

LSM's BUNGLED BIBLE SMUGGLING SCHEME

In January 2002 news broke around the globe—a Bible smuggler had been arrested in China. The Washington Post reported¹ the detention of “*a Hong Kong businessman who tried to deliver tens of thousands of Bibles purchased by American worshipers for an underground Christian congregation in China.*” The story grew in importance to include the world’s most powerful leaders. What’s more, this case has special interest for saints in the recovery because the Bible being sneaked into China was the Living Stream Ministry’s (LSM) Recovery Version.

Strangely, many saints have only the faintest knowledge of this adventure in Christian boldness. What was a golden opportunity to fulfill LSM’s mission statement—“to promote the enlightenment and revelation regarding the Bible as interpreted by...Watchman Nee and Witness Lee”—slipped away, producing nothing. A look at these events may prove instructive as to why this opportunity was lost.

Courageous For Christ

Mr. Li Guang-qiang² was the courageous Christian whose faith stirred him to risk smuggling 33,000 Recovery Bibles into China. A Hong Kong newspaper³ identified Mr. Li as a member of the Church in Hong Kong. Obviously, Mr. Li’s desire matched LSM’s mission⁴ to provide Recovery New Testaments to the spiritually hungry within China’s borders. Hence the Washington Post noted:⁵ “*Friends said Li is a member of the Local Church, and was asked by a church leader from Anaheim, California, to deliver the Bibles to Fuqing [China] about a year ago.*” Later reports spelled out this LSM connection,⁶ “*Prosecution papers name Andrew Yu, 51, general manager of Living Stream, as a source of the Bibles.*” As the story broke, the Chicago Tribune explained to its readers,⁷ “*Li brought [in] 16,800 copies of the Shouters’ “New Testament Recovery Version”...The Bible was translated and edited by the late Li Changshou, [Witness Lee] identified...as a leader of the Shouters sect.*” What a blessing for those local-church believers, spiritual descendants of Watchman Nee’s ministry, to get these Bibles. And so with the help of mainland-Chinese brothers, Mr. Li began smuggling these Bibles into southern China, the first shipment in April, the second in May, 2001.

Then Satan intervened. While completing the second shipment, Mr. Li was arrested along with several leaders—Brothers Lin and Yu—of the local churches in China (derogatively known as “the Shouters”). If convicted, Li faced a possible death sentence⁸ on charges of assisting an “evil cult.” With Mr. Li in prison, the story broke internationally. Suddenly LSM was thrust into the global spotlight. The press approached LSM to find out the whole story. Major newspapers carried reports and asked for interviews. Special feature articles appeared,⁹ describing LSM’s activities. While the situation was extremely delicate, here was a golden opportunity for LSM to aid Mr. Li and also highlight the Recovery Bible and the ministries of brothers Nee and Lee. LSM’s response, however, was entirely different this expectation.

LSM “Denies Any Link...Any Connection”

Initial published reports indicated close links between Mr. Li and the local churches (“Shouters”) in China, the Church in Hong Kong and Living Stream Ministry. However, the *Los Angeles Times* reported,⁹ “*In a telephone interview, Living Stream Ministry spokesman Chris Wilde in Anaheim **denied any link between his organization and either Li or the Shouters. “We don’t have any connection with them, and we really don’t know that much about them,” he said.***” This is perplexing, given the information already available. Multiple reports implicated LSM. Then how was it Chris Wilde, the official LSM media spokesman, “*denied any link between [LSM] and either Li or the Shouters?*” Simultaneously, the Church in Hong Kong also distanced themselves from Mr. Li.¹⁰ “*A spokesman for the...Hong Kong church said...Li had been a member for only a few months. The spokesman added his trip was not sanctioned by them and they had no links with the Shouters.*”

"Bungled Smuggling Scheme Becomes International Incident"

