Though his preaching meetings were first attended by a couple of dozen people,<sup>27</sup> Wei was soon preaching to large crowds.<sup>28</sup> Converts came to hear Wei preach, and be baptized facedown. Critics also came from rival churches to challenge his teachings. Wei's own children Huiying (惠英) and Wenxiang (文祥) were baptized in the early days of this initial revival.<sup>29</sup>

The early church meetings followed the revivalistic and evangelistic playbook.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on his experience as a lay leader, Wei held emotionally-charged meetings in which people wept and spoke in tongues, and were filled with the Holy Spirit. These meetings were often followed by baptism ceremonies in which people emerged from the water “extremely happy, praising Jesus.”<sup>31</sup>

These revival-style meetings were in line with other Christian groups in China at the time, although were viewed as possessing a higher level of energy and emotion than was common for other churches.<sup>32</sup> Healing miracles, too, played a central role in these early worship meetings.<sup>33</sup>

“The congregation was greatly moved. Zhang Zhirui raised two or three people from the dead, and performed many other miracles... The Holy Spirit poured out in abundance. We were all as though in the form of angels, all dancing hand in hand, very happy, singing Spirit-songs, praising the Lord with one voice.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> True Testimony, 20A.

<sup>28</sup> True Testimony, 27A–28B.

<sup>29</sup> True Testimony, 23AB.

<sup>30</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p.96.

<sup>31</sup> True Testimony, 24B, 28A, 29B–30A, 31B.

<sup>32</sup> Xi, L. (2010) p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Wei Enbo 魏恩波, Shengling zhen jianzheng shu [xia] 聖靈真見證書【下】 [The True Testimony of the Holy Spirit, Vol. II] (True Jesus Church, date of publication unclear (hereafter True Testimony II), 4A, via Inouye, M. (2020).

Wei is also said to have personally healed people of tuberculosis, deafness, blindness, possession by devils, and dumbness.<sup>35</sup> His miraculous thirty-nine-day fast and the charismatic energy apparent in his revival was seen by many converts as proof of Wei being divinely commissioned. Wei's followers began to spread his teachings, and sought to recreate his sacred experiences.<sup>36</sup>

### ***THE EXPANSION OF THE TJC***

Wei and his associates began to publish the True Jesus Church's first newspaper, *Global Church Correction* (萬國更正教報), in early 1919. It was mass-mailed to Protestant churches around the country, and contained sermons, articles, and testimonies that evangelized to outsiders. It also worked to reinforce the church's efficacy to insiders, and reported news of the church's growth.

The first issue called for readers to write in with miraculous stories that would confirm the efficacy of Wei's doctrines, including "visions you have seen, God's voice that you have heard, times in which you have relied on the Lord and received protection, and all kinds of miraculous methods (妙法, miaofa)."<sup>37</sup>

By the end of 1919, the church had more than sixty congregations across China, and two bishops headed its organizational structure.<sup>38</sup> Wei was the bishop of Zhili Province, and Zhang Lingsheng the bishop of Shandong Province. Below these men were twenty-seven elders, and twenty-two deacons and deaconesses.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p.97.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Global Church Correction* no. 1, February 1, 1919, p. 1 ("Advertising *Global Church Correction* 萬國更正教報廣告"), via Inouye, M. (2020).

<sup>38</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> *Global Church Correction* no. 1, February 1, 1919, p. 2 ("True Jesus Church Personnel 真耶穌教會職員"); *Global Church Correction* no. 3, November 22, 1919, p. 4.

## **TJC FORMALISATION**

Wei's timing for a religious movement was indeed fortuitous. The declining Republican government no longer had the resources to curb threats from "heterodox religion" (邪教, xiejiao), even after Wei ventured into apocalyptic prophecy.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, growing Chinese disillusionment with warring Christian European countries during the Great War provided Wei an opening to criticize established Christian denominations as formalistic organizations "that had lost their charismatic spark and become burdened by Western cultural baggage."<sup>41</sup>

Believers then, as they are today, were chiefly concerned with the issue of sin, and a belief that the religious practices of other denominations were insufficient to gain salvation. The name of the church, Zhen [True] Yesu [Jesus] Jiaohui [Church] (真耶穌教會) was itself a subtle criticism of the awkward foreign names of many Protestant churches, and their apparently "limited" view of the Bible.<sup>42</sup> Wei and True Jesus Church evangelists were unafraid of handing out pamphlets at the entryways of other Christian churches, and were sometimes ejected by police for disrupting meetings.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the turmoil of the national and international political environment, the True Jesus Church represented simplicity, purity, and a return to the charismatic scripts of the New Testament and words of Jesus. All worship and rites were to be done "in Jesus' name."

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<sup>40</sup> True Testimony, 87AB.

<sup>41</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p. 110.

<sup>42</sup> Global Church Correction no. 1, February 1, 1919, p. 6 ("Cancel All Church Names 取消各公會之名稱"), in Inouye, M. (2020). This article argues, for example, that the Chinese name of the Presbyterian Church (長老會, or Elder's Church) was incorrect because a church ought to be Jesus's church, not elders' church. The London Missionary Society (倫敦教會, or London Church) was "clearly just glorifying a city in England." The Methodist Episcopal Church (美以美會) and Wesleyan Church (維斯哩堂) were "both just glorifying themselves [by use of loosely transliterated names with no obvious Christian linguistic content]." The Baptist Church (浸禮會) focused only on a single rite.

<sup>43</sup> True Testimony, 35B.

## Political Upheaval and Early Trials

Thanks to Wei's charismatic energy, financial resourcefulness and business connections, the True Jesus Church grew rapidly to become a large independent denomination with a national following. Even so, the ensuing decades were nothing short of a baptism of fire for the church.

