

What the Underground Church in China Is Saying About *I Stand with Christ*

This is unlike most book endorsement sections, which are filled with affirmations from scholars or famous pastors and preachers. You may not recognize the following names, but they are among the most respected leaders of the Chinese underground house church. Together, their churches represent more than seventy million believers throughout China.



As I read this book, I cried until I finished it. Once I picked it up, I could not put it down. I consumed it in one day. I was shocked at the kind of witness Pastor Zhang Rongliang has been for the Lord. Instead of touching the lives of just a few people, God has used him to touch the lives of millions all across China.

Those who heard the messages preached by Zhang Rongliang ended up surrendering their lives, picking up the cross, and following Jesus. As I read this book and thought about the people involved with Pastor Zhang, I had to stop and ask myself, “What kind of people are these?” These people are crazy. They willingly give up their own freedom and comfortable lives to take on a life of persecution and hardship. These are not normal people. Normal people do not do the things that are found in this book. Normal people just want to have a family, live their lives in comfort, and have good health.

Again, as I read this book, I was not able to hold back my emotion. On one side, I appreciate how God’s rescue and mercy continued throughout the challenging times of China’s early years, but on the other side, I want to pray that God will keep His children protected from persecution. This story of Zhang should remind us that no matter how comfortable life is, we should never forget the lessons of hardship. Hardship and persecution have always been with the church since its beginning. If the church truly follows in the footsteps of Jesus, then hardships are inevitable. Every early disciple had to learn this lesson, and many met death in the glorious fires of persecution.

So what is our responsibility today? I think that this book makes us ask if we are truly willing to suffer for the Lord. It compels us to ask if we are truly willing to give our lives for Him as He did for us. Around the world today, there are many Christians who are suffering and being tortured for Jesus Christ with the hopes of one day being reunited with our heavenly Father. That is what this book reminds us of.

I Stand with Christ describes the deepest details of Pastor Zhang's life. Maybe, like me, you will not be able to hold back your tears as you read this story. My heart was revived and my spiritual life was challenged after reading this book. My prayer is that Pastor Zhang will never again suffer from the pain of chains, shackles, whips, or starvation in prison but instead fly like an eagle until the Lord calls him home.

—Xiao Min

Singer and songwriter for the underground house church

I view Pastor Zhang Rongliang as an outstanding and respected leader in the Chinese underground church. We have had more than thirty years of serving together. Through the years, we have had some disagreements, but the love that we share keeps us working together in Christ. Together, we have been in the same boat of persecution, faced the same storms, and faced suffering together.

I am so glad to witness his story finally being told in this long-awaited autobiography. Pastor Zhang has witnessed God's leading hand of protection at every turn of his life. His story is not about him alone but is the story of the Fangcheng underground house church—one of China's largest house church networks. If you read Pastor Zhang's story, you will also learn the details of the last forty years of history in China's church.

Pastor Zhang's story is one that brings glory and praise to God, because we can witness how the faithful rely upon God during the hardest times in life. My hope is that this book will bring revival and encouragement for brothers and sisters around the world and leave an eternal spiritual blessing for the church of Jesus Christ.

—Pastor Chen Xiao Fu
Beijing

When I finished reading the story about Zhang Rongliang, I immediately felt that this is a book that all pastors should read. This is not just the experience of one pastor but also the story of the underground church in China. The last sixty years of China's church history can be better understood by reading *I Stand with Christ*. There are so many things about the underground house church that are not known to the rest of the world, but Pastor Zhang's personal testimony fills in the blanks. I am so thankful for this book.

Zhang Rongliang's life is full of miraculous marvels that come as the result of relying upon Jesus. From begging for food, to tending sheep, to being a member of the Communist Party, to being thrown in prison for the gospel, we see it all. As we say in China, we are able to follow his life from black hair to white hair.

God has always been with Pastor Zhang and rescued him during times of trouble. It is impossible to imagine China's revival of the Holy Spirit without Pastor Zhang. His testimony and witness proves that Jesus is alive and is not dead. Jesus is living in Chinese hearts far and wide throughout China.

Just as Jesus whispered to Peter, He also whispered to Pastor Zhang, "If you love me, feed my sheep."

—Pastor Zhen Ju Xing
Shenzhen

My dear brother Pastor Zhang Rongliang, who is a big influence in China, suffered and shared trials in Jesus Christ. I am happy that he has written this book because it shares a sober story of God's love. Pastor Zhang comes from Fangcheng in Henan Province, but I come from Zhejiang Province, so we didn't meet until early 1981. Going back in my memory, I am reminded of the messages that I heard Pastor Zhang preach with passion, like the ones that he preached at a secret gathering during Chinese Spring Festival in 1982.

