

CHINA: The Shepherds of Living Stone Church



Pastor Su Tianfu (left) and
Pastor Yang Hua

By: Yaxue Cao

China Change (25.12.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2hECXsb> – On December 9, 2015, after dropping their two sons off at school, Pastor Yang Hua (杨华) and his wife Wang Hongwu (王红武) of the Living Stone house church (活石家教会) in Guiyang, made their way to the 24th story of Guiyang International Center, which hosts the main hall of their congregation. At the same time every Wednesday, at three different church locations, Living Stone congregants hold a prayer service. A few days prior, government Neighborhood Committees and police stations dispatched personnel to go door-by-door to the homes of hundreds of Living Stone church members, warning them against attending the Wednesday service. “We’ll arrest whoever goes,” they were told. Needless to say, the authorities had the home addresses, workplaces, telephone numbers, and other personal information of every churchgoer. The few who were determined to attend that morning were intercepted by government agents, who deliberately collided with their car and then dragged them off to the local police station to settle the “accident.”

The prayer service was set to start at 9:30 a.m., but at 9:00 well over 100 "integrated law enforcement" agents swept in. There were personnel from the Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Bureau of Religious Administration, public security bureau agents, and a squad of SWAT police in full armed regalia. They demanded that Pastor Yang open all the doors. After he refused, they called over their locksmith. When the "law enforcement personnel" attempted to enter the office and the sound control room next to it, to take the computer hard drives, Pastor Yang stood blocking the doorway. He demanded that the technical personnel present their work identification cards. When they said they didn't have any, he announced that they wouldn't be allowed in. At that point, one of the commanders of the operation yelled out "SWAT police, come over here!" A few burly members of the SWAT team ran over, lifted Yang Hua off his feet, and carried him away to a corner next to the elevator, pinning him there.

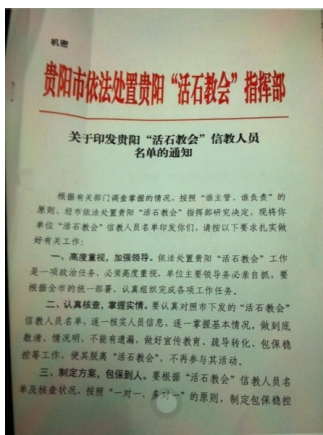
Pastor Su Tianfu (苏天福), who had just finished his errands in the morning and arrived at the church, attempted, abortively, to reason with the agents. They began confiscating the church's computers, equipment, and anything else they thought useful. They said they would provide a list of the items confiscated, but over a year later no such list has been forthcoming. They also confiscated the cellphones of Yang Hua, Hongwu, Pastor Su, and a number of couples who arrived for the service, deleting all photographs on them.

When the raid was over they posted two notices sealing the church doors, one saying that the church was an illegal civil organization, the other that it had set up a center of religious activity without authorization. Yang Hua and Hongwu were taken to the police station. Living Stone's two branch locations were dealt with in a similar manner.

On December 14 Pastor Su was taken into custody at his home by police. Two days later when he was released, they warned him that he would be charged with "divulging state secrets" later.

A year on, he is still technically “on bail pending further trial,” which means that his freedom of movement is restricted.

A few days after Yang Hua was arrested the authorities raided his home and took away his computer and everything else that they thought would be useful for their investigation.



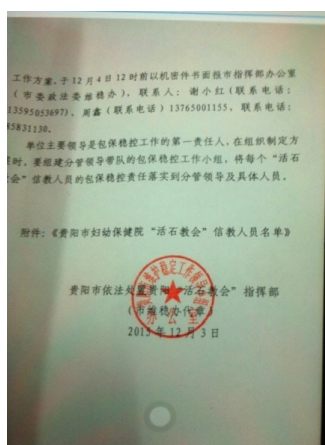
The “secret” document issued by the “guiyang municipal command center for legally dealing with the ‘living stone church’, page 1.

On December 26, 2016, Yang Hua will be on trial for “deliberately divulging state secrets” (故意泄露国家秘密). The Chinese government seems to deliberately time cases of political persecution around the Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations, as a means of avoiding international attention.

The “state secrets” in question is a document issued by an *ad hoc* office set up to eliminate the Living Stone Church, which goes by the title of the “Guiyang Municipal Command Center for Legally Dealing With the Living Stone Church” (贵阳市依法处置贵阳“活石教会”指挥部)

□). Dated December 3, 2015, the document bore the official seal of the Office of the Guiyang Municipal Stability Maintenance Work Leading Small Group (贵阳市维稳工作领导小组办公室). It said that “Dealing with the Living Stone church according to the law is a political task that must be given a high level of priority. Leaders of work units must be personally on task, fall in line with the entire city’s overall deployments, and earnestly mobilize to complete all the work.” Attached to it was a list of names of every Living Stone member, which was forwarded to each of their workplaces, demanding that those employees be investigated and placed under “stability control” (维稳).