After surviving foreign invasion and civil war in China (1931-1949), the mass political mobilization and repression of the Maoist era (1949-1976) put the church's central administration under extreme pressure to survive. Remarkably, church members quietly sustained charismatic practices on a grassroots level long after the formal bureaucracy had succumbed to the party-state.<sup>44</sup>

### *THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION*

The Chinese Communist Party's takeover in the 1950s, in which it consolidated control over government institutions, territories and the entirety of moral discourse, meant that the country's Christian churches were suddenly faced with the option to adapt or face extreme persecution.<sup>45</sup>

Christianity's focus on the Bible, self-contained communities, and diverse membership posed a direct threat to the party-state's plans for total ideological control, and churches came under intense pressure to change their language regarding right and wrong, the saved versus adversaries, in favor of the rhetorical tones and moral categories of Maoism.<sup>46</sup> While such code-switching did not necessitate a complete conversion to Maoist ideology, it signaled an acceptance of the state's authority in a form of loyalty "karaoke" that was quickly becoming the only way to survive the transition to Communist rule.<sup>47</sup>

The transition to Maoist rhetoric was particularly trying for the True Jesus Church, which had by then set itself apart as Jesus' "one true church," with an

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<sup>44</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p. 223.

<sup>45</sup> Inouye, M. (2018) Speaking in the Devil's Tongue? The True Jesus Church's Uneasy Rhetorical Accommodation to Maoism, 1948–1958, *Modern China* 44 (6) p.653.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

orthodoxy of belief and practice based on the Bible and the Bible alone. While this “internal culture of authoritative discourse” helped the church maintain community boundaries and resist Maoist control, it also forced communities to go underground or maintain a low profile in order to survive.<sup>48</sup>

The Denunciation Movement (控诉运动) launched in the spring of 1951, for example, saw some mainstream Christian communities hold large meetings designed to criticize so-called agents of American imperialism, and “force a break with the past.”<sup>49</sup> The True Jesus Church’s emphasis on God’s universal domination framed church leaders’ critique and resistance to these denunciations.

At the same time, believers took pride in the church’s native Chinese roots. The fact that the church ticked all three boxes of “self-led, self-financed, and self-propagating,” in line with Maoist criteria for rejecting imperialism, meant that church members considered themselves exempt from the accusations leveled at churches founded by foreign missionaries.<sup>50</sup>

Even so, the top national leaders of the True Jesus Church had “changed their tune” from “I Will Seek the Holy Spirit” (我要求圣灵) to “The East Is Red” (东方红) within a few years of the Communist takeover, and internal documents reveal the adoption of Maoist rhetoric in internal discourse.<sup>51</sup> In 1953, the True Jesus Church General Assembly leadership joined other Christian groups in expressing solidarity with the Soviet Union after the death of “Chairman Stalin, the dear friend of the Chinese people.”<sup>52</sup>

The 1958 Great Leap Forward (大跃进) posed yet another existential threat to the church, with campaigns against religious groups intensifying across the country. Ultimately, the True Jesus Church as a formal institution would be shut

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Lutz, J. G. (1988) *Chinese politics and Christian missions: the anti-Christian movements of 1920-28*, Cross Cultural Publications, Cross Roads Books.

<sup>51</sup> Inouye, M. (2018) p.7

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.18

down until the adoption of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which included a new policy of party-state toleration for religious organizations, in 1982. By most accounts, the church survived on the efforts of underground church communities, including the writing of Bibles by hand.<sup>53</sup>

Today, the True Jesus Church in China endures as an affiliate of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) (三自爱国运动), with members meeting in state-sanctioned TSPM church buildings. With the charismatic practices of the church under tight state control, a number of True Jesus congregations remain as independent house churches, and face continued persecution under the current communist government.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p. 224.

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch (2018, December 13) *China: Repression of Christian Church Intensifies*, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/13/china-repression-christian-church-intensifies>; Briggs, M. (2019, October 15) *True Jesus Church Razed to the Ground in China*, Church Leaders, <https://churchleaders.com/news/363886-true-jesus-church-razed-to-the-ground-in-china.html>; and Fang, Y.R. (2021, December 30) *Crackdown on Association of Disciples Extends to Inner Mongolia*, Bitter Winter, <https://bitterwinter.org/crackdown-association-of-disciples-inner-mongolia/>.

## From Foreign Missionaries in China, to Chinese Missionaries across the Strait



Map of Taiwan (2018), U.S. Department of State via [Wikimedia](#).

The first True Jesus evangelists reached Taiwan in 1925, after the then-ruling Japanese government lifted entry restrictions on Chinese protestants, and spread their doctrines of a new Holy Spirit-centered church.<sup>55</sup> Evangelists found fertile ground in the Taiwanese Presbyterian community, active in Taiwan since the 19th century, and the community soon enjoyed rapid growth.

When Chinese members of the True Jesus Church began to migrate to Taiwan in the late 1940s, they joined their brothers and sisters in what was already the second largest Protestant church in the country.<sup>56</sup>

The first evangelistic campaign was led by Barnabas Zhang (1882-1961), an elder ordained by Wei who would eventually prove influential in the north-

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<sup>55</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan: Mission, Seminary, and Church*, M. E. Sharpe, p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.6.

south schism that developed in the church following Wei's death.<sup>57</sup> Over weeks of intense evangelism, Zhang and his Taiwanese coworkers visited a number of cities, towns, and villages, preaching the new doctrines in the face of opposition from the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church.<sup>58</sup>

Over the next eight years, a core group of evangelists would target their message to Taiwanese Christians, rather than the non-Christian Chinese majority, and use methods such as the "laying on of hands" to convince many of the power of TJC's new doctrines.<sup>59</sup> True Jesus Church histories of these early years make reference to elders, deacons and congregants of the Presbyterian Church who recognised the "truth" of the True Jesus way, and were baptized again in order to receive the "gift of the Spirit."<sup>60</sup> By 1934, even the remote southeastern city of Taitung had its own True Jesus congregation.