During those early days, to the outside observer, it seemed that the house church was being broken down and torn apart by persecution, but

on the inside, the church was only getting stronger. During the most trying times, Pastor Zhang's messages brought power and encouragement—not just to his church in Fangcheng but to all of China's underground house churches. His influence cannot be underestimated.

He is a remarkable leader. The amazing story that he shares in this book shows how he led one of most well-known churches in China. I know many of these stories personally because I was there. Between 1982–1986, I had a lot chances to visit with the underground church in Fangcheng. Whether it was summer or winter, hot or cold, busy or not, Pastor Zhang was always able to gather coworkers and evangelists to study and train. He always preached a fiery message encouraging us to lay down our lives and obey God's Word. I saw the church grow through an amazing revival during those years. The gospel was preached so widely and quickly throughout China because of those messages. Pastor Zhang was able to build up and send out teams, and he played a pivotal part in setting the foundation for the big five house church networks.

From personally observing the life of Pastor Zhang, I can say that I understand better what it is to be a servant of God. I saw the power of the Holy Spirit introduced in Henan during the early days of the church, and all of the brothers and sisters who felt dry and thirsty were able to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Pastor Zhang, together with Pastor Dennis Balcombe, played a key role in this outpouring. By obeying God's leading in his life, Pastor Zhang was able to see much fruit. Not only did his church rise in membership under his leadership, but some of the members eventually gave their lives in martyrdom for the gospel.

The fire that God put in Pastor Zhang was not able to be quenched. It was not extinguished by persecution, prison, or threat of death. Even though he was persecuted by the government and thrown in prison numerous times, the enemy could not stop him. I believe that it was only through the power of the Holy Spirit that so many millions of people came to believe in Jesus Christ through the vessel of Pastor Zhang, who willingly gave himself in submission to the Spirit. Today, Pastor Zhang's main mission is to take the gospel to the rest of the world between China and Jerusalem in what is known as the "Back to Jerusalem" vision. His voice is among those voices encouraging the church to fulfill the Great Commission.

The journey of the Chinese church has been from chaos to order, from no framework to framework, and from hardship to revival. The church has grown, but not without challenges. There have been disagreements, splits, and conflict, but Pastor Zhang continues to march on, leading the church from cold to hot. I have never met anyone with a heart as big as Pastor Zhang's. He has shown patience and has lived life by biblical principles. I have seen him solve conflicts within the church and combat heresy with amazingly tactful wisdom. Pastor Zhang was the man that God used to bring His revival to China. My prayers are with him until the Lord returns again.

—*Pastor Peter Xu*
USA

Pastor Zhang is both noble and precious and has been greatly used by God. My heart was deeply moved when I read his testimony. It reminded me of the stories that were recorded in the film *The Cross* about the underground church in China. He is like a blooming flower that sprouted during China's spiritual spring. His flower brought beauty to China during a time when everything was dark and grey. As I read his testimony, I found myself crying, laughing, and remembering. You see, Pastor Zhang represents all of us simple farmer Christians in China today. We are not educated; we are simple, but we are loyal. Our loyalty has brought us to a place where we are willing to die for the sake of the cross.

When I read the part about Pastor Zhang demanding that his mother give the shoes back to the government, even though he didn't have any shoes, I found myself laughing because I know him and I can actually see the scene in my mind's eye. Pastor Zhang was not released from prison until recently, and my hope is that his tears of sorrow from the persecution that he endured will be turned to shouts of joy.

—*Pastor Yuan Zhi Ming*

I STAND WITH CHRIST

I STAND WITH CHRIST

THE COURAGEOUS LIFE OF A CHINESE CHRISTIAN

ZHANG RONGLIANG WITH EUGENE BACH



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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I STAND WITH CHRIST: *The Courageous Life of a Chinese Christian*

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House brought a level of exposure and professionalism to Pastor Zhang's story that otherwise would never have happened. He has been more than a partner—he has been a dear friend to the persecuted church in China.

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Lois Puglisi: The hardest job regarding anything that I write is the editing stage. Lois has exercised so much grace, patience, and devotion when working with me and editing this book. She has become someone that I have come to rely on greatly in the last two years to take a roughly written story and turn it into something that is amazing. She does so much more than correct grammar and spelling. She somehow finds a way to take awkward sentences and ideas and arrange them so that they effectively communicate with passion to the reader.

