Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China

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Much has been written about the complicated relationship between Christianity and imperialism in China, both from the Marxist and revisionist perspectives. The debate about the role of Christianity in modern China used to be shaped by plenty of polemics and ideological assumptions, such as the theory of challenge-response, anti-imperialism, and religious antagonism. The more we know about the temporal and spatial variations of Christian missionary movements, the less accurate these generalizations appear to be.

To date, two divergent approaches still characterize both scholarly and popular literature: the missionary advocacy of "Three-Self" movement (*Sanzhi yundong* 三自運動) and the study of anti-Christian violence. First, the term "Three-Self" (*Sanzi* 三自) was originally proposed by two Anglo-American missionary strategists in the nineteenth century, Rufus Anderson (1796–1880) of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and Henry Venn (1796–1873) of the Anglican Church Missionary Society. The conceptual emphasis was laid on church plantation, which was to coordinate groups of native Christian believers into self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches. In principle, it advocated that foreign missionaries learn to be advisors rather than commanders, and Chinese ministers and local church leaders work independently, without missionary protection and support. More important were institutional changes in church property ownership, congregational governance, and ecclesiastical leadership. The actual practices of implementing this principle differed from place to place and from denomination to denomination. The debate about the structure of a "Three-Self church" even became an important topic of discussion during the 1920s and 1930s, as shown in numerous articles in the *Chinese Recorder* and other Protestant church periodicals.

The second approach focuses on the origins of anti-Christian violence, widely known as "scholarly research on religious cases" (*jiao'an yanjiu* 教案研究). This methodological approach dominated the post-1949 Chinese Communist historiography. From the early 1950s

onwards, the Chinese Communist authorities had skillfully manipulated the "Three-Self" slogan to "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" (*Sanzi aiguo yundong* 三自愛國運動) in order to legitimatize the socialist state's takeover of former Western missionary properties and Chinese church institutions. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the study of Christianity in Mainland China was more subordinate to state politics and ideology than it is nowadays. The compilations of many published and unpublished oral materials about Christian activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries manifested a clear political agenda. Because the oral materials were presented in Marxist-Maoist terms, there was a tendency to interpret the history of Christianity within the rigid framework of cultural imperialism, thereby portraying missionaries as foreign aggressors, Chinese Christians as collaborators of Western imperialists, and anti-Christian violence as patriotic struggle. Despite the ideological biases, the oral materials collected by Communist historians in the 1950s contain much valuable information about the location of Christian villages, their settlement histories and ongoing tensions with the non-Christian society at large. From the 1980s onwards, social historians have used these materials to reinterpret the outbreak of anti-Christian violence from a grassroots perspective, and their findings have thrown light on the ongoing resource competition prior to the arrival of Christianity, raising questions about the credibility of the dominant Chinese Communist historiography.[1]

Throughout the Maoist era (1949–1976), Mainland Chinese scholars were completely cut off from historical scholarship abroad. At that time, there was a paradigmatic shift of research focus in the Western historiography from the attitudes of foreign missionaries and Chinese literati to the faith experience of ordinary Christians. Scholars have regarded Chinese Christians as what historian Daniel H. Bays calls "integrated parts of the local community," and their interaction with non-Christians as subject to the changing local circumstances, pre-existing power relations, and longstanding cultural values and cus-

[1] R. G. Tiedemann, "Protestant 'Missionary Cases' (jiao'an) in Shandong Province, 1860–1900," *Ching Feng* 8, no. 1–2 (2007): 153–159; and Joseph Tse-hei Lee, "The Church as a Protector: Anti-Christian Cases and Resource Disputes in Post-Boxer Chaozhou," *The Chinese Historical Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 33–53. See also the case studies of anti-Christian violence in Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in Modern China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

tomary norms.[2] These recent studies have called for more attention to the diverse linkages between Christianity and Chinese society, and the incremental transformation of the gospel from a foreign belief system into an indigenous faith.[3]

