

# THE BACKGROUND OF ANTI-CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT OF THE CHINESE INTELLECTUALS IN THE LATE MANCHU DYNASTY

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## INTRODUCTION

The Nestorian Tablet revealed the earliest date of the coming of Christianity to China. The arrival of Jesuits headed by Matteo Ricci at the late Ming Dynasty initiated the formal contact between Christianity and the Chinese, and the establishment of the Church in China. Although the Church was suppressed at the beginning of the Manchu Dynasty, one hundred years later after the Opium War (1839-1842), the Chinese government allowed the Christians to resume their activities in the Five Port Cities.<sup>1</sup> Since the establishment of the Chinese Church in 17th century, there were numerous difficulties and hardships. Anti-Christian sentiment began with the arrival of Matteo Ricci in Beijing. Then the situation became less tense as Christianity was reduced to silence. But after the Opium War, the signing of the Sino-Anglo Peking treaty and Sino-French Treaty of Tientsin (1860), the anti-Christian movement spread widely. Anti-Christian incidents (教案) continued in various forms in every province, resulting in conflicts between the Chinese and the foreigners. Since the ultimate purpose of the

Church is to spread the Gospel of Christ and she teaches the doctrine of love, what brought about all these conflicts? This short essay is an attempt to understand the background and the reasons for such friction.

There were two basic reasons leading to the anti-Christian feelings in the late Manchu period (1840-1910). First of all, the excessive teaching of self-respect and self-worship in Confucianism made the Chinese intellectuals despise Christianity and finally reject it. This was also a point articulated by the anti-Christian gentry since the late Ming period. The second reason focused on the nature of missionary work which after the Opium War had been interwoven with Western politics and military power. Inevitably, the mission of the Church had been depicted as aggressive. After 1849 these sentiments appeared in all anti-Christian writings.

#### BACKGROUND I - The unwavering conservatism of the gentry towards Confucian tradition

Beginning in the Han and Tang Dynasty (206 B.C.-683 A.D.) traditional Confucianism held a pre-eminent position in the hearts of the Chinese intellectuals who considered all religions and morality to be incomparably inferior to their Confucian beliefs. The practice of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and possession of the feeling of the sense of shame were the most noble and perfect level of morality. The other 'Hundred Schools of Ideologies' were regarded as heresy and half truths. Since Confucianism was considered to be the orthodox doctrine in all schools of philosophy, it was to be revered and learned by every human being under the sun. Gradually the Chinese intellectuals assumed a self-imposed duty to preserve and to propagate Confucianism. Indeed, some broad-minded Chinese gentry such Xu Guang-qi (徐光啓) and Li Zhi-zao (李之藻), while holding a respectful attitude towards Confucian cult never despised Western technology, Western learning and religion. Yet Xu and Li were an insignificant minority, while the rest of the Chinese gentry were egocentric and ultraconservative. They had an exaggerated sense of self-esteem and self-respect. They relentlessly and contemptuously criticised or looked down upon every-

thing related to the West. The following quotation illustrates their mentality when asked to be compared with foreigners.

"The difference between Chinese and barbarians is equivalent to the difference between a man and a beast."

This mentality could be traced back to the oral tradition of Chinese history of Pre-Zhou Dynasty proceeding to the era of Confucius and Mencius, during which time it became a basic tenet of proud Chinese who looked upon all foreigners living outside the middle kingdom with contempt. Hence the concept of "sinicizing all the barbarians who enter the Middle Kingdom of China" was prevalent and the gentry never tolerated the westernization of the Chinese by the foreigners. The Chinese consistently revered the orthodox teaching of Confucius and Mencius doctrines while rejecting any foreign influences.

Mencius once remarked that human beings have the feelings of compassion, shame and dislike, modesty and complaisance, but mostly Mencius valued the feeling of approval and disapproval. All these feelings are the essence of human nature, but human beings are burdened by the negative aspect of their nature such as selfishness, greed and cruelty. A person of perfect character could curb the growth of the negative elements within human nature, and develop the positive aspect through the assistance of ritual, music and discipline. This could be realized within the framework of the five relationships among people (father-son, emperor-official, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife and friends) and the three relationships in nature, (heaven, earth and man). While striving for perfection, individuals must work to rectify the mind, to cultivate the person, to regulate the family, to govern the state, and ultimately bring about a peaceful and happy kingdom. Therefore it is natural to have an established order of seniority and responsibility among emperor and official, father and son, husband and wife, brothers and friends. The vitality of the family and the nation is based upon filial friendship and loyalty. Disobedience to one's superior was regarded as a lack of loyalty, refusal to worship the ancestors was an infraction of filial fidelity. If one conceptually neglected the

ancestors, such a person was described by Mencius "to be akin to beasts".

