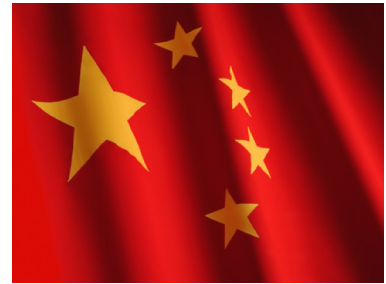

Visit to China

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

Christine Elliott, September 2017



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Background to the Visit

Eleven representatives from three nations, five member churches, one mission agency and two China focussed groups embarked on a Churches Together in Britain and Ireland visit to China at the invitation of the China Christian Council/Three Self Patriotic movement (CCC/TSPM). It had been several years since the last CTBI visit to China and it was both timely and creative. While it was disappointing that the group didn't include anyone from the Catholic church, nor anyone from Wales, the group was able to visit two areas of historical interest and engagement which proved to be inspiring.

The invitation for the visit was following conversations with Rev'd Kan Baoping, General Secretary CCC, in Jakarta in 2015 and Rev'd Xu Xiaohong, Vice Chairperson and Secretary General of the TSPM, in London in 2016. The China Forum of CTBI has had to review its way of working in recent years and this led to a desire to re-align and reaffirm our relationship with China through making this visit.

The visit was designed to allow the group to look at the history of mission in China by visiting two historic centres; Shimenkan in the South West province of Guizhou and Shenyang in the North West province of Liaoning. In each province we met with the local CC/TSPM staff, visited churches, Bible schools or seminaries, and places of historical and cultural significance. We also visited the two important centres for the National CCC/TSPM, Shanghai and Nanjing, and there were further discussions about theological education and the place of Bishop Ting's Theological Reconstruction for China. This is something for future consideration in our ongoing relationship with the CCC/TSPM.

Leadership of CCC/TSPM

The first day of our visit we met with the leadership of the CCC/TSPM in the head office and embarked on a day of listening and discussion in which we each shared areas of importance of Church and society in our respective contexts. This included presentations on the role of media and its value in ministry in China, inter-religious relations in Britain and Ireland, social services in China, and theological education from both. Elder Fu Xianwei, Chairperson of TSPM, Rev'd Dr Gao Feng, President of CCC, and Rev'd Xu Xiaohong reminded us of the history of the Church in China and the exponential growth in urban areas in recent years to where the numbers are around 60%, whereas previously the largest numbers of believers were in rural areas. There are 38 million CCC/TSPM registered believers, with 400,000 people being baptised every year. Currently there are 5,000 ordained pastors, one third of whom are

women. There are only around 800 graduates ordained annually and while there are more theologically qualified people, they need to be recommended as a person suitable for ordination by a local congregation. This can take several years. There are 6000 elders and 190,000 – 200,000 lay preachers working at the grass-roots who support the ordained pastors.

Our Chinese hosts reiterated the long standing friendship between our two organisations and thanked us for our ongoing commitment to respecting their post denominational nature by coming as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. The day was positive and helpful and set the tone for our visit. It was good for members of the group to make contact with those we would meet again later in the visit and also renew friendships already forged in the past.

Shanghai CC/TSPM and Guizhou Bible School

The next day we visited the Shanghai CC/TSPM. This visit focussed on their ministry to international communities in the metropolitan area. They have English, Korean, German, Swedish and Cantonese congregations in their midst and they recognise this as an important part of their ministry. There is to be a delegation of six pastors from Shanghai visit Britain and Ireland in November this year and we were able to facilitate their visa applications through letters of invitation from CTBI and the Irish Council of Churches.

From Shanghai we travelled 1,500 kms to Guiyang in the green and mountainous province of Guizhou in the south west. Since 2000 the CTBI China Forum has supported the infrastructure of the Guizhou Bible School through substantial grants and library support (CTBI sent its library to the school when it down-sized and moved out of Paris Garden). Guizhou is an historically poor province with several ethnic minority groups represented and many people live in isolated communities.

Everywhere we went we saw new roads, bridges, tunnels, high speed railway links and extensive high rise blocks of flats being built, all as part of their intentional move to make this a desirable tourist destination. It is certainly a beautiful part of China.



We travelled to the Guizhou Bible School, about an hour's drive from Guiyang in one of the outer areas of the city environs. A member of the Religious Affairs Association (RAA) joined us for the meeting with staff and office holders of the Guizhou CC/TSPM and we were very warmly welcomed.