Even as LSM and the Church in Hong Kong dissociated themselves from Mr. Li, the Chinese government moved aggressively forward. China warned foreign governments not to meddle in its internal affairs and vowed to prosecute Li. One paper reported,¹¹ "*The....death sentence...delivered late last month, was handed to Li Guang-qiang.*" It's not clear, based on subsequent events, if this was a preliminary judgment or inaccurate information. Nevertheless, it emphasized the peril of Brother Li's position. In the US, President Bush took a personal interest in Li's case. President "*Bush was personally alarmed when he read about this during his break in Texas,*" sources said.¹² "*The president is deeply concerned about these reports,*" said a US State Department spokesman.¹³ The US ambassador to China raised this case with his Chinese counterparts, calling on them to "abide by the international norms of behavior." He also warned that¹⁴ "*the negative impact of such a story on the image of China in the United States cannot be overestimated.*" The political stakes were raised in China and the US as this¹⁵ "*bungled smuggling scheme...became an international incident.*"

Despite LSM's efforts to distance themselves from the case, the media continued to investigate. "*Mr. Li is not believed to be a member of the Shouters but only someone helping to deliver the Bibles on behalf of another Christian group based in Anaheim, Calif.*" one reported.¹⁶ Later an "in depth" report revealed the depths of involvement,¹⁷ "*Church members in Taiwan gave businessmen from Fuqing [China] money to buy 33,000 Recovery Bibles. The Bibles were printed at a Living Stream plant in South Korea and shipped to Hong Kong.*" Ultimately, LSM's ties to this case were spelled out. At the time, with the Church in Hong Kong and LSM standing aloof, it appeared that LSM had abandoned Brother Li and his co-laborers to their fate in the Chinese government's hands. But even as Satan manipulated the situation against these brothers, the Lord was moving His hand to protect them...and He chose to use the highest echelons of earthly power as His means.

President Bush Intervenes

Exactly 30 years has passed since President Nixon's 1972 historic visit to China broke through the "bamboo curtain" of China's isolation. Now President Bush was to visit China. The US President's impending visit concerned Chinese authorities; if President Bush raised this case of religious freedom, China's leaders would be profoundly embarrassed. *The Times of London* reported that¹⁸ "*President Bush is to put religious freedom at the top of the agenda for his visit this month to Beijing. The issue is certain to embarrass his host, President Jiang Zemin*" of China. Behind the scenes the wheels of diplomacy and politics were turning. The diplomatic pressure began to work. Chinese authorities reduced Li's "crime" to a lesser charge of engaging in "illegal business activities." Brother Li was sentenced to two years in jail, his mainland accomplices to three years. All three were fined \$18,000 US. Although spared execution, they were still jailed and fined. The worst-case scenario was averted. Yet the case still overshadowed Bush's impending visit.

Suddenly, on February 9, China freed Brother Li for "medical reasons." He was allowed to serve his sentence at home, in Hong Kong. The timing—12 days before the arrival of President George W. Bush in Beijing—was no accident. President Bush's visit was the catalyst for Brother Li's release. One of Mr. Li's co-laborers, Brother Lin was released a few months later on medical grounds. The other, Brother Yu, was not so fortunate; he served most of his 3-year sentence, (sometimes doing hard labor, 16-hours per day) before being released in March 2004.¹⁹

LSM recognized President Bush's role in securing Mr. Li's release. LSM-spokesman, Chris Wilde, admitted,²⁰ "*I don't think that there was any question that President Bush was instrumental in his release.*" In fact, President Bush excelled, not only in international diplomacy, but also in terms of his Christian testimony:²¹ "*I can tell you that in my last visit with President Jiang I shared with him my faith,*" President Bush said. "*I talked to him on very personal terms about my Christian beliefs.*" "*I explained to him that faith had an incredibly important part in my life,*" the President testified.