### ***POLITICAL UPHEAVAL***

The mid-1930s saw conditions begin to change for Taiwan's Christian community. The ruling Japanese government began to adopt nationalistic and militaristic ideologies, which included a strong hostility toward foreign influences. By the time World War II broke out in the Pacific, church leaders were struggling for survival.<sup>61</sup>

In response to perceived threats posed by Taiwan's Christian community, wartime Japanese authorities began to handpick Japanese officials to serve as leaders of churches, including the True Jesus Church.<sup>62</sup> The True Jesus Church briefly became the Japanese True Jesus Church in 1941, until the end of Japanese rule in October 1945.

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<sup>57</sup> Xi, L. (2010) *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, Yale University Press, p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> True Jesus Church (2023) 本會簡介. True Jesus Church. <https://www.tjc.org.tw/brochure>

<sup>59</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.22.

<sup>60</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.23.

<sup>61</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.26

<sup>62</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.30.



The Chinese Nationalist military and civilian population that replaced Taiwan's Japanese rulers in 1945 quickly proved disinterested in peaceful cohabitation, and simmering tensions between the Taiwanese population and the new Chinese emigrants reached a boiling point in an uprising that came to be known as the February 28 Incident ( 二二八事件).<sup>63</sup>

The Presbyterian Church and the True Jesus Church experienced the new conditions in Taiwan from different perspectives.<sup>64</sup> The Presbyterian community viewed itself as a Taiwanese church that represented the Taiwanese and indigenous people of the island. Missionaries had translated the Bible into the Taiwanese language, and worship and church services were conducted in Taiwanese. The True Jesus Church, in contrast, maintained strong ties with the mainland, and viewed itself as a “Chinese” church. Each church had a different view of the church-state relationship as a result.<sup>65</sup>

In the wake of the February 28 Incident, Presbyterian leaders were outspoken in their opposition to the Kuomintang government and its repression of the Taiwanese people. Though forced to take a low profile as the regime, in turn, moved to suppress Presbyterian activism, leaders continued to “bear witness” and played an active role in defining the now-ruling Democratic Progress Party's philosophies and policies.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> The Chinese Nationalist military crackdown on the February uprising was brutal. Death toll estimates range from five to twenty thousand, and many thousands more were arrested. The ensuing chapter of martial law, known as the White Terror Period, did not end until 1992.

<sup>64</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.29.

<sup>65</sup> In the twenty-first century, Taiwan's True Jesus Church appears to view itself more as an international community of believers, set apart from national identities. The history of the church's beginnings in China is referenced only as a side note on the True Jesus Church website, and there was an absence of any form of paraphernalia or literature discussing the subject in the churches we visited. When asked about Wei and his role in “creating” the True Jesus Church, most interviewees did not appear to have knowledge or an opinion on the subject. One man told us, “that is not important. What is important is Jesus. We only follow Jesus.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Contemporary Presbyterian leaders take a similarly “Pro-Taiwan” stance in the country's political landscape, see Lu, Y.H. (2018, December 18) *Church urges push for independence*, Taipei Times, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/12/18/2003706336>.

The True Jesus Church also reorganized itself and took steps to strengthen its outreach, but took care to avoid politics.<sup>67</sup> Though the church existed as a Japanese-run entity during the war, it once again called itself the True Jesus Church. The church's offices in Taichung were restored to them after being confiscated during the war, and the city was once again the administrative and evangelical headquarters of the Taiwan board of the True Jesus Church.

In September 1945, before the Nationalists took formal control of the island, the Church's Taiwan board held an emergency church strategy meeting in which it was decided to formally renew contacts with the parent church on the mainland.<sup>68</sup>

### ***CHURCH GROWTH***

The ensuing years saw a period of great growth for the True Jesus Church. Under the new regime's promise to uphold religious liberty, church leaders could focus on local evangelism, church planting, and theological training. Church workers devoted themselves to evangelizing to the indigenous tribes of Taiwan, and framed their message to emphasize that conversion to Pentecostal Christianity would bring a number of important advantages.<sup>69</sup> The message carried great appeal, and the number of indigenous people joining the church soon equaled the number of Taiwanese members.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.30.

<sup>68</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.31.

Though beyond the scope of this paper, an in-depth study of the relationship between the formal leadership bodies of the True Jesus Church on either side of the Strait, and in the US (the True Jesus Church has been headquartered in California since 1985), merits further study given the current political climate.

<sup>69</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Waves of immigration through history have created a rich and diverse population in Taiwan. The term "indigenous people" refers to Austronesian aboriginal tribes which have been on the island for thousands of years. In the early 20th century, the term "Taiwanese people" generally referred to the Han Chinese Hoklo and Hakka people, who migrated from mainland China between the early 1600s and 1700s. Those who migrated to Taiwan from mainland China in the latter half of the 20th century amid the Kuomintang's retreat to Taiwan in 1949 were deemed "mainlanders."

Chinese people migrating to Taiwan, too, presented the church with new opportunities. Many of these immigrants were from urban eastern China, and a portion of them were Christians. Those who were True Jesus Church members tended to seek out the church establishment upon arrival on the island. By some estimates, mainlanders made up about 10 percent of True Jesus Church membership by 1950.<sup>71</sup>

The collapse of the Nationalist regime in China in November 1949 saw a million and a half people move to the Kuomintang's island base in Taiwan. The migration of government officials, soldiers, and their families transformed Taiwanese life. Facing an influx of "conquerors and occupiers," as well as a "full-scale missionary invasion," widespread uncertainty and social trauma soon led to an explosion in Christian evangelism; church ranks across a number of denominations swelled.<sup>72</sup> Predictions that Taiwan would become a Christian island by the end of the century began to gain traction.<sup>73</sup>

Tried and true missionary methods that had been employed in China were now adapted to conditions in Taiwan. Missionaries, both Western and Chinese, preached in the street and in rented halls, held tent meetings, established reading rooms and English language schools, and set up small medical clinics and hospitals.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the influx of foreign missionaries from "competing" denominations, the True Jesus Church actually grew in strength during this time. Many people in Taiwan now had a heightened consciousness of Christianity and sought spiritual answers in the face of social upheaval. At the same time, they wished to worship in a church run by Taiwanese leaders instead of foreign missionaries; as such, many converts turned to True Jesus congregations.<sup>75</sup> By

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p.32.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p.34.