The letter came to the attention of a young woman named Wang Yao (王瑶), who worked in the office of the Party Committee of the Maternal and Child Healthcare Hospital of Guiyang City. She knew a friend, Yu Lei (俞磊), who attended Living Stone bible study sessions. So she gave Yu photographs of the document. Now, Wang and Yu have been tried for “illegally acquiring state secrets” (非法获取国家秘密) and “illegally disseminating state secrets” (非法传播国家秘密) respectively. Their judgements have not yet been handed down.



Page 2 of the
“secret”
document.

Two Young Preachers from Poverty

The two descriptions I kept hearing about the two pastors of the Living Stone church were, firstly, that they were from the poorest parts of Guizhou (Guizhou itself is one of the poorest provinces in China), and secondly that they were both very young. Pastor Su Tianfu was born in 1975, while Pastor Yang Hua was born in 1976; they come from the neighbouring counties of Qianxi (黔西) and Nayong (纳雍) respectively.

Zhang Tan (张坦), a member of the Living Stone church and an independent scholar of Christianity in China, explained that Guizhou was one of the 12 centers of missionary activity established by the China Inland Mission, the protestant organization founded by 19th century English missionary Hudson Taylor (哈德逊). Yang Hua and Su Tianfu grew up in an area in which the China Inland Mission had once preached the Gospel, until early 1950s when missionaries were expelled by the Communist Party.

Most Christians at that point were forcibly integrated into the Party-controlled "Three-Self" church movement. After the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Tan says, Christians in Guizhou began to embrace their faith ardently. In the poverty-stricken far-off reaches of mountainous Guizhou, he added, neither the Three-Self church nor house churches had much purchase.

Yang Hua was born Li Guozhi (李国志), the fourth sibling in a third-generation Christian family. When he was young, though, he not only refused to believe, but found the idea embarrassing. His father was an elder in a house church. He spent most of his time dealing with church affairs and relatively less on looking after his family. He also struck his kids at the slightest provocation. Nevertheless, after suffering a sudden accident in the family, and personally experiencing the transformative effect of prayer, Yang Hua became a Christian.

At around that time there were Christian workers offering in his hometown Bible study sessions, which he joined. Before

long he felt the desire to spread the Gospel himself. At age 13 in 1989 (he probably had little idea what was taking place in Beijing that year), he cut short his studies and became a roaming preacher. First he followed a group in his hometown, then went onto Yunnan, Guangxi, Henan, Zhejiang, and other provinces to preach. Christians in Zhejiang wanted him to put down roots there, but he felt the urge to return to Guizhou.

In 1997 Yang Hua, then 21, moved from Zhejiang back to Guiyang.

Su Tianfu grew up in abject poverty. In 2011, in an interview with the Christian author Yu Jie (俞洁), he mentioned that the only clothes he wore when growing up were hand-me-downs from relatives. In winter, he said, there was often hardly any food at home, so he only ate once a day. His father was a drunk who beat him. When he was unable to pay the miscellaneous expenses for junior high school, one of the teachers pitied him and only made him pay half up front. The rest he earned over summer, collecting trash, hauling sandbags at a construction site, and laboring as a road builder. When he finished middle-school he applied for junior teachers' college (黔师) because it was free. In his own words, he was a cynical and hopeless youth who was convinced that life had no meaning.

But he began to join a Bible study class at the teachers' college. There was no pastor and no preacher; sometimes a fine arts teacher at the school, who was a Christian, would lead them in Bible study, or play hymns on tape that everyone would sing to. "Though I didn't understand a great deal about the truth of it, I participated in the meetings regularly, and I felt in my soul a great sense of contentment," Su said. "I felt joy."

On Christmas 1993 Su Tianfu was baptized as a Christian – the first in his family. In 1997 at the age of 22 he quit his job teaching elementary school and went to Guiyang.

1997-2000: Each Their Own Ministry

The two young men first met while serving the “Dandelion” Christian Fellowship at Guizhou University of Technology. It was established in 1980 by two foreign missionaries who were teaching there.