—*Eugene Bach*

Foreword

I am Brother Yun, “the Heavenly Man.” For the sake of the gospel, I have shared much persecution together with Pastor Zhang Rongliang. I was put in prison for more than thirteen years of my life, but by the power of Jesus Christ, I was able to persevere.

I am so excited about Zhang Rongliang’s testimony being shared with the world and feel humbled that I can write something about this book. Pastor Zhang and I share a long history. We have been arrested together, we have become homeless together, and we have walked through the lowest valley and up to the highest peaks together. We have also shared many moments of joy and laughter.

Both of us are products of the underground house church in China, and both of us were elders of the Sinim Fellowship—a fellowship of underground house church networks. After reading just a few pages of Zhang’s personal story, I was so moved. I could not help but stop reading and get down on my knees to pray to God. Immediately, I shouted in prayer, “For the cross, for the cross—it is all for the glory of the cross. Forever may God help us to preach to the nations!”

My heart was deeply and profoundly moved as I continued to read *I Stand with Christ*. My heart filled with a deep fear to ensure that all thanks goes to God. The night that I first started to read this book, I immediately devoured it, reading from chapter to chapter. What I was reading was satisfying me as if I was eating a filling meal. I read the story throughout

the night and really felt that I was reading David's psalms. When I finally looked up from the book, I saw that the night had passed; it was already dawn.

Thanks to our God who chooses us. We do not have a thing to boast about. We are all full of weaknesses, shortcomings, failures, and offenses. Pastor Zhang and I have our weaknesses, but we are serving God before the angels of heaven. It is only because of the blood of Jesus that we are able to play our part. It is our responsibility to witness His faithful message of power and righteousness.

I highly recommend this book with great prayer and blessing. I believe that Pastor Zhang's life story is a powerful testimony of the cross that will impact both the church in the West and the church in the East. On the way back to Jerusalem, the Father is looking for His sons and daughters to turn their hearts to Him. If we turn to Him, He will turn to us. I wish that the church today could return to the days of the apostles, that believers would be ready to lay down their lives for God with boldness, as Pastor Zhang has done. Let us read this story and be reminded that we are to continue preaching the good news to every nation, tribe, and tongue until everyone has had a chance to hear.

—*Brother Yun*
Author, *The Heavenly Man*

PROLOGUE:

My Testimony Belongs to Christ

My name is Zhang Rongliang, and I am an unashamed follower of Jesus Christ. I am the pastor of a little countryside church known as Fangcheng. I don't really know how many people are in our humble church, but most international sources estimate it to be a fellowship of about ten million believers. Some say that the numbers are much less than that, and others that it could be more. Only God truly knows the number. I don't think it really matters.

In these pages, I want to share with you my personal testimony as given to me by the Lord. It is considered quite dangerous to reveal the contents of this book, but these are stories that need to be told for God's glory and for the encouragement of the church. I spent a period of many months working on this book with international authors who traveled to China and sat down with me, painstakingly going over each part of my story. It was not an easy task, and many times, my throat became parched or my eyes became wet with tears of remembrance. My life story is complicated and full of ups and downs. I have been arrested and thrown in jail several times; I have spent a large portion of my life behind bars, serving five separate prison sentences.

I count it a privilege to have suffered for the name of my Lord Jesus Christ. Through all the lonely nights and hopeless situations, He has never left me nor forsaken me.

This story is not really mine to share. I believe that my life is not my own, and thus my testimony is not my own but rather belongs to Christ. He alone saved me and redeemed me. All that I have and all that I can tell about my life belongs to Him. I desire to be like one who is dead so that Christ can live through me, and that is why I am telling this story. I want to share about His never-ending love, His never-ending grace, and His never-failing companionship.

1

The Great Leap Forward

I was born on March 23, 1951, to an extremely poor family in Fangcheng County, Henan Province, during one of the most difficult times in China's long history. I am the middle child, my older sister now being seventy-three and my younger sister fifty-seven. My father worked as a carpenter and used his craftsmanship as best he could to provide for the needs of all our family members. However, there were still times when we had little food and had to search the fields to look for wild vegetables. My older sister could bear hunger, but my younger sister and I cried all day and begged our mother for food. Our mother loved us more than she loved herself, and one day, as we were crying again from hunger, she said, "My dear children, please don't cry! Mommy knows that you are very hungry, but every time you cry, my heart aches even more." My younger sister and I seemed to understand our mother's pain, so we stopped crying and learned to endure.