<sup>73</sup> Taiwan Today (1962, May 1) *Protestantism Serves the Nation*, Taiwan Today, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=20,29,35,45&post=26258>.

<sup>74</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p.36.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

1958, the thirtieth anniversary of the church in Taiwan, membership stood at 15,500 people.<sup>76</sup>

### ***STAGNATION AND DECLINE***

Taiwan experienced rapid change from 1960 to the late 1980s. Government investment in infrastructure projects increased, transportation improved and the production of hydroelectric power was established. Tax-free and duty-free industrial zones were expanded, and liberal policies were introduced to encourage foreign investment.<sup>77</sup>

At the same time, the growth rate of Christian churches slowed dramatically. In some denominations, membership was shrinking.<sup>78</sup> After steady, and even explosive, evangelical success in the 1950s, church leaders of all denominations began to analyze this decline, and uncovered a number of reasons.

One major factor behind church growth in the 1950s was that mission stations often served as distribution centers for relief supplies; vulnerable people who came to obtain food or clothing would remain behind to listen to the missionaries. This suggested that a certain percentage of converts were “rice Christians,” who made contact with Christianity based on physical survival and came to belong to churches for practical reasons. With economic revolution came greater levels of prosperity, and many people could leave their lives as “rice Christians” behind.<sup>79</sup>

Another factor was that the relationship between Christianity and modernisation preached by missionaries was challenged by the technological changes introduced by the U.S. Agency for International Development. People

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Berkeley Economic Review (2020, February 17) *Analysis of Taiwanese Economic History and Policies*, Berkeley Economic Review, <https://econreview.berkeley.edu/analysis-of-taiwanese-economic-history-and-policies/>.

<sup>78</sup> Rubinstein, M. A. (1991) p. 49.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p.50.

saw that economic change did not, in fact, depend on Christianity, and thanked their local gods for a new era of economic security.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, by the early 1960s, the powerful resurgence of traditional religions and folk religions in Taiwan presented major barriers to missionaries' Christianisation efforts. Secure in their newfound prosperity, local people returned to their respective temples, and a "renaissance" in Taiwanese folk religion saw temples built and festivals celebrated with renewed vigor.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

## Noah's Ark? True Jesus Church in Taiwan Today

Those working to spread the message of Christianity in Taiwan today cite many of the same challenges as those faced by their predecessors in the second half of the 20th century.

Reverend Timothy Conkling, a member of the interdenominational New Hope Christian Fellowship church, has described Taiwan as a “missionary graveyard.” According to Conkling, evangelists in Taiwan struggle to overcome the influence of traditional and folk religions, Chinese expectations of filial piety, and substantial linguistic barriers.<sup>82</sup>

A study of the True Jesus Church, then, with its roots as an “indigenous” Chinese Christianity, provides a fascinating cultural comparison to western missionary efforts. The following chapter will present the results of our research of the lived experience of True Jesus believers in Taiwan today, and examine departure points between this charismatic community and mainstream Christianity.

### *AN ARDENT MINORITY*

Taiwan's Christian community today exists along a denominational continuum, from catholic to evangelical, to Pentecostal and charismatic.<sup>83</sup> Christians make up just over six percent of Taiwan's population, totalling about 1.4 million people, though an estimated 70 percent of the country's 484,000 indigenous people identify as Christian.<sup>84</sup>

According to TJC data from the end of 2022, believers in Taiwan number just over 56,600, with 745 clergy across 256 churches and 38 prayer houses.<sup>85</sup> True

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<sup>82</sup> Taiwan Today (2008, September 11) *Spreading the word is no bed of roses*, Taiwan Today, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=10,23,45,10&post=14968>.

<sup>83</sup> In his research of Taiwanese Protestantism, Murray Rubinstein argues that “the churches of the Holy Spirit,” including the True Jesus Church, practice an ecstatic religion that is closer in mood to Chinese temple communities and sects. The historical and contemporary relationship between charismatic Christianity and other faiths practiced in Taiwan, though beyond the scope of this paper, merits further investigation.

<sup>84</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) (2020), National/Regional Profiles: Taiwan and China, ARDA, [https://thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=50c&u=23r#S\\_2](https://thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=50c&u=23r#S_2).

<sup>85</sup> True Jesus Church (2023) 本會簡介. True Jesus Church. <https://www.tjc.org.tw/brochure>

Jesus Church members, then, make up roughly four percent of Taiwan's total Christian population.

The global population of the church is spread across 39 countries on six continents,<sup>86</sup> and includes as many as 1.5 million believers.<sup>87</sup> Outside of China, member churches fall under the umbrella of a national body, or a General Assembly (GA)<sup>88</sup>, which in turn looks to the international headquarters, the International Assembly (IA), of the True Jesus Church in Lakewood, California. The International Assembly's Truth Research Committee (TRC) meets annually to deliver resolutions on tenets of church theology, and these resolutions are endorsed at the annual World Delegates Conference (WDC). These resolutions are then distributed to True Jesus churches across the world.<sup>89</sup>

For the purposes of this report, Religioscope conducted interviews with several church elders, female and male preachers, and congregation members. We interacted casually with many more in our attendance at worship services around the country. We were formally introduced and warmly welcomed at every worship service we attended, and found that congregants were eager to share their stories and opinions.