In June of 1997, Su Tianfu went to Guangzhou to be further trained in pastoral care. In Guangdong he began to regularly participate in church meetings led by the renowned pastor Lin Xiangao (林香高) of the Damazhan house church. He studied Cantonese and traveled with other disciples to found churches and spread the Gospel around Guangdong. In 2000 he married Ouyang Manping (欧阳曼平), a young lady he’d gotten to know in their Bible training classes.

Back in Guiyang, Yang Hua joined a house church group of a few dozen members. It was there that he got to know Wang Hongwu, at the time a nurse at the charity clinic run by the church. When he revealed that he took an interest in her, however, he was curtly rebuffed. As Hongwu put it: “He didn’t fit my criteria. All the things a girl wanted, he didn’t have: a diploma, money, good looks – he didn’t measure up in any area.”

Yang Hua was deeply hurt, and for a while fell into terrible health. He had nosebleeds and high fever, and came to the clinic for treatment. This went on for a while until he decided he had to pull himself out of it. At a workers’ meeting one day, Yang Hua told a Ms. Li that “Next week I’m going out to the Yachi River” (鸭池河). He’d been planning and hoping to establish a church there for a long time, but had put it off because of the emotional turmoil of being rejected. Hongwu overheard the conversation. “My heart thumped,” she said. “It was like a shut door being suddenly flung open.”

Yachi River at the time was the headquarters to the Ninth Engineering Bureau of the Sinohydro (中国水利水电第九工程局),

inhabited by thousands of construction workers and their families. Over the next two years, Yang Hua went door to door spreading the Gospel. There had been only one or two believers when he started, and number quickly mushroomed to over a hundred over the next two years. In 2000 he went back to Guiyang, and in 2001 he and Hongwu married.

Preaching and Training in Guizhou from 2000 to 2008

“Even though I’d lived in Guangzhou for quite a few years, had learnt Cantonese, and was gradually getting used to life there, there was always a voice in my heart telling me: ‘You have to return to your home province and begin a new phase of your Ministry.’ Though Guizhou was poor and behind-the-times, it was a much bigger canvas,” Su Tianfu said.

On the day that Su and his wife arrived in Guiyang, Yang Hua and another friend met them at the train station. Their journey together had begun.

In his interview with Yu Jie, Pastor Su explained what happened over those years. First, the two young men each led their own small-scale house church assemblies. They also returned to serve a mission in their hometowns in the Bijie (毕节) and Liupanshui (六盘水) prefectures, southwest Guizhou, populated by the Miao and Yi ethnic groups. As a way of alleviating the reliance on preachers coming out to the countryside, from 2003 to 2008 they held training sessions in Guiyang every year for ethnic Christian workers, and each session lasted three months, training 20 students each time.

Beginning in 2003 they arranged for Christian workers to travel around Guizhou, focusing on regions without churches, to conduct short- and long-term missionary work. They’ve relied on the donations of congregants for their livelihoods, though their wives have also worked to help support the family.

Their activities have always been a matter of close attention

for the authorities. In 2003 they got a tip off that the secret police were investigating them, and were likely going to make arrests. They prepared travel bags and were ready to flee at short notice, but in the end they didn't flee. In the years followed, similar threats stalked them, until police interrogations and menace became a part of life.

A City on the Hill

By 2008 Yang Hua and Su Tianfu were being harassed and attacked wherever they went in Guizhou. They were increasingly running short of resources, until they were unable to pay the rent on their training venue.

It bothered them that the house churches they led in Guiyang had been underground. "Even though it was just a small meeting of a dozen or so people, we had to act like the underground [revolutionary-era] Communist Party you see on television dramas – using codewords, acting secretively as though we were doing something terrible," Su said.

But at that point, as Su judged it in the 2011 interview, Guiyang had only one Three-Self church for a population of five or six million, plus a seminary and another small church on the outskirts of town. "On the one hand, a lot of people had never ever heard the Gospel, but on the other, the existing Christians had nowhere to meet."

Through prayer and careful consideration together, their small church groups started to think clearly on what they wanted to achieve: they wanted their fellowship to grow and thrive in the open, and they wanted to make an impact on the city of Guiyang.

"Given that Christians are the light of the world, the church is the city on the hill. So it can't be hidden. It's got to be public," Su Tianfu said.

The new church they opened would be the "Living Stone" church,

a name that Yang Hua picked. It was drawn from Peter 2:4-5: "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

After spring in 2008 they began drawing up plans to rent an office space for worship. In Easter they held a dedication ceremony for a new church with about 50 members. Apart from regular services, the church held Christmas celebrations, hosted weddings, and organized excursions, all of which attracted more members.