The above criteria were used by the gentry who blindly and stubbornly suppressed any foreign practise but preserved the traditional Confucian cult. With the arrival of Matteo Ricci, the Chinese gentry, wishing to defend their own culture, manifested their feelings by despising the Jesuit missionary. In the second chapter of "Breaking the Heresy" an official of Fujian Marine Department, Shi Bang Yao (施邦曜) remarked in his gazette:

"After carefully reading their book, I discovered that they observe the doctrine of Catholicism and witnessed their way of pointing to heaven and hell as their final destination. Then everything on earth was despised except God who was regarded as the supreme being. At the funeral of one's parents, the mourning ceremony and the memoration of the death was not observed. This kind of behaviour reflects the commentary of Mencius upon those who rejected tradition, did not respect superiors and ultimately degenerate into animals. It is easy to figure out that they are heretics who entice our people...

I attempted to ask Huang Shang Ai (黃尚愛) and others about the reasons for their belief. They said 'After the age of Confucius, people had no way to imitate him. With the coming of Catholicism, the faithful were encouraged to seek perfection and remain close to our parents in their final hours, and to commemorate them after death. Confucius also taught us to serve our parents properly during their lifetime, bury them with proper rite and offer them proper sacrifice. How could one who does not mourn over the death of parents and neglect the burial ritual, still be considered a follower of Confucius? Moreover, the Christians tried hard to denounce ancestor worship, and taught that the believers of God would be born again after death. If this is so, then the sacrifices offered to ancestors in Spring and Autumn are unacceptable. This is employing heresy to confuse the orthodox. Isn't such a person sinning against Confucian

morality and the hierarchy of values? The Christians have reduced human order to that of beasts, and eventually they might lead the barbarians to cause great confusion in China. Isn't it time to worry about them?"<sup>2</sup>

The Catholic Church established by Matteo Ricci had gone through numerous persecutions and hardships. Ricci himself changed his monk's garb for a scholarly robe, and tried to study in detail the Chinese Classics as a means to make friends with the upper classes, such as officials, scholars, the nobility and gentry. Only after going through numerous debates and explanations, Ricci began to sow the seeds of the Catholic faith. Due to the conflict with Confucianism, six years after the death of Ricci, an official of the ministry of Rites, Shen Que (沈樞) instigated a severe attack on the Chinese Catholic Church. In this persecution, Fr. Alphonse Vagnoni, Fr. Alvare de Semedo and other missionaries together with some twenty Catholics were arrested. It was the first incident of a religious conflict which took place in Nanjing (南京教案). The primary reason for this persecution could be traced back to the time of Matteo Ricci who rendered the Buddhist high priests speechless in debates over Christian doctrines. This fact widened the gulf between the Buddhist and the Catholic Church, because Shen Kuo himself was a pious Buddhist.

The incident of religious conflict involving the director of the royal observatory (欽天監教案) was brought about by Yang Guang Xian (楊光先) in 1659. After this incident, other anti-Christian sayings surfaced successively. "Breaking the Heresy" and "Inevitability" were typical examples. In "Breaking the Heresy", Yang said:

"Heaven (Tian) is formulated by the sky and the air, and it is not created. If there is a God who exists among the universe and dominates every creature, then he will never allow himself to be merely the ruler of Judea alone. If he rules only one nation he could not be called the son of heaven. If he is called God, then every creature of the universe, every nation on earth

should be dominated by him. When he was incarnated as man for thirty three years, during this period of his absence from heaven, who was his substitute? During the period that the ruler of heaven and earth was absent, the heavenly bodies would not move, the earth would not produce grain and animals, and people would not function according to their nature. If God wished to save Adam, why was he not incarnated at the beginning of the creation, instead of waiting until the Han Dynasty?"<sup>3</sup>

The argument applied by Yang in his anti-Christian sayings were all derived from Christian doctrine. Although his shallow understanding of Christianity led to a misinterpretation of Christian doctrines, nevertheless these misconceptions in later days became the basic arguments of the Chinese gentry in their anti-Christian movement.

#### BACKGROUND II - The relationship between political invaders and Christianity

The Opium War (1839-1842) was the result of the British expansion of trade after the Industrial Revolution. Through the sale of opium, the British focused on China as the target of an economic invasion which eventually led to the reluctant opening of the Chinese door, previously closed to foreigners for more than two thousand years. The defeat of the Chinese in the Opium War resulted in the signing of the Nanjing Treaty (1842), the first in a series of unequal treaties.