Each congregation was open to our research, and permitted us to photograph and video church activities, including prayer time and sacred Holy Communion rites such as footwashing. During our time studying the True Jesus Church, we noted in particular a distinct sense of shared culture, connectedness in relationships, and shared church responsibilities.

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<sup>86</sup> True Jesus Church (2023) About True Jesus Church. <https://tjc.org/about/>

<sup>87</sup> True Jesus Church (n.d.), About True Jesus Church, True Jesus Church E-Library, <https://ia.tjc.org/elibrary/ContentDetail.aspx?ItemID=208&langid=1>

<sup>88</sup> True Jesus Church (n.d.) The True Jesus Church General Assembly in Taiwan: An Introduction, True Jesus Church E-Library, <https://ia.tjc.org/elibrary/ContentDetail.aspx?ItemID=30126&TOC=30130;30117;30118;30119;30120;30121;30122;30123;30124;30125;30126;30127;30128;30129&langid=1>.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, The International Assembly's Truth Research Committee's 2010 and 2011 Resolutions, which addressed questions regarding the girding of the waist with a towel during footwashing, the issue of divorced ministers, and others. Truth Research in the True Jesus Church (2011, October) Truth Research in the True Jesus Church: The International Assembly's Truth Research Committee: 2010 and 2011 Resolutions, *Manna*, 35(2), p. 28-29.

The following is an account of the community of True Jesus Church believers in Taiwan today, based on an amalgamation of first-hand accounts.

## ***PRAYER***

Perhaps the most obvious distinction between True Jesus Church services and those of other Christian denominations is members' practice of 禱告 (daogao), or prayer. The typical Saturday service includes three separate prayer times, in which members kneel in pews, close their eyes and clasp their hands in front of them, and speak in tongues.

The experience for first-time attendees is a unique one: a few seconds after the announcement of prayer, the room fills with the sound of wails, at both a high- and low-pitch, as believers shake their shoulders and rock in place. Some members pray more quietly than others, muttering under their breath as they shake their bodies. Others pray loudly, and cry out as their bodies rock back and forth. Most members pray in a rhythmic “de de de,” “lo lo lo,” “hallelujah hallelujah,” or similar repetitions.

Once it is time for prayer to end, a church leader at the front of the room rings a bell, and prayer instantly ceases. The prayer portion of a church service can last between five and fifteen minutes. Prayer sessions during the bi-annual, six-hour Holy Communion service lasted up to 30 minutes.<sup>90</sup>

For True Jesus Church members, the ability to speak in tongues is evidence that a believer has “received the Holy Spirit.” Conversely, if an individual cannot speak in tongues, they have not yet received the Holy Spirit.

“When a person receives the Holy Spirit, God gives a sign to show that the Holy Spirit is in him,” reads a church pamphlet received during a service in Taipei, “The sign is the speaking of tongues, or the ability to speak in an unknown

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<sup>90</sup> The Holy Communion service takes place in Spring and Autumn each year, alongside the rites of Baptism and Footwashing. A Religioscope researcher was fortunate to attend one of these services, which took place from 9am to 3pm. It is common for believers to fast that day, though our researcher was thoughtfully given a sandwich in advance.



language that only God can understand. The speaking of tongues is a profound communion with God, for prayer and for praising God.”<sup>91</sup>

This receiving of the Holy Spirit can take place at any age, and at any stage of a believer’s time as a True Jesus Church member. We saw some children, as young as seven or eight, praying in this way, while other members were still praying to receive the gift of tongues at forty or fifty years of age. In these cases, asking to receive the Holy Spirit involves an individual kneeling at the front of the service, and being prayed over by an elder during communal prayer time.

According to our interviews, once a believer receives the gift of tongues, the gift is with them for life. Once the gift is received, speaking in tongues becomes the main mode of prayer even outside of service times, including nightly prayer at home. As described by one member, the act of speaking in tongues feels more like *connecting* with God, rather than speaking to him.

For newcomers, the act of prayer is described in very simple terms. “You will feel it,” one member told us in Taipei, handing over a small card with a basic script for prayer, “Say ‘In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.’ Then say ‘Hallelujah. You will get the Holy Spirit if you ask. Then, you will feel it. You will understand.”

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<sup>91</sup> True Jesus Church Department of Literary Ministry, *Holy Spirit: Helper and Counselor*, 1997, p. 5. The pamphlet references 1 Corinthians 14:2, “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.”

## HEALING AND MIRACLES



*A True Jesus Church pastor shows us a report he'd received of a miraculous healing that took place in China following an industrial accident.*

including video interviews with church members, in both English<sup>93</sup> and Chinese,<sup>94</sup> and a monthly newsletter detailing stories of miracles as sent in by members across the world.<sup>95</sup>

Without exception, interviewees were eager to speak of miracles that had taken place either in their immediate circle, or that they had heard of through fellow believers. In one interview, a trainee minister from Malaysia described, with

Another central tenet of the True Jesus Church faith is the practice of hands-on faith healing, and a steadfast belief in miracles. That “encounters with divine power are commonplace and casual” is a theme that carried through all our conversations with believers.<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, it is the True Jesus Church claim to exclusive access to miraculous power that strengthens the legitimacy of church ideology in the eyes of members, in that the regularity of miracles within the community is seen as evidence of the efficacy of the Church’s doctrinal teachings.

This is supported by church literature and online content,

<sup>92</sup> Inouye, M. (2020) p. 262.

<sup>93</sup> True Jesus Church (2023) *Our Stories*, True Jesus Church, <https://tjc.org/our-stories/>

<sup>94</sup> 真耶穌教會 (2022, July 1, 龍溪教會發生的數則神蹟見證 [Video], Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zhc6zOh2GU>.

<sup>95</sup> True Jesus Church (2023) 聖靈月刊, True Jesus Church, <https://tjc.org/zh/holy-spirit-monthly/>.

tears in her eyes, how her younger sister died soon after birth; the girl's life was saved after her local community of True Jesus Church members laid hands on her, and prayed in Jesus' name for healing.