Against the backdrop of changing perspectives, Ambrose Mong revisits the historical trajectory of Protestant Christianity in China. Composed of eleven lucid chapters, *Guns and Gospel* is a fine synthesis that investigates the symbiosis between Christianization and Western imperialism. It examines the fast-changing relations between Protestant missionaries and Chinese converts, and the growing antagonism towards Protestant missionary enterprises in the midst of wars and revolutions. The brief introduction looks at the presupposition that Western missionaries often supported the colonial project of empire-building in all times and places. The subsequent chapters, however, challenge us to consider the ways in which missionaries and converts frequently co-opted imperialist resources perceived as beneficial to the goal of evangelization, and in which they rejected certain aspects of imperialism perceived as being in conflict with their faith and carved out new institutions to challenge the old Christendom.

The first two chapters lay out the historical context of Protestant missionary expansion into China. Operating along the Chinese coastal peripheries, most nineteenth-century missionaries translated the Bible, founded schools and churches, and recruited converts from all walks of life. This became a model of active evangelization after the Opium War.

Chapter three reviews the legacy of the Taiping Uprising (1850–1864) and the Boxer Rebellion (1898–1900). While Anglo-American missionaries stressed individual salvation from sin, the Taiping leader Hong Xiuquan was concerned with the national salvation of China. When he first saw the translated term *Shangdi* 上帝 (the Supreme God of ancient China) in the Old and New Testament, he thought of the ancient concept of *Shangdi* and decided to restore a theocratic system that honored *Shangdi* against the Confucian ideology. Yet, the scale of the Taiping iconoclasm surprised the missionaries. Smashing idols and opposing blasphemous rulers were two sides of the same coin in the Taiping crusade. After the Heavenly Kingdom fell in 1864, missionar-

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[2] Daniel H. Bays, "Christianity and Dynamics of Qing Society," in Bays, *Christianity in Modern China*, 3–7.

[3] Anthony E. Clark, ed., *China's Christianity: From Missionary to Indigenous Church* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2017).

ies refused to acknowledge Hong's attempt to integrate Christianity with Chinese culture. Instead, they associated Christianity with the military power of the West. Their obsession with guns and gospel betrayed Hong's initial efforts to transform Christianity into a force of liberation. Because the missionaries and Taiping rebels failed to articulate a sound theology that would accommodate Christianity with the local social and cultural norms, many Chinese still viewed the gospel with distrust and suspicion.[4] Several decades later, the Christians in northern China were brutally attacked by the Boxers due to some longstanding resource conflicts.

The next four chapters evaluate the evangelistic visions and strategies of several prominent missionaries including Robert Morrison (1782–1834), Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851), James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), and Timothy Richard (1845–1919). Despite his religious fever, Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, closely associated himself with the opium merchants in Macau and "became an unwilling tool of British imperialism."[5] By comparison, Karl Gützlaff was known for his evangelistic innovations. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, Gützlaff embraced the printing press to overcome any linguistic and geographical barriers. He also recruited a group of diasporic evangelists and sent them to preach in coastal China. Similarly, James Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission and took the idea of indigenization to new heights. Instead of concentrating on evangelization and church plantation, Timothy Richard partnered with Chinese imperial officials and assisted the Qing court in modernizing local disaster relief efforts and railroad networks.

Chapter eight refers to the colorful story of Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973). As a mission kid, Buck was born and grew up in China. Because of her intimate ties with Chinese mission staff and domestic servants, she became critical of the missionary enterprises and broke away from the church circles. After relocating to the US, she published numerous novels on China in the 1930s, and emerged as a public intellectual who commented on broader US-China relations. The conclusion is the most insightful chapter of the book, exploring the disappearance of missionary Christianity and the incremental growth of native churches that are now deeply rooted in Chinese soil.

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[4] Mong, *Guns and Gospel*, 60.

[5] Ibid., 79.