The school was originally housed in a single classroom in 1993 and after two subsequent moves the new building was completed in 2005 on land that was offered by the local government. Several of the staff of 11, were in the first intake of students and it is clear that their commitment to the school is solid. Five of the staff have either just completed or are in the process of studying for Masters degrees. The school provides the first stage of theological education for students some of whom go on to the regional seminary in a neighbouring province. It provides critical education and training for the Christian population of around

500,000 most of whom (70%) are from the ethnic minorities. At present, there are 2,200 pastors, elders, and non-ordained preachers serving some 850 congregations.

Guizhou Bible School is working to develop 'theological reconstruction' as Bishop Ting advocated. It was particularly good to note that in 2013 the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) has approved them as a Bible School. The funding of the school is difficult. Students are expected to cover their costs but many of them can only afford the fees for the first year. The Provincial RAA gives them 30-40,000RMB and local churches give a further 20,000RMB through an annual offering but this still leaves them with a constant shortfall of funds. They have plans to build student accommodation but the estimated cost of around 6 million RMB, (£700,000) is well beyond local resources.

From the Bible School we drove some 4½ hours through the glorious mountains and feasted our eyes on the gorges, hills, vegetation, wind farms, towns and the ever present construction of new buildings en route to our next stop, Weining, in the west of the province. We had a meeting with the local CC/TSPM and then headed off to bed.

Visit to Shimenkan

The following morning, we drove another 4 hours on winding roads further up into the hills to the town of Shimenkan. This town has an extraordinary tale to tell of faithfulness to the gospel by a young missionary Samuel Pollard and subsequently several more colleagues and the Miao people who have maintained a worshipping presence ever since his arrival in 1888. Samuel Pollard developed a script for the Miao language which meant that there was the opportunity to read and write in their own tongue and while this script is still in use today, it is beginning to fall into disuse as all their learning is done in Han Chinese. The first Bible to be printed in the Pollard script was published in Japan in 1916 a year after Pollard's death. The Miao people make up around 18% of the 3,400 population, with 70% Han and the remaining 12% Yi or Hui, the latter being a Muslim ethnic minority.



Following a welcome and lunch by the local Religious Affairs staff and one of the elders of the church we made our way to the church where we were greeted by a church full of people all singing us into their company. It was deeply moving as many of the women especially were in tears. The reception we received reminded us afresh of how deep and lasting was the work of those early missionaries who gave their lives unstintingly for the good of the people they served. As the service of celebration continued the choir began to sing 'Blessed Assurance' and then the chorus of 'This is my story, this is my song, praising my saviour all the day long'. We joined in, singing in English as they continued to sing in Mandarin/Putonghua. The connections of the world-wide church of Jesus Christ are deep and profound and we meet them in many guises.

There have been a number of visits by British and Irish people to Shimenkan over the years starting with the first by a Friends of the Church in China (FCC) in the mid 1990s. At one point in the history of the town the graves of two of the pioneer missionaries were desecrated and earlier this century the state refurbished them, built a path to them and they are now easily accessible. The two graves are for Samuel Pollard (Methodist Missionary Society) and Reginald Heber Goldsworthy (China Inland Mission). Godfrey and Dorothy Stone were in contact with family members prior to our visit and brought with them several letters of support and love to give to the church. In their honour, we laid fresh flowers on the grave and Godfrey led a short service of remembrance which included the reading of scripture in Miao. It was perhaps fitting that it poured with rain the whole time, a sign of blessing in many cultures.

It was of special interest to all of us, but most particularly to the Methodist members of the group, to meet a film crew while we were in Shimenkan to record our visit as part of a year-long project in honour of Samuel Pollard. The National Department of Culture has given permission for this film to be made in recognition of his significant contribution to the life of the Miao people as a positive story in their history. The crew will visit Cornwall later in 2017 to film his birthplace and other important places in Samuel Pollard's life to build a richer picture of the man who is revered in this south-western part of China.

As we set off again for another long drive to our hotel bed for the night we were reminded that in a year or so, it is likely that the new road system will mean that it will only be a one hour drive from Weining to Shimenkan and that will revolutionise their accessibility to the rest of the world. So many of the young people from the village go to the cities for work and study that it will make their travel easier and may even encourage them to return after their studies.

Shenyang in Liaoning province

Our next stop was Shenyang in Liaoning province some 3000 kms in the north east from Guiyang. The city is set on a river which flows into North Korea and while we were in China President Kim Jong-un was sanctioning the firing of missiles.

This is the historic centre of Scottish and Irish Presbyterian mission and it was especially good to have Ian Boa, the current moderator of the United Free Church of Scotland, in our group as his church sent out Rev'd John Ross to serve in China, another highly respected and revered missionary.

