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The Public Broadcasting Corporation’s Frontline series has a long tradition of airing documentaries on China. Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon’s prize-winning look at 1989, “The Gate of Heavenly Peace,” was shown as part of the series, for example, as was a later Tiananmen documentary, “The Tank Man.” And thanks to the online extras, from guides to further reading to lesson plans for teachers, the PBS Frontline site has become a valuable resource for those who offer classes or simply want to learn about the PRC. Still, it is rare (probably unprecedented) for two China shows to run back-to-back on Frontline. But that is just what is happening now, as yet another sign that 2008 is no ordinary year where either Chinese events or international fascination with China are concerned. Last week’s “Young and Restless in China,” which was the subject of an earlier China Beat post and has become the latest Frontline show to be supplemented by online classroom-friendly features, is about to be followed by “Jesus in China,” which premieres June 24.

No one at China Beat has seen the show yet. But we did check out the materials available in advance online, which include a “video diary” featuring Chicago Tribune reporter Evans Osnos. So, we decided to pose a few questions by e-mail to the award-winning journalist, who along with his involvement in the film has continued to file reports on the earthquake and other breaking news stories for the Tribune and has also begun to write occasionally for The New Yorker. Here is what he had to say about “Jesus in China” and the general topic of the surge of Christianity in the PRC, which is also the subject of a series he’s doing in print, beginning with this piece published today.

CB: Is this your first experience working on a documentary film?

EO: Yes, if we don’t include—and we shouldn’t—my brief tenure as a student documentary-maker some years ago.

CB: You note in your video diary that one big shift that has taken place since you first went to China is the increased visibility of Christians and the sheer number of them. Do you think of the rise of Christianity mainly as a subset of a larger phenomenon, such as a turn toward spirituality more generally that has also seen an increase in the popularity of other imported and local religions? Or do you see it as something that is completely distinctive?

EO: The rise of Christianity in China is part of a broader spiritual awakening. People are seeking new sources of guidance everywhere, from mystical Taoist sects to the Bahai faith. Among the measures of that, a survey by East China Normal University found that nearly a third of those polled described themselves religious. In particular, the rising middle class seems to be searching for a kind of moral reference as they confront new social and economic choices. One of the interesting things about Chinese Christians is that we don’t yet know what kind of social positions they will endorse: Will the mainstream of Christianity in China be a form of liberal Protestantism familiar in some American churches or will it be closer to the conservative brand that is thriving in the developing world?

CB: What struck you as most exciting or perhaps most daunting about trying to convey ideas about China via involvement in film as opposed to writing on your own for the Chicago Tribune or The New Yorker?

EO: Writing for the Tribune and The New Yorker is a fairly solitary exercise. I tend to spend a lot of time with people I’m profiling, but, otherwise, there are no other journalists in the room. And the process of writing, of course, is one of staring at a blank empty page until a story appears. But this project meant hashing out story ideas and strategy with a team of talented people, and that was terrific. Luckily, Cassandra Herrman, an incredibly talented producer, came to China for a month to
oversee the production for *Frontline/World*. I’ve written two *Tribune* pieces to run alongside the film, and they tell related but separate stories than what we followed with the cameras.

**CB:** When *China Beat* ran a piece on the last *Frontline* episode, about young people in China, we paired discussion of the film with discussion of Duncan Hewitt’s *Getting Rich First*, a book by a journalist that dealt with similar issues. Is there any book or article you’ve come across lately that you think would make particularly appropriate reading to pair with the “Jesus in China”?

**EO:** I recommend several things:
– The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has a [valuable report on China](#), including survey and demographic trends.
– The Council on Foreign Relations last week conducted a day-long seminar on religion in China. Most of the transcripts are available [here](#).
– The CFR also has a useful [backgrounder](#).
– Christian writers have produced a range of books and articles—too many to list—but a frequently-cited text is the updated edition of *Jesus in Beijing*, by David Aikman, which includes a history of the growth of the church.

For *China Beat* readers who would like further information on the history of Christianity in China, we also recommend the following sources:
*Christianity in China*, edited by Daniel Bays
*Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857-1927*, by Ryan Dunch
*The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, by Jonathan Spence
*To Change China: Western Advisors in China*, by Jonathan Spence