LSM, "Captured Bibles" and "Captured Brothers"

President Bush, deserves kudos for his role in this case. The media also deserves credit for unearthing and following the story. However, it appears most of the other parties involved, emerged with blemished records. The BBC reported:²² "*no real orthodox religious group...showed any concern about [Mr. Li's] case during the whole process, on the contrary, the people most zealous about his release were the human rights groups and democratic parties.*" Considering the clear links to the LSM, we cannot help but wonder why they dissociated themselves from Mr. Li, the brother at the center of this international incident. Under the headline, "**Living Stream Ministry provided Bibles that are focus of death-penalty charges,**" it was reported that,²³ "*At the ministry's Anaheim warehouse, Living Stream spokesman Chris Wilde flipped through a book like the ones captured in China—a black, soft-covered, gold-leaved Chinese text of the New Testament. "It's the Bible, and that's the bottom line, and we'll never back down from that," Wilde said.*" Some might ask: If LSM was willing to promote its "captured Bibles," why not identify²⁴ with the "captured brother? On the contrary, in the same report, Chris Wilde, was quoted saying, "*the ministry has no official connection with Li*"—a brother facing possible execution. If LSM will "never back down from" the Bible (to quote LSM-spokesman, Wilde) why did they "back down" from supporting Brother Li, in his hour of need? Surely, openly identifying with Brother Li, would give them more credit in the public's eyes and hence more opportunity to promote the Recovery Version. So, why did LSM continue to deny any link, any connection?

What Motivated LSM's Denial?

One possibility is that LSM was trying to shield Brother Li by withholding information that might be used against him. But if this was the motive, it is illogical. LSM's unqualified denial could be easily exposed, damaging their credibility. Furthermore, even if this was the real motive, it begs the question—Should Christians lie, even in these circumstances? This lie could have easily been avoided with a simple diplomatic response:²⁵ "LSM neither confirms or denies any link."

Another possibility is fear. Perhaps LSM's leaders were afraid this incident might reflect negatively on the recovery, perhaps by the association with the "Shouters," a group labeled a cult by China's government. Indeed, Chris Wilde seemed to indicate this was a factor when he stated,²⁶ "*The Bible is the Bible, and it should never be classified as cult material.*" Given the tenacity of LSM's fight against the "cult-label," (e.g. in the Harvest House litigation) this strategy—denying any link²⁷ with "the Shouters"—might appear reasonable.

Reasonable perhaps, but is it wise? What China's government labels cultic, many Christians worldwide would see differently. Evangelical Christians strongly favor Bible distribution, even Bible smuggling, into atheistic lands. They are more likely to view "the Shouters" as persecuted believers, rather than accept the Chinese government's "cult" label. Mr. Li was surely viewed as a hero by most evangelical believers. LSM probably had more to gain from supporting his cause, than they lost from dissociating themselves from him and "the Shouters."

Another possibility is that the LSM was afraid of being portrayed as incompetent, due to their bungled Bible-smuggling scheme. 33,000 Recovery Bibles ended up in the hands of the Chinese government. The financial donations of overseas saints came to nothing. Mr. Li was imprisoned, facing possible execution and two local church leaders were apprehended. This was surely an embarrassing conclusion to LSM's Bible-smuggling adventure. One common response is damage control—deny all knowledge, repudiate all connections. This is an "understandable" organizational response. However, it is not a biblical, Christian response. In this instance it seems LSM reacted like any other worldly organization. Watchman Nee warned us that organizations fail. He said,²⁸ "*When the grace of God comes, men immediately set up an organization to keep it. The organization remains, but the content is lost.*" It seems this case fits Brother Nee's prophecy that human organizations inevitably fail to accomplish the divine purpose.

What Was Behind LSM's Bible Smuggling Scheme?