「奉主耶穌聖名禱告; 哈利路亞讚美王耶穌」 *Pray in the Holy Name of the Lord Jesus, Hallelujah, Praise King Jesus. The centrality of the name of Jesus underpins all of True Jesus Church ideology. This prayer is placed to the pulpit in all True Jesus Churches, and acts as a model for prayer in situations from conversion to healing to exorcisms.*

In another instance, the pastor of a rural church in Taitung province shared images of a Chinese man healed of his burn injuries through prayer after an industrial accident. Another interviewee described the deathbed conversion of her aunt to the True Jesus Church, and her subsequent river baptism shortly before passing away.

## ***POSSESSION AND EXORCISM***

A third distinctive feature of True Jesus Church discourse is a belief in demons or devils (鬼, gui), and the relatively commonplace practice of exorcisms.

During an interview with the pastor and church team of a small, predominantly indigenous, church on the east coast, researchers' questions about demons sparked a lively half hour discussion about individuals' experiences with possession and exorcism. Everyone had a story about demons. Demons can take on all forms - such as one that tried to break into a house disguised as a lion - and can possess or attack individuals in their sleep. Demons can also be represented in behavior, such as an "alcohol demon" (酒鬼, jiugui) in an individual who drinks alcohol, a forbidden pastime for church members - as is smoking cigarettes, chewing Betel nut (嚼檳榔, jue binlang), and consuming meat with blood in it.

Each time, demons were cast out (趕鬼, gangui) through prayer in the name of Jesus. This is a rite that can only be performed by church leaders, though church members may attend exorcisms to lay hands on the possessed individual as a group. In response to a question about crosses and holy water, as in the style of a Catholic exorcism, one church minister laughed: "You can bring those," he said, "but it would be a waste."

When asked about why an individual might be targeted for possession by a demon, a common response is the issue of being weak in faith (軟弱, ruanruo), or being emotionally disturbed in some way (心情不好, xinqing buhao). In one particularly intense recounting, a woman spoke of her cousin becoming possessed by a demon, turning ice cold, speaking in a low, unrecognizable voice.

As one witness explained, "we couldn't agree on whether or not to take her to hospital or to the church, so she was taken to the hospital first. There, she sat up in her hospital bed, pointed at another patient behind a closed curtain in her ward, and predicted the patient's death. That night, the patient died."

In this instance, the exorcism lasted several days. Family members from around Taiwan came to stay at the house of the afflicted woman, and repeatedly prayed

over her on the advice of the church minister. At one point, they facetedimed with friends and family who could not attend.

“They said everyone looked normal on the screen, except for [the possessed woman]. Her face was completely black. The next day, her face looked like fire.”

The cousin was eventually healed, and life continued as normal. When asked about whether the woman attends church now, the interviewee shook her head sadly. “Maybe because she is too busy at work,” she said.

### ***SALVATION THROUGH SACRAMENTS: HOLY COMMUNION, BAPTISM AND FOOTWASHING***

With a firm belief in eternal punishment for sinners,<sup>96</sup> the True Jesus Church teaches that the sacraments of Holy Communion, baptism and footwashing pave the way for salvation.

“Faith in the Lord also means accepting the sacraments, which are... specific commands from our Lord that have God’s saving effects,” reads church literature.<sup>97</sup>

Congregations practice the sacraments twice yearly in specially dedicated services. We were fortunate to attend one such special service in Taipei, on the Sunday following a regular Saturday service, and observed as believers celebrated two baptisms- one, a baby, and the other a recent convert who looked to be in her forties- and took Holy Communion together.

The Holy Communion service lasted close to six hours, and included extended prayer time, the singing of hymns, and a specially dedicated sermon for each of the three sacraments. Church leaders regularly made reference to the importance of practicing these sacraments in strict accordance with the instructions and example set by the Bible.

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<sup>96</sup> “Sinners have no peace or joy. They are condemned with the curse of death from God... we have no hope, except the fearful expectation of the eternal punishment of our souls in hell.” True Jesus Church Department of Literary Ministry, *Salvation: Gift of Grace*, 1998, p.12.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

“If we have not received the sacraments, or have not done so in the manner taught in the bible, we need to receive them in accordance with God’s Word in order to be saved,” reads a church pamphlet on salvation.<sup>98</sup>

So how, then, are these sacraments to be practiced? This is what we witnessed:

For Holy Communion (聖餐禮, shengcanli), each church must specially prepare a large, round flatbread baked without yeast akin to the “unleavened bread” eaten during the Passover. A pitcher of unfermented grape juice is also prepared. There is only one bread and one “cup,” in this case a large tea kettle, regardless of the size of each congregation. This, church members are reminded in a sermon, is in line with 1 Corinthians 10:17, “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

After hearing a pastor preach about the redeeming death of Jesus Christ,<sup>99</sup> the importance of repentance and of living a life free of sin, congregants sang a hymn together. The mood in the room was somber and sincere, the singing emotional. When the hymn finished, a church leader blessed the bread before breaking the single piece into hundreds of tiny pieces. These pieces were then passed around the room, as the congregation sang a second hymn.



*Holy Communion is carried out with solemn reverence, and creates a space for believers to reflect on their own salvation and ask repentance for their sins.*

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “Jesus Christ redeemed us with his own blood, which was shed on the cross. Those who believe in Christ are saved from the control of Satan to become God’s treasured possession.” Ibid., p. 8.

This second hymn was followed by a silent prayer, in which congregants closed their eyes and clasped their hands around a small piece of bread. In their own time, believers would lower their face masks and eat.

A similar sequence of singing and prayer then followed for the blessing and passing around of the grape juice. Each time, congregants were reminded that the bread and grape juice would miraculously become Jesus' literal body and blood as they consumed it; as in the Catholic Eucharist, the True Jesus Church views the practice of communion as a metaphysical, rather than symbolic, rite.