On Sunday morning, we worshipped at Beishi church with around 1000 people who congregated in four rooms on four floors of one of the buildings in the church compound. It was a moving service of communion during which we were invited to bring greetings. At the distribution of communion, we were all administered with the bread and invited to wait until all had been served across all four floors and then together we ate the bread and then the same with the wine. It was hugely symbolic and a moving moment of solidarity. We are one in the Body of Christ.

The senior pastor Ho Huang, tells a remarkable story of how she came to faith and to serve as a pastor. She grew up in the cultural revolution and when it came time to study, her grandmother told her she should apply to the newly opened up seminary. She had no desire to do that as she had no Christian leanings but her grandmother insisted and following a three-day period of instruction she sat the entrance exam and passed with honours! She continued through the course gaining good marks and a deeper understanding and love for God and the church. The mission of Beishi Church is 'love God, love the people'.

At the North East Theological Seminary a new 1000 seat chapel had recently been completed and our tour began there with Yu Mi and later we were welcomed by the Principal Elder Shi Aijun who is also the chair of the Liaoning CC and the Provincial TSPM. The seminary was first founded in 1894 and went through subsequent changes, a merger with Beijing and then it re-opened in 1982. In 2009 it was granted approval to move to a new campus with the main buildings opening in 2012. As a provincial seminary, it offers a four-year Bachelor of Theology, a five-year Sacred Music programme and two-year programmes for pastors, elders and lay people. They have guest lecturers from Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as local universities. The seminary serves three provinces in the north east, has a sizeable community of Korean speakers and it also receives students from the north west of China. Three of our group are serious musicians and were taken with the idea of a five year sacred music programme. Unfortunately, we were not able to explore that further. We did visit the library and in the English section two more of our group gave books that they had written to add to the library.



As part of our stated aims for the visit we were taken to a more remote part of the Liaoning province, to the city of Benxi. Its industry is predominantly coal and steel, but we couldn't see much by way of that as we travelled other than huge factories which appeared to be silent. The church, Hong Tu Ling, is set on a hill above the main part of the town and is a large complex which includes a training centre, an old people's home, church and a wedding chapel. They are known for their social services, especially elder care and health service. It has a membership of 8000 with 10 pastors and six seminary graduates. As in every place we visited we received generous and gracious hospitality, this time with the most delicious dumplings!

Jiangsu seminary

For the last leg of our journey we headed off to the airport again where we boarded a flight to Nanjing, 1,150 kms south, to meet with members of the Jiangsu Christian Council, its seminary staff, and visit the Amity Foundation, the Amity Printing and the National Union Theological Seminary (NUTS).

Our first visit was to the Jiangsu seminary and we were welcomed by the Principal and President of the Jiangsu CC/TSPM, Rev'd Zhang. The seminary has had a major

refurbishment and new buildings added in recently and as we walked around the centre there were still last minute painting occurring. It was the beginning of the new year and registration had begun that day. On the top floor of the newly built centre we were impressed to see a large globe in one room where people are encouraged to pray for the world and on the next floor up there are several prayer pods for private prayer and contemplation. Another room is being prepared to receive a permanent collection of crosses from around the world, and across the centuries. It is a donation from a scholar in Hong Kong.

It was good to engage in a wide-ranging conversation with Rev'd Zhang and his staff, around issues of training, ministry and selection for ordination and also the significant changes to secular society and the role of the church in meeting people's spiritual needs.

Amity Foundation

The Amity Foundation staff hosted us for a day and a half and we visited a number of their projects, including the Amity Bakery, the Child Development Centre and the Philanthropy Valley Elder Care facility, Amity Printing Press, and time at the Amity Foundation centre.

The Bakery was founded in 2009 as a social enterprise initiative where it employs and trains up to 15 young adults with special needs. These young people are taught how to make and bake biscuits and other bakery goods for sale. Each year one or two of their trainees moves on to regular employment in other catering centres, hotels or food outlets. This is a positive outcome for the trainees and the Bakery.



The Child Development Centre began in 2007 as a place where children with autism and their parents are able to both support the parents, understand the needs their children face, and also provide a safe and secure environment for the children. They currently have around 50 children up to the age of seven, which is all their premises can manage, but there is a waiting list of 200. Amity would like to have another facility to help cope with this demand. The government provides the building and Amity the services, and are presently negotiating with the government to extend their agreement. Members of the China Forum have had connections with this centre since its inception and the Scottish Churches China Group has supported staff training.