Beginning in 2009 the Living Stone church each year baptized between a few dozen and over 100 new believers. Their Christmas celebrations attracted over 1,000, either participants or onlookers. The government was apprised of every large-scale activity in advance. When the authorities tried to interfere, the churchmen, often led by Pastor Yang Hua, argued their case strongly and never gave ground. In 2011, in a river on the southern outskirts of Guiyang, they held a baptism ceremony for 120 new Christians. With friends and family included there were probably between 300 to 400 people there. The government then mobilized at least twice as many security personnel to watch them.

As part of the church's pastoral program with congregants, they encouraged all believers to also participate in small-scale house church meetings. Last year when the church was formally banned by the Guiyang authorities, there were over 20 of these small house church congregations, each with between one and a few dozen members. The effect of the small groups was to give believers a sense of family, return, and belonging, where spreading the Gospel, caring for one another, and caring for society became part of their way of life.

Most of the congregants were between 20 and 40, from all walks

of life: businessmen, teachers, doctors, professionals, public servants, homemakers, students, and more.

For years they facilitated adoption of abandoned infants, fostered children with developmental disabilities, taught survival skills to children in orphanages, and performed other welfare services – all of which they were praised for in the local press. Separately, a number of church members founded or participated in charitable social programs of their own, helping disabled people, orphans, the elderly, and others. The church became an interconnecting structure, linking the community with the wider society.

Church management was handled by a 12-member board of directors elected by the congregation, which held meetings to discuss and make decisions on church affairs both large and small. When there were items of serious disagreement, they put the matter aside rather than have the majority overrule a minority. The goal was to eventually reach a consensus.

As the number of congregants continued to grow, the church bought three residential units on the 24th floor of the Guiyang International Center with a total 600 square meters. After they bought the units, the church began coming under more intense pressure from the authorities. Before they began using them, the government posted notices inside and outside the building stating that the newly established church was “an unapproved non-religious site established without permission,” and that pastors Su Tianfu and Yang Hua were unapproved, unregistered ministers.

On November 8, 2015, Living Stone congregants, under the menacing gaze of hundreds of riot police, SWAT police, regular police, and officials from a multitude of government agencies, held a ceremony dedicating their new church. When government agents later attempted to force them to join the regime-controlled “Three-Self” church movement, they were firmly rejected. The result was a campaign of harassment, threats,

and efforts at blocking believers from attending.

Defending the Rights of Small Churches

Pastor Yang Hua and Pastor Su divided their duties roughly in half: Su handled internal affairs, and Yang took care of liaison and external activities. As one congregant told me in an interview: "We've been helping small rural churches around Guizhou for years. When these churches are raided and broken up and their members arrested, no one else even knows." The small churches seek out Yang Hua, who finds lawyers to defend them. Quite a few cases have been defended successfully.

Hongwu, Pastor Yang's wife, said that on every occasion that brothers and sisters of the faith have been attacked by the government, Yang Hua stands up for them.

In May 2014 the authorities made a series of arrests of churchgoers in Liupanshui (六盘水), at a church that had grown rapidly and had held regular services for over 20 years. Now it was called an "evil religion" and its members detained. Yang Hua engaged lawyers in Beijing and Shanghai who traveled with him to Liupanshui, where they were followed by government vehicles. Chen Jiangang (陈江刚), one of the lawyers, described the torture that believers were subject to while in custody: they were beaten hard with long wooden staffs, forced to stand for prolonged periods, starved, deprived of sleep, and had lit cigarettes stuffed into their mouths.

In 2015 there was a similar incident in Dagan, Qianxi county (黔西), where a number of locals, who had returned from years in Hangzhou as migrant workers, were arrested after setting up a thriving church. Yang Hua and two lawyers from out of town arrived to help. They were followed by government-hired thugs everywhere they went. The men rammed their vehicle into Yang Hua's, and pulled out long machetes threatening to hack him and the lawyers to death.

More than one person has described Yang Hua as diminutive in

size and “frail” in appearance: he’s just under 1.6m (5’3”), is somewhat hunched due to back inflammation (ankylosing spondylitis) and often in pain. But when the rubber hits the road and fellow Christians are being assailed and threatened, he’s on the front lines defending their rights, not in the least afraid. He carries of aura of invincibility. “Pastor Yang Hua’s courage and sense of responsibility is extraordinary,” a church member who was on some of these trips with Yang Hua told me.

