



## The Flower that Blooms in Adversity

Who would have imagined that the world's largest evangelical Christian country would be a non-western, atheistic, Communist nation that actively persecutes members of all religions? Yet in God's sovereignty, this is exactly what He orchestrated. China is considered one of the "cradles of civilization" because of its status as one of the oldest cultures in the world. Prior to 1949, despite a rich history of foreign missionaries to China, such as Hudson Taylor, Protestant Christians numbered fewer than 1 million.

All that changed in 1949 when Mao ZeDong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China. Viewing all religions as an existential threat to his Communist Party, missionaries were removed, pastors arrested, Bibles banned, and churches closed. As China was effectively cut off from the rest of the world, many assumed that very few, if any, Christians would remain.

Currently, China has very highly restricted religious freedom, with the fourth highest level of restrictions on the Mobilization Index. Despite this, the church has experienced tremendous growth in recent history, growing from 3 million to possibly more than 100 million in just forty-five years.<sup>1</sup> With such growth, China now has the largest evangelical population in the world! Chinese believers have thrived under pressure,

finding a way to prosper in another form.<sup>2</sup> As China opened up in the early 1980s, the world was stunned to find that not only had Christianity survived after three decades of Communist rule, but it had thrived. God had orchestrated hardships and intense persecution to turn the hearts of tens of millions of Chinese to Jesus.

Though reports of the size of China's church are notoriously difficult to verify, most estimate that there is an excess of 100 million evangelical Christians in China, but the Chinese church continues to face an intensifying wave of persecution and restrictions at the hands of a Communist government. In spite of these challenges, due to the size of its church, close proximity to the unreached, and its status as an economic powerhouse, we rank China's mobilization potential as Very High.



NUMBER OF EVANGELICALS

### A Huge and Prospering Church **Very High**

Determining the actual size of the Chinese church has always been problematic. Persecution, hostilities, and government restrictions on religion only add to the difficulty of counting China's Christian and evangelical populations. Over the past several years, sources have estimated China's evangelical population

from anywhere between 2 million to 200 million. Conservative estimates put the size of the evangelical church in China anywhere between 60 and 150 million.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the most recent research was conducted by Asia Harvest. For nearly a decade, Asia Harvest has undertaken the enormous task of calculating the Chinese church's numbers down to the city and district levels. Their research shows that China's evangelical community is nearly 110 million making China the world's largest evangelical country. If anything, the number of Christians in China is probably being underreported!

China, with nearly 110 million evangelicals, has become the world's largest evangelical church! Despite such tremendous opposition, the church in China has exploded in size from just under 3 million in 1975 to over 100 million in only 45 years.



#### CULTURAL BRIDGES

### A Country Bridged to the Unreached

**High**

With an average Median Cultural Distance of 18.3, China shares cultural similarities with many of the 30 UPG nations on the Mobilization Index.<sup>4</sup> China's closest cultural neighbors are Bangladesh (7.5), India (10), Iraq (12.5), and Lebanon (12.5). Ethiopia (5.5) also shares cultural similarities with China. However, two of the six categories on the Geert Hofstede Index are missing for Ethiopia, making it difficult to conclude if this would be one of China's closest cultural neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

Because Chinese culture emphasizes collective identity and understanding the self through the lens of community, Chinese Christians are primed to better understand their relationships to one another and God as being a part of one

body, the Body of Christ. Thus, they are more likely to understand that they cannot thrive on their own but rather need the rest of the Body to flourish.<sup>6</sup> This part of Chinese culture is a framework that Chinese Christians use to strengthen and encourage one another during uncertain times in their country. What an incredible combination! A culture that greatly values the group as a whole but is also dedicated to being driven and focused on what they do. No wonder China is quickly emerging as the largest church!

*Culturally, China as a society tends to be very communal.*



#### STRATEGIC ACCESS

### The Unreached Are Next-Door Neighbors to the Chinese

**Very High**

With unreached populations of 183,423,000 in-country and 340,873,000 regionally, China scores high in strategic access to unreached people groups. According to the Joshua Project, there are 445 unreached people groups in China.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these people groups live in the southwestern and western reaches of the country. In addition, many unreached individuals are coming to cities to receive an education and to find work. This means that the average Chinese evangelical could have regular and meaningful interactions with unreached people, especially in the Sichuan and Guangxi provinces.

This provides the Chinese church with strategic access to unreached peoples within a few hours' drive or flight from where they live. And with the Belt and Road Initiative, the giant Chinese infrastructure project spanning across many countries in the 10/40 window,<sup>8</sup> there will be renewed and constant access to the highest concentration of UPGs in the world, not to mention the 340 million unreached people in their region.<sup>9</sup> Praise God for positioning the

Chinese church in such a way that they have ample opportunity to take the gospel to the unreached in their own neighborhood!