By outlining the Chinese mission history, Mong draws attention to both global and local forces that influenced the passions, visions, and actions of different Protestant missions, the missionaries' perception of China as "the Other," and the dissemination of Christianity in a Chinese context. Although Mong breaks little new grounds in empirical and conceptual findings, he substantiates the observations of R. G. Tiedemann, Daniel H. Bays, Kathleen Lodwick, and Lian Xi.[6] First is the regionally diversified pattern of evangelization. After all, the missionaries and local Chinese seldom interacted in a vacuum. Their encounters were affected by a web of human relations that had predated the arrival of missionaries. Mong shows us a complicated picture of evangelistic adjustments and constant negotiations between both sides. The personalities of missionary pioneers, their evangelistic visions and strategies, and their links with secular authorities often shaped the reception of the gospel at the local level.

Equally important is the role of multiple agents in the course of Sino-Christian encounters. As I argue elsewhere, the missionaries, local believers, and anti-Christian opponents constantly engaged with one another in intra- and inter-communal disputes.[7] Even though some Chinese church leaders opposed the Anglo-American expansionist sentiment, ordinary worshippers purposefully appropriated the system of treaty protection to empower themselves in local resource conflicts. This pattern of social behaviors rejects the teleological determinism connected with the discourse of Western imperialism in the Chinese historiography.

Third, as the West established a formal empire in Asia in the nineteenth century, many missionary societies evolved from Henry Venn's three-self model to a more authoritarian, top-down, and rigid "trustee" model of evangelization that emphasized missionaries' control over native churches. Although such colonialist mentality became widespread in the China mission field during the heyday of imperialism, Henry Venn's "three-self" idea did not completely fade away. The Chinese Christians were far more indigenous than has been acknowl-

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[6] R. G. Tiedemann, ed., *Handbook of Christianity* in *China*, vol. 2, *1800–Present* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009); Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Kathleen L. Lodwick, *How Christianity Came to China: A Brief History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016); and Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[7] Joseph Tse-hei Lee, *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

edged in the scholarly literature. The early converts took the initiative to propagate the gospel with their extended family members, peers, neighbors, and friends. Despite occasional setbacks and disappointments, the missionaries relied on these native evangelists to found churches. Through their commitment and sacrifices, Christianity enrooted itself in the Chinese society. Therefore, the localization of Christianity was an important way for Chinese congregants to actualize their faith, to reconcile the gospel with the pre-existing cultures and values, and to make Christianity responsive to their immediate crises.

Methodologically, Mong is correct to problematize the tensions between guns and gospel in China. His critique, however, remains largely an abstract study of Western imperialism and Christianization at the intellectual and political levels. His assessment would have been more informative if he had consulted the latest regional studies of Christian missionary movements as well as the diverse patterns of Sino-Christian encounters in coastal, inland, and frontier regions.

Another challenge concerns Mong's study of missionaries' writings. Mong refers to certain primary sources and secondary literature rather than the archives of specific Christian missionary societies to construct his arguments. When the missionaries wrote for the Western audience at home for fund-raising and publicity purposes, they sensationalized their experiences and criticized Chinese religions. The missionaries' background, education, and perspective determined not only what they noticed and looked at, but also the way they narrated what they had seen. For example, the missionary literature often portrayed the Chinese as a homogeneous and idolatrous group of pagans, waiting to be saved and civilized by the gospel. This prejudice fed the missionaries' belief in the Christian eschatology, according to which all heathens were destined for hell unless they were converted to Christianity. In turn, this worldview created a sense of urgency among the missionaries that the business of saving souls should be of prime importance. While consulting the missionary materials, one should bear in mind the contradictions of public and private opinions in their writings. Critical comments made by missionaries in public differed from their opinions expressed in private correspondence and diaries. That is true for missionaries of different age groups and genders within the same denomination. It is, therefore, necessary to compare the remarks made by the missionaries at different stages of their career.

Notwithstanding these minor interpretative issues, non-specialist readers will benefit from this tightly written critique of the Protestant missionary expansion into China. *Guns and Gospel* is an essential

reading for anyone interested in Chinese Christianity, interreligious dialogues, and cross-cultural engagements.

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