The same strict literalism is applied to baptisms (洗禮, xili). The True Jesus Church teaches that a proper water baptism is necessary for salvation, and that baptism must take place in "living water" (活水, huoshui). In practice, this means new converts must be baptized face down in the ocean, rivers or springs, but "never manmade pools or cisterns."<sup>100</sup> The splashing of water on an individual's face, such as in a Catholic christening, is expressly rejected as insufficient and out of line with examples of baptism laid out in the Bible.

"The outward action of baptism, which Jesus and his disciples demonstrated, involves going into natural flowing water, head bowed and being totally immersed in the water," reads a church pamphlet, "Baptism must also be performed in the name of Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>101</sup>

As with Holy Communion, the rite of baptism is seen as an essential step in order to secure forgiveness and join "God's household."<sup>102</sup> The act itself is also miraculous; we heard several stories of members who had witnessed the water surrounding a newly baptized individual turning red, like the blood of Jesus.

The third sacrament practiced by the True Jesus Church is the rite of footwashing, in which new believers' feet are washed in a basin and dried with

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<sup>100</sup> True Jesus Church (n.d.), *Why must you perform baptism in living water, and not in a pool or baptistery?* True Jesus Church E-Library, <https://ia.tjc.org/elibrary/ContentDetail.aspx?ItemID=208&langid=1>.

<sup>101</sup> True Jesus Church Department of Literary Ministry, *Baptism: Cleansing of Sins*, 1997, p.8-9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

a towel. As with Holy Communion and baptism, footwashing is not a symbolic ritual, it is a “command from the Lord” to “have a part” with Jesus.<sup>103</sup>

At the same time, the footwashing rite is a demonstration of humility, and the importance of following Jesus’ example in serving others.



*A week following her river baptism, a young baby received the foot washing rite as part of the Holy Communion service.*

“In the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world, the washing of feet was often the lowest form of servitude, a task delegated to slaves,” explains church literature, “But Jesus, the glorious king of heaven, got down and washed the feet of sinners. Most amazing of all, he even washed the feet of his betrayer!”<sup>104</sup>

The sermon that preceded the footwashing rite focused on living a life of virtue, with congregants urged to walk away from temptations, immorality, and godless values. Individuals were encouraged to be selective in their relationships outside the church, be sure to associate only with those who could support them in living a life of morality, and demonstrate a life of faithfulness so as to encourage outsiders hear the “good news.”

“We must dedicate our feet to go into the world and bring the good news of salvation to everyone. May our footprints be the imprints of God’s love in the world.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> True Jesus Church Department of Literary Ministry, *Footwashing: Having a Part with the Lord*, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.



## *A SENSE OF BEING SET APART*

Today's True Jesus member holds tight to the belief that the True Jesus Church alone holds the truth of the Christian faith, and is unique in wholly abiding by the Holy Bible. In this way, the church promotes a form of exceptionalism that influences every aspect of believers' experiences.

"Sometimes I wonder why God chose us, a small church in a small country," said one woman, "but I think of it like Noah's Ark. The True Jesus Church is like Noah's Ark, we are the few who are saved."

In our interviews, a common theme emerged in that other Christian denominations are viewed as picking and choosing what parts of the Bible to follow based on convenience (為了方便, *weile fangbian*) such as baptism through sprinkling or in a tub instead of emulating the way Jesus was baptized. For True Jesus believers, the concept of simplicity (單純, *danchun*) in obedience to the Bible is paramount.

Indeed, what other churches may view as pragmatism, True Jesus Church members largely view as evidence of putting the self over God. "It is not about believing what you want to believe," said one interviewee in a Taipei church, "It is about humbling yourself to follow the Bible."

In this way, church leaders and believers alike are gently critical of other denominations' practice of Christian rites such as the Sabbath<sup>106</sup>, baptism, communion, and perceived flexibility around smoking and drinking alcohol.

"If you don't follow the Bible, how can we trust what you say?" one church minister asked.

This orthodoxy extends Taiwanese and indigenous cultural practices, too. As in mainstream Christianity, the worship of other gods is forbidden for True Jesus believers, precluding participation in many traditional Taiwanese rites.

True Jesus believers, for example, are warned strongly against partaking in Taiwanese folk cultural events. During Ghost Month (鬼月, *guiyue*), one sermon

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<sup>106</sup> "God never commanded Sunday worship. It is man-made... Since God did not change the Sabbath day, we should still keep the Sabbath on Saturday." True Jesus Church Department of Literary Ministry, *Sabbath Day: Holy Day of Rest*, 1997, p.7.

sifted through a multitude of references to spirits and ghosts in the Bible, and church attendees were told not to participate in any festival activities such as the burning of incense, joss paper, and ritualistic food offerings. In the same way, one interviewee spoke of a family member becoming possessed by a demon after consuming food that had been a part of a ritualist offering.

Interestingly, when it comes to indigenous festivals and community events, believers from other Christian denominations appear to be allowed some wriggle room on cultural grounds. This is not the case for True Jesus followers, who must reject these festivals or, as seems more common, turn a communal blind eye to members' participation.

“Don't tell the minister that we took you to the harvest festival,” said one woman, on the way to an interview with a visiting pastor.



*An indigenous village in Taimali celebrates their annual harvest festival. Pictured is a rite that mimics men and boys of the tribe taking roll call, and fleeing from the Japanese efforts to kidnap and kill male tribal members. This tribe is made up mostly of Presbyterians; indigenous members of the True Jesus Church are generally barred from participating in traditional harvest festivals.*

Some Han Chinese members also perceive this tension between cultural affiliations. “Indigenous [True Jesus believers] are typically not as committed as Han followers,” one woman told me.

On the other hand, when asked about the co-existence of multiple Christian denominations within a single village, one indigenous woman told us that preservation of culture and community necessitated pragmatism- a sentiment not readily expressed in interviews with other True Jesus believers.