*The average Chinese evangelical has regular and meaningful interactions with unreached people nearly every day.*



#### RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS

### Persecution of Many Religions is Rampant

**Low**

Of the countries on the Mobilization Index, China has the 6th highest level of restrictions on religious freedoms. The Chinese government has also been a source of persecution for much of the last century. Starting with the post-World War II Communist regime, the government has been constantly surveilling and breaking up religious groups in order to “keep the peace.” Though the Chinese government recognizes Christianity as an official religion of China, they require members of the church to register their religious affiliation with the government. This puts individuals at risk of surveillance and governmental church control. Because of this, much of the church has gone underground. Many pastors and believers are still regularly arrested, interviewed, or surveilled. Furthermore, the Chinese government has been pursuing a policy of “sinicization” of all religions, including Christianity. In other words, to the extent that Christianity is permitted by the Communist regime, government directives now require Christianity in China to be adapted to support the Chinese Communist Party.

Governmental persecution has increased greatly for Muslim minority groups in the country, namely the Uighur people, who have been forced into detention camps for the purpose of combating Islamic extremism. Although there are doubtless believers throughout the Chinese government, official government policy

forbids members of the Chinese Communist Party to hold religious beliefs or be involved in religious activities. This level of surveillance and persecution certainly makes it difficult for the church to actively grow and flourish out in the open. But what the enemy means for evil, God is using for His glory, and the church has continued to explode under harsh conditions.

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#### PROSPERITY

### Higher than Average Economy, but Growth Needed in Personal Freedoms

**High**

China, in comparison with the rest of the countries on the Mobilization Index, falls in the top third with a ranking of 54. China has quickly become the second largest economy in the world behind the USA, and could soon overtake the USA in terms of GDP. Just 30 years ago, China made up 3% of the world’s manufacturing output, but as of 2015, it produced 25% of the world’s manufacturing output.<sup>10</sup> Due to this, China scores highest in Economic Quality but only ranks at 54 as a result of their lower scores in areas such as Personal Freedoms and Social Capital. It is worth noting that China’s economic growth may plateau or even decline; nearly 77% of all jobs in China are at risk of being automated in the future.<sup>11</sup>

But while the rest of the world has seen sharp declines in economic output due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, China’s manufacturing sector has boomed in the second half of 2020 as the country has largely succeeded in taming the outbreak.

The good news is that as China continues to emerge as one of the world’s leading economies,

more and more opportunities will be presented for Chinese believers to go into the business world and take the gospel with them. And as wages continue to rise and the church continues to spread throughout China, the church will continually be more able to send missionaries to parts of China that have never heard the gospel as well as to other people groups connected to them by the Belt and Road Initiative, a Chinese infrastructure project spanning sixty countries throughout the 10/40 window.

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#### CURRENT SENDING

### **Sending a Huge Number with Room for More Very High**

Currently, there are an estimated 20,000 cross-cultural Chinese missionaries and nearly 100,000 believers estimated to be missionaries within their own culture.<sup>12</sup> What an incredible movement of God to see such a persecuted church leading the charge in one of the largest movements to Christ in history!

The majority of those missionaries are staying within their context and culture. While there is a great need for this, it is not where the need stops. Please join us in praying that God would match the 100,000 missionaries serving within their culture with 100,000 missionaries that are going outside of the culture to make sure the name of Jesus is known. Imagine what it would look like to see each and every church pledge to adopt a different unreached people group within China. While it is hard to know how many house churches there are for sure, the 445 UPGs could very easily and realistically be adopted by the Chinese church!

If the largest church in the world (of over 100 million believers) were to adopt the remaining UPGs, Matthew 24:14 could be achieved in our lifetime. Pray that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” will come to fruition through the Chinese church.

Please join us in praying that God would match the 100,000 workers serving within their culture with 100,000 missionaries that are going outside of the culture to make sure the name of Jesus is known.



#### MOBILIZATION POTENTIAL

### **A Perfect Storm of Opportunity Very High**

The Chinese church is in one of the most strategic positions of any church on earth. It has one of the largest populations of evangelical believers as well as access or near-access to billions of unreached people within Asia. China has a rich history with Christianity that dates back to around and even before the Mongol empire in the 13th century.<sup>13</sup> China has already mobilized 1 in 1,000 believers in the country. Imagine if the church was able to add an additional 1 in 1,000--that would be another 100,000 workers, bringing the number of total Chinese missionaries to 200,000!