What were the LSM's motives for bringing Recovery Versions into China in the first place? The answer might seem obvious—because they need them! However, China is not North Korea, where everything is controlled. It's a one-party state politically. But, there's lots of free-enterprise economically. News reports inform us that,²⁹ "As long as someone pays the bills, private Chinese print shops will publish almost anything—from Bibles to pornography. Distribution is relatively straight-forward amid China's growing freedom of travel and trade. Books, shipped for about \$10 a box, can reach almost anywhere in the country in a week by private parcel post." So, why smuggle foreign-printed Recovery versions into China? Evidently copyright isn't an issue, as LSM acknowledges.³⁰ Then, why not allow Chinese believers to freely print them inside China? Perhaps copies printed in China are slightly inferior in quality to LSM-printed versions. Moreover, "replica recovery versions" might be less of a status symbol than the "original" LSM foreign-printed edition. More important, we would suggest, foreign-produced recovery versions produce a "direct link" (via the product and LSM's representatives) between LSM and local churches in China. The uncontrolled reproduction of "replica" recovery versions in China produces no such links. Rather it fosters genuine local churches, independent of LSM. We suggest one rationale for LSM's Bible-smuggling scheme was to strengthen the connections between LSM and local churches in China. If successful, LSM's "sphere of influence" over mainland churches would have expanded. The question is—is that a good thing? The answer depends on whether we want to see "LSM-ministry churches"³¹ or genuine local churches in China.

What happened to the Lord's Blessing?

Whatever the underlying motives, this opportunity to fulfill LSM's mission—to promote the ministries of brothers Nee and Lee—was lost. Rather than supplying Bibles to saints in mainland China, thousands of Recovery versions were confiscated, and brothers' lives were jeopardized. Even worse, LSM could be perceived as fearful, reclusive, and disloyal. To the outside observer, it might appear that LSM allowed Brother Li and his two mainland helpers to be "hung out to dry," left "twisting in the wind." It appears only God's intervention in the political sphere, delivered Brother Li from execution. Obviously this case wasn't a repetition of "Project Pearl." In that celebrated 1981 operation, 1 Million Bibles were successfully smuggled into mainland China³² where believers were crying out for God's Word. Now, 20 years later, LSM's Bible-smuggling scheme failed. Why? Evidently God did not bless this project, at least not compared to "Project Pearl." Perhaps we should ask: Is this an indication of God's disapproval? Perhaps LSM's activities should be evaluated against Watchman Nee's "blueprint." After all, Brother Nee was the "master builder" of God's recovery work in mainland China. That land was the scene of W. Nee's labor, imprisonment and "martyrdom." Isn't it appropriate to consider his assessment of what meets with "divine approval"? Over 60 years ago, Watchman Nee warned,³³ "Whenever a special leader...or organization becomes a center for drawing together the believers of different places...the divinely-appointed sphere of locality is displaced by a sphere of human invention, there **the divine approval cannot rest.**" In view of this, shouldn't we consider whether the failure of LSM's Bible-smuggling scheme indicates that God doesn't want "LSM-ministry churches" in China? Does the withholding of God's blessing imply that He wants genuine local churches—with "administration local, each answering to the Lord"—according to Brother Nee's vision, rather than "LSM-ministry churches"³¹?