In 1956, my parents took me to the town of Lushan, then down to Nanyang and Zhenping, to beg for food. All of us would go door-to-door as we begged. My father would often offer to trade his carpentry skills for food if there was any work to be done or any food to be earned. Some people were quite unfriendly and could not understand why we were going around asking for food. Sometimes, we would find people who would share with us, but just about everyone during those days was poor and didn't have a lot of food to give to others. Starvation was rampant; it was common for us to see the bodies of those who had died of hunger lying in the street.

Our family had to fight to survive, and we would travel around all day looking for food, often only being able to scrape together two bowls of rice to feed the whole family. For two years, we had to beg for food every day because it was the only way we could stay alive. Now, as I look back on those years, I feel that a child should never have to beg for food. The constant rejection and uncertainty were not easy to deal with, and they have left their mark on me to this day. Those were terrible, painful years for me.

Then China implemented a nationwide law requiring multiple households to share the same cooking pot, meaning that we were able to share some of our neighbors' food. It was not much, but we no longer had to beg to survive. During the "The Great Leap Forward" (1958–1961), a disastrous attempt by the Communist Party to modernize the nation, there were very few pots available for cooking because everyone had been forced to give up their pots in 1958–1959 to contribute to the nation's steel production. Chairman Mao believed that steel production was the true representation of a superpower. He wanted to surpass England and America in the production of steel so that China could take its rightful place as a global force. As a result, our village had only one pot for 250 households to use. And things were so bad that we were able to get noodles only once every seven or eight days. Those familiar with Henan Province know that noodles are the staple food for the local people.

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stay alive.**

By 1960, we were feeling the full effect of the Great Leap Forward policies and found ourselves on the margin of death. All of China was enduring a crisis at the time. From 1958 to 1962, China experienced what turned out to be the largest famine in the history of the world. Through its programs, the government had created a man-made disaster that killed an estimated forty-five million people over four

years, not only through starvation, but also through beatings, torture, or being worked to death. Chairman Mao Zedong (Tse-tung), considered to

be the father of Communist China after taking over in 1949, was in power then. The chairman mocked reports of famine in the country and denied that there was a food crisis, calling it merely a “period of scarcity.” During that time, some collectives or communes were divided into groups. Food was distributed according to one’s capacity for work. The elderly, the weak, and the handicapped quickly perished under this scheme.

Rural China was hit the hardest by the famine. Many families tried to make broth out of anything they could find, including tree bark. The government confiscated livestock from farmers to “serve the greater good,” only to waste it and allow it to rot at the hands of inexperienced urbanites and cadre members. Painful stories from those days include those of children who were too weak to cry and were left to die in empty fields. Suicide was epidemic. More than one million people died by taking their own lives.

My own father was among the millions who perished during those years. In February 1960, he died of starvation, and my mother was left to take care of us by herself. My father just lay down to sleep one day and never got up. Even though I was nine years old at the time, I don’t remember much about the event, perhaps because I didn’t witness his death. My mother simply told me that my father was no longer with us. With so much starvation all around us, we knew it would inevitably happen to us all.

I kept thinking that my father would come back to life. It didn’t seem real that he would no longer be with us every day. I kept expecting to hear his voice coming from around the corner or for him to come to our room and get us ready for bed. I waited for him to return, but he never did. Since I was only a child, the idea of death was not easy for me to grasp. I didn’t have much knowledge about death at the time, even though it was occurring all around me. As time went on, I became very familiar with death, and I have tasted of it more times than I wish to remember.

All of China was on a downhill trajectory at that time, but as a child I didn’t understand the meaning or the cause of it. I knew only that I was hungry and that my mother worked hard to find enough food to feed her children. Every day seemed to be a new struggle just to keep alive. We lived in a village of about two hundred thousand people called Longchuan (Yangji today). Our house was a small hut made of mud, clay, and grass.

We shared our hut with three other families, and there was a small, dark room in the corner of the house where we would all sleep on the dirt floor. I can still clearly remember how my mother, like a mother hen, would prepare a place for her children to sleep on the floor late in the evening.

My mother was often tired from days filled with work and worry. She was extremely undernourished, and her skin barely covered her bony frame. She would give any extra food she had to us instead of eating it herself. I remember being able to see the outline of her body even in the darkness of the room at night as she prepared to lie down.

Even though all of China was suffering, our village stood out as a place that was in a serious state of crisis.

During those years, my mother fought with death every day. I think that she would have warmly greeted death if she hadn't had us children to take care of. She had watched my father go to sleep and never wake up, and she feared the same would happen to us. At one point, my older sister married, so it was just my younger sister and me in the house. I believe that my mother's love for us and her dedica-

tion to provide for and take care of us kept her alive day after day.