There are a few things that may deter or counteract progress in this region. The first is that the government closely monitors and surveils the church and its leaders. This may hinder large movements as the bulk of the movement would be forced to work underground, although biblical church history and China's own church history give hope to this situation. Another barrier could be the cultural distance between China and many of the countries with large numbers of unreached people. Although China does share many close cultural connections, there are also

a high number of countries that are culturally distant from China. This is not inherently a bad thing, but it will require Chinese missionaries to strive to understand and relate to these cultures so as to more accurately present the gospel to the people they reach. Additionally, there are an estimated “46 million ethnic Chinese living outside of Mainland China.<sup>14</sup> Could these millions of overseas Chinese spread out all over the world be an untapped mission force?

All things considered, China is poised to take the lead in missions on a global level. The training and equipping of leaders within the Chinese church will be crucial as the movement expands. There has been a vision of “Back to Jerusalem” in China since the 1920s; the idea that the Chinese church would carry the gospel from the east coast of Asia back to Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> What a beautiful picture of what is one day guaranteed to come to pass; let us pray that it comes quickly!

*China is poised to take the lead in missions on a global level.*

#### Obstacles:

China has some of the highest restrictions on religious freedom in the world. This could be a deterrent to many who desire to go.

Cultural distance from nearby countries with high numbers of unreached people may also pose as an obstacle that will require patience, prayer, and learning to surmount.

#### Opportunities:

The Chinese economy is emerging as one of the strongest in the world and will continue to provide opportunities for believers to serve both at home and abroad in the business world, an area oftentimes in desperate need of the gospel.

China’s economic and business success should pave the way for healthy financial support of Chinese missionaries.

#### Prayer

For another 100,000 believers to be mobilized to go to those who have not heard His name.

For China to launch the largest missions movement in the history of the church!

For the 445 unreached people groups that are in China and desperately need the saving power of the gospel. There are 340 million unreached people within the grasp of one of the largest churches in the world! Pray that China would play a major role in reaching them.

For the many minority groups and religious groups that are being persecuted within China right now. Pray that this would be an opportunity for the church to love on people that others don’t deem worthy of love!

#### Praise:

Praise God that 120,000 believers have already been sent as Christian workers both in and outside of China.

Praise God that the church has not only endured persecution over the last several decades but has also thrived under persecution, as seen in its growth from 3 million to over 100 million in the span of just over 40 years.

# Endnotes

- 1 Operation World. DVD. 2010.
- 2 Huang, Yi. "Responding in a Time of Testing." ChinaSource, August 19, 2021. [chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/responding-in-a-time-of-testing/](https://chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/responding-in-a-time-of-testing/).
- 3 Operation World. DVD. 2010
- 4 Unreached people groups are ethnic groups that have little to no access to the gospel including to believers, churches, or Christian resources. People in unreached populations have no way of hearing the gospel barring someone crossing cultures and languages to share with them. A working definition for unreached people groups is peoples who have an evangelical population of 2% or less.
- 5 Hofstede Insights. "Country Comparison." [hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/](https://hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/).
- 6 Huang, Yi. "Responding in a Time of Testing." ChinaSource, August 19, 2021. [chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/responding-in-a-time-of-testing/](https://chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/responding-in-a-time-of-testing/)
- 7 "Joshua Project." [joshuaproject.net/](https://joshuaproject.net/).
- 8 The 10/40 window represents the highest population of the world with least access to the gospel. 97% of the world's unreached (people with little to no access to the gospel) is housed within the 10/40 window, an imaginary area called such because of its position between 10° N Latitude and 40° N Latitude. This area stretches from North Africa to East Asia, creating a rectangle, or a window. In a sentence: 97% of the world's unreached population is housed within the 10/40 Window
- 9 Katz, Joshua. "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative." Council on Foreign Relations, October 16, 2023. [cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative](https://cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative).
- 10 Hernández, Javier C. "BRICS Summit in Xiamen: A Mixed Bag of Fortunes." TIME, September 6, 2017. [time.com/4923837/brics-summit-xiamen-mixed-fortunes](https://time.com/4923837/brics-summit-xiamen-mixed-fortunes).
- 11 Bennett, Jessica. "Will Robots Bring About the End of Work?" The Guardian, October 1, 2017. [theguardian.com/science/political-science/2017/oct/01/will-robots-bring-about-the-end-of-work](https://theguardian.com/science/political-science/2017/oct/01/will-robots-bring-about-the-end-of-work).
- 12 Operation World. DVD. 2010.
- 13 PBS Frontline. "China: A History of Change." [pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china\\_705/history/china.html](https://pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china_705/history/china.html).
- 14 Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. "Chinese Diaspora." [culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?chinese-diaspora](https://culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?chinese-diaspora).
- 15 Johnstone, Patrick. "The Future of the Global Church History, Trends and Possibilities." InterVarsity Press, January 17, 2014