“We all live in a community, we need to be together and not focus on divisions,” she said.

### ***COMMUNITY AND OBEDIENCE***

The True Jesus communities we encountered have a distinctively collectivist feel in practice. Members of different churches view themselves as part of one family, and can often travel between churches if work opportunities have drawn them away from their hometowns.

Additionally, a mismatch in the number of True Jesus churches and number of pastors means that pastors may travel between churches in a given area. In Taitung, for example, each pastor tends to two or three separate congregations; on their “off weeks,” speakers are chosen from within the congregation, usually a member of the church team who has demonstrated a high degree of faithfulness.

Church members spoke of the importance of discipline in faith; faith is not so much a personal journey to truth, as it is an act of obedience to God. There is also a sense of being selected by God. A person’s faith is not something they choose, but instead you are chosen by God. There is an assumed humility in this.

“You cannot choose what you follow from the Bible. Life is not always about being happy, or doing whatever you want. A good life means discipline, faith is like training,” said one woman in a Taipei church.



*A choir sings at the beginning of a morning church service in Taipei. This was one of the largest congregations we saw during our research: more than 200 members joined the main service in both the morning and afternoon services, with another 30 or so watching from the downstairs overflow room.*

“Do not question it. God is above humans, humans are not above God,” a friend’s father said, “Do what you are instructed to do, and do not question it. Believe first, and then God will prove he is real.”

Interestingly, the separate “religious education” for young people at one Taipei church demonstrated a distinctly Taiwanese-style approach to children’s education. Where a “Western” Sunday school program may focus on crafts, group talk, two-way communication, the method of teaching was described by one attendee as “old-school.”

“The teacher is at the front of the classroom, and children sit and listen and learn. They are not necessarily encouraged to question, or debate. They must learn from the teacher.”

As in other churches across the world, attendance among young people is not quite what it was for previous generations. In the children’s classrooms, the ratio of teachers to students was almost awkward; in most rooms, a teacher sat in front of two or three young children, while as many as eight “teachers in training” observed from the back of the room.



*Older members make up the majority of the congregation of this rural church. Most young people leave their villages for work opportunities in urban areas, and only return home during holiday periods.*

## **REMAINING A BELIEVER**

With church attendance and rates of religious affiliation declining in many parts of the world,<sup>107</sup> what keeps the faithful, faithful?

The Holy Bible, the same version used by most Protestant Christians, inarguably forms the foundation for True Jesus members’ experiences; it was common for

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<sup>107</sup> Pew Research Center, (2022, December 21) *Key Findings From the Global Religious Futures Project*, The Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/>.

Saturday sermons to reference more than a dozen different passages cast throughout the old and new testament, with congregants expertly flipping to the correct page with every new reference.

“It is not the text of the Bible that gives eternal life,” reads a church pamphlet, “but the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ... Because the Bible bears witness to Jesus Church and directs our faith to the Savior, we can receive salvation by trusting and obeying the word of the Lord written in the Bible.”<sup>108</sup>

Indeed, the importance of simple (單純, danchun) obedience to, and faith in, the Bible was emphasized in several discussions with church members. “I believed first,” said one woman who converted in adulthood, “and then I saw the evidence of my faith.”

For many believers, the Bible provides an accurate viewpoint from which to understand the world. The COVID-19 pandemic for example, was linked to predictions made in Revelations. So, too, are the planet’s worsening natural disasters. “I see the evidence of what I believe,” said one woman, “This is how I know the Bible is true.”

For others, faith is a source of comfort during difficult periods. Three young people we spoke to all attested to their faith and membership in the True Jesus Church as providing solace during their experiences studying overseas. Access to the church community, and corresponding Chinese-speaking diaspora, no doubt provided them with the critical support they needed when alone abroad.

At the same time, as in other denominations, the True Jesus Church has not completely avoided the pressures and incentives of modern life. Facing a lack of economic opportunity at home, it is not uncommon for young people to migrate to larger cities and thus loosen their commitment to their home church.

Older interviewees said younger family members often did not attend church in their new homes due to work pressure and long working hours. Even so, interviewees were confident that younger people remained believers, evidenced by their attendance at church when they return home during national holidays.

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<sup>108</sup> True Jesus Church Department of Literary Ministry, *Holy Bible: Word of God*, 1998, p. 6. The pamphlet references John 6:63, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

Of the churches we attended, most members present at Saturday service appeared over the age of sixty - and by a large margin. Children and young adults were the clear minority. It appears that the True Jesus Church experiences the same phenomenon of cohort secularization as other denominations, with a decline in religious practice among younger generations.

## **Conclusion**

The story of the True Jesus Church has its roots in centuries of Chinese history, and touches on the experiences of millions of believers over the past one hundred years. Despite untold political upheavals in the first decades after Wei's initial vision- no less than the fall of an imperial dynasty, a communist revolution, and the relentless existential crises of an entire island- the charismatic flame of this relatively tiny sect has never gone out.

Today, True Jesus Church believers worship in a combination of government-sanctioned locations and house churches across China, in the safety of a democratic Taiwan, and in houses of worship on as many as six continents. In spite of geographical spread and myriad language barriers, believers have built an international community held together by a singular belief in the teachings and promises of the Bible.

Membership in this community means a belief in the extraordinary: of daily communion with the Holy Spirit, the ubiquitousness of miracles, and a constant readiness for spiritual warfare. Membership also means separation, a sense of spiritual exceptionalism, and a rejection of many parts of daily life enjoyed without concern by non-believers.

With few exceptions, we encountered a community of faithful dedicated to a moral, and eternal, life. With a simplicity and uncertainty that felt profoundly unfamiliar for a life lived in the 21st century, it is clear that the heart of the True Jesus Church community is far, far larger than her otherwise small footprint in the global Christian assembly.



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