Every night, she would lie down beside me and gaze at me as if she were looking at me for the last time. Her voice would break through the silence as she said, "My son, I have taken off my shoes tonight, but when the morning comes, I might not be putting them on again." I knew what she meant. As her son, it hurt to hear her say that. My mind would race with ideas of what my world would be like without my mother. I had already lost my father, and I didn't want to lose her, too. It was too heavy a burden for me to imagine life without her.

"If I die tonight and do not wake in the morning, I want you to run to your sister's house. Do you hear me? I want you to go straight there. Your sister will take care of you," she would say in the still darkness. Those were always the last words I would hear before going to sleep every night. And

that was how I spent my childhood. It was difficult and filled with fear. Even now, as I think of those days, I can still feel the pain.

Even though all of China was suffering, our village stood out as a place that was in a serious state of crisis. Such an unusually high number of people were starving to death there that the Chinese government didn't have any choice but to face reality and finally start to deal with it. The government enacted feeding programs that helped to distribute food among the families in our village.

Even though we now were no longer dying, we were still suffering from hunger and malnutrition. We had very little food and no salt. My mother cut off her hair and sold it in order to buy rice and salt for us. As a result, she became the laughingstock of the entire village. I saw how the people laughed at her and how much shame she bore in her efforts just to feed us, and I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt.

The relationship between a son and his mother is a very special one. With my father gone, I was the only man in the house. Naturally, I wanted to protect my mother and comfort her. When she endured the shame of public humiliation to feed my younger sister and me, I felt responsible for it and in that way carried her burden, too. Her tears were my tears, and her shame was my shame. I felt helpless and ashamed for letting her go through such pain.

Many years later, on October 2, 2005, as I was sitting in a prison cell, I was suddenly overcome by the memory of my mother and all that she had done for me. I needed an outlet to tell her how I felt. Since she was no longer with me, I wrote down the following poem in Chinese:

My Mother,
 You left me on March 4, 2003, at 86 years old.
 I cried beside the bed where you slept,
 I looked at you and my heart ached.
 Your memory plays in my mind like a film:
 It was springtime in 1962,
 The year our nation ached with trouble.
 We had no salt in our cupboards,
 Yet you never neglected the health of your children.

You bought what we needed
with the locks of your own hair.
Finally, my food had taste, but my heart was bleeding.
Passersby turned around to look at you,
Some even mocked you
by calling you the “hairless woman.”
Mother, I never should have eaten that salt,
I never should have let you cut your hair.
Mother, now your children are living much better,
But you are gone.
I wish that I could have kept you around for these years,
So that you could have tasted of the salt
that your son has bought.

Even though we were barely able to find food during those days, my mother fought to find a way for me to go to school. Since my father was gone, it seemed impossible for me to be able to get an education, but she found a way. It is not easy being a single parent, and it is even harder when you are facing a famine due to unconscionable government policies that are killing everyone around you.

**Though we were barely
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My mother did all that she could to send me to school, and although I attended for a time, she eventually arrived at the conclusion that she could no longer find the money needed to do so. She could barely scrape up enough money for us to eat. I really did not want to drop out of school because I knew that if I had any chance at finding a better life, it would have to be through education. My mother had done all that she could, and now I would need to do something.

One day, I thought of a way to raise funds to pay for school. During those days, since food was scarce, people would eat almost any kind of animal. I decided to go out in the fields and find moles to sell to the local

villagers as meat. I had calculated in my head that if I sold fifty moles, I could raise sufficient funds to cover tuition for an entire semester of school. I also developed a crafty way of catching the moles that was quite successful. I was able to keep this lucrative business up for the next four years. Thanks to the moles, I earned enough to pay for my schooling. This kept my mother from having the extra worry of trying to find a way to pay for my education. After four years, however, the moles started to disappear from the Chinese countryside. It seemed that even they were falling victim to China's famine. Without any more moles to catch and sell, I could no longer pay for school and was forced to drop out.

My having to drop out of school was not easy on any of us. I felt that my future was slipping away. I tried to think of another way to pay for my education, but I was out of ideas, and my mother also needed my help at home. As much as I wanted to improve the future for our family, I knew that tomorrow was not certain for any of us. Mere survival took priority over education.

In 2005, I saw some moles in a field and was reminded of those difficult days. Now, whenever I notice moles in the countryside, I feel like waving to them and apologizing for how brutally I had treated their kind. I told myself those many years later that even though I hadn't been able to complete my education, I had to make good use of the investment of money I had put into my schooling by diligently studying the Scriptures in order to save human souls.