The Concerned Brothers

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NOTES

1. **Washington Post** January 6, 2002
2. Li Guang-qiang (based upon the Mandarin.) The same name is rendered Lai Kwong-keung in Cantonese. For simplicity we use the names Mr. Li or Brother Li. The two mainland Chinese local church leaders were identified as Yu Zhu-di and Lin Xi-fu. We refer to them as brothers Yu and Lin, respectively.
3. **South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)** Jan. 6, 2002. Although Mr. Li had been arrested 9 months earlier (May 2001), his case was not publicized in Jan, 2002 when the possibility of a death sentence loomed larger. In the light of incidents around that time, execution appeared much more than a hypothetical possibility. The **Los Angeles Times** reported, "As often happens in such instances, Li's relatives worked quietly for months seeking his release but decided to publicize his plight after two Local Church members in Hubei province were sentenced to death and a third was given a term of life imprisonment after being convicted of involvement with an "evil cult." Fourteen other church members received lesser sentences." **Los Angeles Times**, Jan. 9, 2002 p. A3
4. Here we do not distinguish between LSM and the Taiwan Gospel Book Room (TGBR), since they work together and jointly constitute the "one publisher," according to the "blended co-workers" "Publication Work in the Lord's Recovery" (June, 2005). Hence our use of "LSM" includes the TGBR, its personnel and actions.
5. **Washington Post** January 6, 2002
6. **Orange County Register** January 22, 2002 A similar report by the "**CyberCast News Service**" indicated "The court was told that [Andrew] Yu Kit-lun, a former resident of Hong Kong who now works for a California-based group called Living Stream Ministry (LSM), supplied the Bibles." **CNSNews.com** January 29, 2002
7. **Chicago Tribune**. Jan. 8, 2002
8. **The South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)**, carried a "feature article" on LSM, Jan. 12, 2002 (p. 10). **The Orange County Register, (Santa Ana CA)** ran a special series: "FOCUS: IN DEPTH Orange County groups striving for freedom in China Series" Feb. 21, 2002. Another "feature" article appeared in the **Orange County Register Oct 13, 2002**
9. **Los Angeles Times**, Wed., Jan. 9, 2002, p. A3
10. **South China Morning Post** (Hong Kong,) Jan. 12, 2002, p. 10 **South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) Jan 6, 2002** Along the same lines, the **LA Times** reported, "A church spokesman in Hong Kong, D.J. Wong, said Tuesday that Li had been a member for only a few months before his arrest." (**Los Angeles Times, Jan. 9, 2002** p. A3)
11. **Washington Post** Jan. 11, 2002
12. **South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) Jan 12, 2002 (p. 10)**
13. **Los Angeles Times, Jan. 9, 2002** p. A3
14. **South China Morning Post, Jan 22, 2002**
15. "bungled smuggling scheme that became an international incident." **Orange County Register Oct 13, 2002** "The affair has sparked a diplomatic row between China and the United States." the **South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)** reported, Jan 18, 2002
16. **Washington Post** Jan. 11, 2002 Along the same lines the **South China Morning Post (Hong Kong,) reported Jan 9, 2002** "The friend said Lai was helping a Christian group - the Living Stream Ministry in California - to deliver the Bibles....[W]hile Lai was not a member of the Shouters, he was a member of "The Church in Hong Kong", which shared similar beliefs and had 600 members."
17. **Orange County Register, Feb 21, 2002**
18. **The Times (London) date** Feb. 6-10?
19. Brother Lin Xifu, 42, was told he could serve his three-year term outside prison for health reasons. (**South China Morning Post, Apr 23, 2002**) Brother Yu Zhudi, served a three-year sentence with hard labor, sometimes working 16-hours a day making goods—rattan baskets—for export (**South China Morning Post, May 2, 2002**) Finally, in March 2004, Brother Yu was released after serving most of his 3-year sentence. (**South China Morning Post, Mar 7, 2004**)
20. **Orange County Register** Jan. 22, 2002
21. **Orange County Register, Feb 21, 2002 Chicago Tribune Feb. 20, 2002**