The Nanjing Treaty had nothing to do with missionaries but indirectly it engendered a similar expansionary spirit in France and America. The Treaty of Wang Xia ( 望廈條約 ) was signed by China and the United States in 1842 and the Sino-French Huang Pu Treaty ( 黃埔條約 ) was signed in 1844. In these two treaties, the French and Americans could enjoy the privileges which the British had wrested from the Chinese. Not least, missionaries from these expanding European powers could call upon protection from their respective governments while evangelization was carried out in the five port cities. Perhaps the original hope

was to accelerate evangelization while protecting missionaries and the faithful, but unwittingly this alliance of spiritual and temporal entities manifested an image of a church which was yet another institution supported by foreign governments. Dr. Warshimo , a scholar in Chinese affairs, made this perceptive criticism:

"From a legal point of view it is true that the foreigners could only interfere as a protector of the faith, but the unhappy result is that the Chinese faithful were separated from the majority, making the Christian community a minute independent kingdom under foreign surveillance.

This phenomenon is so evident that the Chinese officials imprudently made a very clear distinction between Christian Chinese and non-Christian Chinese. The unequal treaties containing clauses on religious freedom dealt a heavy blow to the independent sovereignty of China and deeply hurt the feelings of the Chinese. In actual practice the treaties removed the Chinese Christians from the sovereignty of their motherland, thus linking them with the intrusive presence of outsiders. By taking advantage of the treaties formulated in gunboat diplomacy, the Gospel which foreigners wish to preach was tainted and their God had to be misunderstood".<sup>4</sup>

The above analysis is indeed very appropriate for the age. The Church was eager to gain a legal footing in China at the time when Europe was carrying out spheres of influence in that vast nation. In the political and military arena there was an effort to gain territory; in the cultural and religious arena, missionaries went forth to evangelize and preach the Kingdom of God. Mission and unequal treaties were intertwined by historical circumstances and had to be considered as a display of cultural arrogance. This haughtiness is tersely worded by Rudyard Kipling as "the whiteman's burden". Operating within such a mentality, the Christianity brought to China from the West quite naturally became an accomplice of the invading imperialists.

In the last years of Emperor Xian Feng , legions of the British and French invaded the capital forcing the Emperor to flee to Rehe and ultimately to sign the treaties of Tianjin

(1857) and Beijing(1860).

In the reign of Emperor Tong Zhi (1862), Huang Bing She ( 王炳燮 ) analyzed the treaties and concluded that the foreigners wanted to seize Chinese riches through commerce and sought to win the hearts of the Chinese through the missionaries. Huang buttressed his argument by illustrating how other nearby Asian nations suffered from foreign invasion.

"The British and French utilized missionaries to encroach upon the peoples of other nations. They tried in Java, then again in the Philippines and India, and also many times in Japan."<sup>5</sup>

In the gazette of Hunan province, a similar attitude and trend of thought was evident: "When Christianity flourished in Africa, the people of the Dark Continent were being slaughtered. When missionaries came to India, India was devoured. In Japan, the nation was turned upside down by Christianity. In China, the barbarians coveted our natural resources which were a thousand times more plentiful than their own. Their motive for coming is as clear as crystal. If we are not careful enough, we shall turn a thousand year old nation of rites and culture into a den of barbarians."<sup>6</sup>

In the next thirty to forty years there was no sign of abatement in the anti-Christian misconceptions held by the gentry scholars. On the contrary, the incidents of anti-Christian activity increased to an extent never witnessed before. Prior to this period (1821-1861) the anti-Christian sentiment was already there but because it coincided with the Taiping and Nien Rebellions, the government met with defeats at the hands of foreigners and had to cope with numerous local riots. These events caused the gentry to shift their animosity away from the missionaries on to the government. During the Tong Zhi and Kuang Xu periods (1862-1908), the Ching government admitted her inferiority in many things and advocated self-strengthening reform by "using Western devices to defend Chinese civilisation". This period saw comparative tranquility. After more than twenty years of insurrection at the local level, the gentry scholars



continued to vent their anger and dissatisfaction on westerners who formulated the series of unequal treaties. During this period, the conflict between missionaries and the gentry reached the apex. The gentry sensed that Christianity was superior to Confucianism. Moreover, the arrogance of foreign officials, the malpractices between merchants and missionaries all tended to worsen relationships.