Our next visit was to the Philanthropy Valley Elder Care home. This centre was opened in 2012 and four of us on this visit were in attendance. This is another joint venture with the government. It was very good to see it functioning so well and to see some of the changes that have occurred in their management of dementia care. Some of the staff in the dementia wing had been trained in Scotland with support from the SCCG and it was particularly good that two of their representatives were able to witness the changes implemented as a result of the training. A wonderful partnership. The centre has been successful with its fundraising

through on-line giving. We met a couple living in the home who welcomed us into their room and shared their pleasure at being so well cared for in such a comfortable environment.

At the Amity Foundation centre we met with two of the senior staff, She Hongyu and He Wen, who introduced us to the new developments within the Foundation's work. Two major successes to note are that, firstly, over 85% of their funding is now from China in comparison to less than 15 years ago when that was the figure from overseas partners support. Secondly, there are now two Amity centres outside of China, one in Switzerland and the other in Africa, which mean they are set to enable the expertise that they have gained over the last 32 years to be shared more widely. This is one of the success stories of the Protestant church in China and the realisation of the extraordinary vision of Bishop Ting and his belief that 'Christianity moves and compels people not by doctrines, but by the love made manifest, love held high and spread abroad, love waiting eagerly for the final coming of a world of love. This love draws countless men and women who give their all to enlarge love's realm.' And as the Amity Foundation's motto says, Love never ends.

The Amity Printing Company (APC) was founded in November 1985 and the first Bibles came off the press in 1987. The growth and development of this place is stunning. In the beginning, all the paper was imported and donated by Bible societies around the world and all Bibles produced were for use in China. Now some 30 years later, all the paper is produced in China to exacting standards and in varying degrees of weights, making the very light weight and fine quality of Bible paper available in country. While printing Bibles for Chinese people remains the priority, they are now able to print Bibles for delivery all over the world. While we were visiting, there were editions in Spanish being produced. In addition, they produce other books when there is spare capacity, such as hymn books and dictionaries.



The APC has produced over 166 million copies of the Bible! More than half, 85 million copies, have been printed in Chinese, including the minority languages. A braille edition, made up of 32 volumes, has been produced for 18+ years. It is now possible for the plant to produce 25 million Bibles per year. It is now the largest producer of Bibles in the United Bible Societies. The APC has been awarded for its corporate social responsibility and its environmental policies. It is an impressive place and even though I have visited it several times, I am still in awe of all that it does and I never tire of hearing its story.

Nanjing Union Theological Seminary

Our last visit was to the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (NUTS). It was an important place to conclude our visit as it gave us the chance to see the scale of theological education in China from a Bible school in Guizhou, a provincial seminary in Jiangsu, a regional seminary in Liaoning and finally the national seminary. NUTS has recently launched their PhD programme, with a DMin programme due to begin shortly. This is a welcome

development for the Church in China. Some of our member churches have offered scholarships for these programmes. The seminary began in a compound in the centre of Nanjing and moved to the University City on the outskirts of Nanjing about eight years ago. It is a large site with lecture rooms, student and staff accommodation, library, faculty rooms, recreation facilities and a recently completed cathedral sized campus church. The large open worship space is filled with light and the coloured glass windows provide a colourful mosaic of reflections when the sun shines. A good image of diversity.

NUTS has a current student population of around 400 and it is envisaged that it will be able to build this up to 500 in the next two years, with the intention to increase that capacity to 800 in the future.

There is a correspondence course for lay leaders which has 2,600 people enrolled and which is a vital and necessary facility for a Church where many local churches are lay led.

The Principal, Dr Yilu Chen and Rev'd Dr Gao Feng welcomed us and encouraged us to work with them in our mutual quest for a contextual theology whereby we can learn from each other and reflect together. Both the Church of Scotland and the Methodist Church have established good connections with NUTS and the FCC hopes to be able to add to this by supporting faculty through short term programmes in the UK.



Reflectons from the visit

As a group travelling together we had time to reflect and consider with each other how we might continue our relationships and we have been encouraged by the people we have met in China to deepen our long-standing relationships. We believe it would be good to follow this up with an invitation to the CCC/TSPM to visit with us in Britain and Ireland and explore further what it means to be part of a world-wide Church.

We travelled many kilometres by air and travelled many hours in vehicles through the varied and fascinating land of China. Despite travelling far and wide we are deeply conscious that we have seen only a small part of this vast country, but we have come away with a renewed commitment and with deepened relationships. The group was very grateful to our local hosts in each centre we visited where we received such generous hospitality and the opportunity to learn more of China. We are indebted to the international relations department of CCC/TSPM, to Ms Zhou Xiaoyan who worked on our itinerary and all the logistical arrangements, and to Ms Shi Meiying who travelled with us and smoothed all our travel and hotel arrangements and provided such wonderful translation services. We couldn't have had better support.