22. **BBC** report based upon the *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong) news website, Feb. 11, 2002
23. **Orange County Register** Jan. 22, 2002
24. A few days after LSM's original denial of "any connection," (**Los Angeles Times, Jan. 9**) the official LSM position was more "diplomatic": "*Living Stream Ministry acknowledges Lai, 38, may have been carrying its works, but even as it expresses concern over his plight it has not yet confirmed formal links with him.*" And also "*Nudge [LSM] for specifics on Lai and they politely move into a mode of neither confirming or denying knowledge of him.*" (**South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) Jan. 12, 2002 p. 10**) This is not intended to imply LSM expressed no interest in Brother Li and the other 2 brothers. Andrew Yu, LSM manager, issued a statement to the **Orange County Register Jan 22, 2002** saying "*I am deeply concerned, and have a 'heart-felt' compassion for the ones being detained in China. I appreciate their efforts to distribute the Bible to Christians in China very much.*" Here, at least, is a genuine expression of concern from someone at LSM. Nevertheless, LSM still continued to deny any official links or connection with Brother Li. The same report quoted Chris Wilde, "**He said the ministry has no official connection with Li.**" (**Orange County Register Jan 22, 2002**)
25. See the previous footnote. This raises the question: When did LSM acknowledge any connection (official or unofficial) with Mr. Li?
26. **Orange County Register** Jan. 22, 2002
27. By the end of January LSM had flip-flopped on this point, by acknowledging a "**strong spiritual bond**" between LSM and local churches ("Shouters") in mainland China. Reports quote LSM-spokesman, Chris "Wilde said there was no official affiliation between Living Stream Ministry and the church the Bibles were going to, **although there was a "strong spiritual bond" between them.**" "**CyberCast News Service**" **CNSNews.com** Jan. 29, 2002. This statement contradicts Chris Wilde's initial public statement, reported by the **LA Times**, "*Living Stream Ministry spokesman Chris Wilde in Anaheim denied any link between his organization and either Li or the Shouters. "We don't have any connection with them, and we really don't know that much about them," he said.*" Clearly a "**strong spiritual bond**" between LSM and the local churches in China ("the Shouters") constitutes **one kind of "link" or "connection,"** something which was initially denied. Moreover, while LSM acknowledged a "**strong spiritual bond**" with local churches in China ("the Shouters"), when did they ever acknowledge a "**strong spiritual bond**" with Brothers Li, Lin and Yu?
28. W. Nee, **Collected Works of Watchman Nee**, Vol. 47, p. 57
29. **Orange County Register, Oct. 13, 2002**
30. **Orange County Register** Jan. 22, 2002 "Living Stream executives...say they face the same challenges as other American companies in China, where copyrights are a foreign concept. Counterfeitors and bootleggers, they say, are responsible for the spread of publications. "We don't control the flow of materials," says Andrew Yu, general manager of Living Stream.
31. We use the term, "LSM-ministry churches" as a particular application of what Watchman Nee called, "ministerial churches." He said, "*If God commits a specific ministry to any man relating to certain truths, he must not make his particular ministry, or his particular line of truth the basis for a new 'church.'...No church should be under a specific ministry, but all ministries should be under the church...Otherwise, the churches will be made to serve the ministry, not the ministry the churches, and the 'churches' established will be ministerial 'churches,' not local ones.*" (W. Nee, **The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works of W. Nee**, Vol. 30, pp. 112-3.) When the "blended co-workers" at LSM make the claim that Witness Lee's ministry is the "all-inclusive, all-inheriting, Ministry of the Age," of which they are the unique continuation, are they not they seeking to bring the local churches exclusively under their ministry (LSM)? Are they not establishing 'ministerial churches,' something denounced by Brother Nee?
32. For a detailed account in English see, **Jesus in Beijing**, by David Aikman, pp. 268-70
33. Watchman Nee, **The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works of W. Nee**, Vol. 30, pp. 68-9

NEWS SOURCES (English):

South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) Jan. 6; Jan. 9; Jan. 12; Jan. 18; Jan. 22; Jan 27; Jan 28; Jan. 29; Jan. 30; Feb. 4; Feb. 5; Feb. 6; Feb. 21; Apr. 23; May 2; Mar. 7, 2004; Mar. 9, 2004
Washington Post Jan. 6; Jan. 11

Los Angeles Times Jan. 6; Jan. 9; Jan. 29
Chicago Tribune Jan. 8; Feb. 20
"Cyber News Service" CNSNews.com Jan. 10; Jan. 29
Orlando Sentinel (Orlando FL) Jan. 13
Orange County Register (Santa Ana, CA) Jan. 22; Feb. 21; Oct. 13
Grand Rapids Press (Grand Rapids, MI) Jan. 23
BBC Monitoring Service (HK) Jan. 28; Feb. 11
Union Tribune Publishing (New York Times News Service) Jan. 29; Feb. 10
Asian Wall Street Journal Jan. 29
The Times (London, UK) Feb. 6-10? [Unless otherwise indicated all dates are for 2002]