Zhang Tan once wrote an article about how Yang Hua dealt with a traffic case. “No matter the size of the case, Yang Hua fights it from the lowest level court to the highest. Even if he’s losing every step of the way, he doesn’t give up.” The process, Zhang told me, has revealed the savagery of the government power, but it’s also shown Yang Hua’s tenacity.

In today’s China, this sort of resistance doesn’t have much practical value. In the Dagan case, the five churchmen arrested were all imprisoned on China’s “evil religion” laws, and the Living Stone church has now also been crushed. Indeed, some church members complained that the fate of Living Stone was precisely because Pastor Yang Hua got involved in too many affairs of other churches.

As far as the Chinese Communist Party is concerned, Christianity and its dissemination is in and of itself a question of ideological competition. For decades the Party has used the “Three-Self” church system to integrate and assimilate Christianity under the banner of “patriotism,” exerting strict doctrinal and administrative control over these “competing” faiths. The escalated repression in Zhejiang, Henan and other provinces over the last three years are another example of the Party and Xi Jinping’s determination to dig out this supposed threat by the root. The shutdown of the Living Stone church and the arrest of Pastor Yang Hua is simply one development in the overall political schema in China. It has little to do with the “leak” of a

ridiculous government document.

Zhang said that Christianity in China has reached a point in time, and that Guiyang's Living Stone church is a perfect product of this point in time.

The Judgment of the Party vs. the Judgement of God

Since his detention, Pastor Yang Hua's wife and children have been prevented from seeing him because his case "involves state secrets." The two lawyers she engaged met Yang Hua for the first time in March and again in May. Yang Hua revealed how his interrogators used torture to try to extract a confession. They fixed him to an iron chair, stomped his feet with their shoes, and threatened his life and that of his wife and children. They also told him: "We know we can't change your faith, but we control everything. If we want, we can paint you as a greedy pastor and destroy your reputation."

The lawyers said that despite the threats, Pastor Yang Hua didn't give in. Nor did the church's accountant, Zhang Xiuhong (张秀红), who was detained in July 2015 – she is still being held, though according to Chinese criminal procedure should have long ago either been tried or released.

In September, lawyers reported that Yang Hua was suffering from liver pain, and had scabies all over his body.

The authorities claim that the case has nothing to do with religion. But they've denied Yang Hua, and the three other detainees, the right to read the Bible while in custody. For months Yang Hua's wife hand-copied Bible passages and mailed them to him, but in October that final connection too was severed too.

For the pending trial, police warned lawyers not to plead not-guilty (indeed, the judicial system in China is government-directed theater, and everyone is expected to follow the script). But in their Legal Opinion submitted to the court in

November, the two lawyers questioned the legality and authority of the *ad hoc* agency set up to suppress the church, the “Guiyang Municipal Command Center for Legally Dealing With the Living Stone Church.” They also questioned the validity of the regulation cited by the prosecution: “Regulations on State Secrets, Their Classification, and Scope in Religious Work.” It’s a document whose existence has never been announced to the public, and whose issuer, legal remit, and period of effect remain unknown. Yet it forms the basis of the charges against Pastor Yang Hua.

Hongwu said that though she has received no announcement of the trial, the only reason she won’t be there is if she’s put under house arrest. Pastor Su, according to a source, has been taken out of Guiyang on an involuntary trip.

As for the fate of the Living Stone church and the trial of Pastor Yang, Zhang Tan shared his thoughts: China’s “governing the country according to the law” (依法治国) is about using harsh legal instruments to control the people, in the model of the Qin Dynasty. It’s about maintaining and exercising the power of rulers, and has nothing to do with protecting the rights of the people. This, he said, is really the “Chinese characteristics.” “Secrets” are everywhere in today’s China, he said. “For example, they want to demolish my home, so they have a ‘secret’ document for demolishing my home. If I get ahold of this document, it is me who violated the law, not they, who want to destroy my property. Only a dictatorship has secrets everywhere, and it’s only under a dictatorship that one finds such absurdities at every turn.”

Zhang Tan argues that throughout Chinese history, there have been benevolent governments and ruthless governments. But take any issue and compare today’s communist rule with that of the Qin or Ming – widely seen as the harshest and most abusive dynasties – and the regime of today is worse. “The Chinese nation,” he said, “has come to an end.”

A sense of peace fills the letters Pastor Yang Hua has sent to his wife and children from his cell. He told Hongwu that his conditions have improved, and that he had no more need of money or other supplies. His imprisonment, he wrote, is a sabbatical that Jesus granted him after 23 years of toil. He said he'll enjoy it, "like a child who's had his full of milk, sleeping in his mother's arms."

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