In the reign of emperor Guang Xu (1875-1908), the advocates of the anti-Christian movement stressed the fact that missionaries were heralds of the western invaders in China. In the later years of Emperor Guang Xu, members of gentry such as Zhou Han (周漢) and Yu Dong Chen (余棟臣) were representatives of this thought. In "Sky Supporting Pillar" Zhou wrote: "The emperor, officials and people of all walks of life in the islands who have some knowledge of morality and culture would never believe in the Pig religion and worship the demon of a Pig... the foreigners desire to encroach upon the territory of their neighbours and to collude with the hidden traitors. There were numerous examples to prove how small islands nearby were annexed by foreigners using these schemes. Based upon our research in books and interviews with visitors we have obtained facts which firm up our argument. It is indeed very dangerous for these sinister barbarians to plot intrigue under the guise of mission work, because they seek not only to poison our people but also plot against the Manchu Dynasty."<sup>7</sup>

Yu Dong Chen writes: "Now the foreigners have appeared on the coast and forced us to trade with them. They evangelized in the name of Jesus, have snatched away the livelihood of the farmers and have abandoned the social order and relationships set down by our Great Sage. They have poisoned us with opium and degraded our hearts with prostitutes and other schemes. Since the era of Emperor Dao-Guang, their influence has been expanding and their nature becoming more inhumane."<sup>8</sup>

Under these circumstances all Christians have become the uncompromising enemies of the Chinese gentry, peasants and intellectuals. The Taiping Rebellion (1851-1868) which caused great turmoil in China was linked with the religious terms of God and Jesus Christ, thus confirming the suspicion that Christianity

was political and expansive in nature. This was one of the reasons why Prince Gong opposed evangelizing activities of the Catholic Church in the capital and other areas in the 8th year of the reign of Emperor Xian Feng.<sup>9</sup>

The gentry of Hengyang and Qingchuan in Hunan Province (衡陽及清泉) wrote a petition requesting that the government drive out the Catholic Church. The letter stated "The hairy bandits have made use of the name of Jesus to foment a revolution which has spread throughout Guangdong, Fujian, Guangxi, Sichuan, Jiangsu, Hubei, Anhui, Hunan, Shandong and Shenxi Provinces, , doing damage in half of China's territories and is now becoming an uncontrollable situation.

Every one was annoyed with the riot in September of 1860. Following this disturbance, the rebellious barbarians became more audacious by plotting intrigue, causing widespread unrest and instability. We do not know how far they will go".<sup>10</sup>

In Wuxi and Jinhui (無錫，金匱) of Jiangsu Province, the academies of Confucian studies were destroyed during the Taiping Rebellion. When peaceful conditions permitted, the gentry scholars worked for the reconstruction of the schools. One tablet depicts the destruction: "Since ancient times, (unwanted) changes were caused by the lack of virtue, such as the bandits in Guangdong Province who falsely called themselves sons of the heavenly father, loosely relating themselves to Western Catholicism. Now that the insurrection has been pacified, Catholicism still flourishes in China to deceive the people."<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Frankly speaking, it cannot be denied that the Christian Churches in the late Manchu Dynasty had been to a degree, related to politics. This fact can be traced to the Western thinkers of the 19th century and also because the missionaries (Catholic and Protestant alike) the majority were imbued with the spirit of the Gospel and worked silently and a-politically in God's vineyard in China. Despite the anti-Christian movement which jeopardized their lives they continued to go forth to China with zeal. To co-ordinate the evangelization, schools were opened, books were translated and publications were printed as means to spread the

western civilization. The issue of human rights was precociously brought to Chinese soil as a catalyst to the growth of political change. In addition to these positive contributions, missionaries urged the banning of opium and foot-binding. Missionaries made efforts to elevate the status of women and alter the morals of Chinese society. Due to the different mentalities existing between the East and the West, these changes were too drastic for the time. After careful research and studies of the period, contemporary religious scholars and philosophers concluded that the conflict was not so intense and vehement. Following a thorough study of the anti-Christian sayings it was discovered they emanated from a narrow nationalism and emotional impulses. Basically it was the Confucian mind-set of the Chinese gentry and intellectuals which blocked the channel of a possible dialogue and led to an unnecessary misunderstanding. From another viewpoint, patriotic intellectuals witnessed the extent to which Christianity penetrated into the hinterland aided by the military power of foreigners. These Chinese observers also came to know how Asian and African nations became colonies of Western Christian countries. As the colonizers professed faith in Jesus Christ, the unhappy alliance between evangelization and expansionism was also evident in China. Is there any mystery why the Chinese were skeptical of the motivation of Western missionaries?

In conclusion, it can be safely assumed that the problems between the Chinese intellectuals and Western expansionism witnessed in the 19th century will not be repeated. In the 20th century the preoccupations of Chinese intellectuals are not those of former generations and international diplomacy will not allow another age of exploitation. Apart from these foregoing surmountable problems, what other obstacles might exist between the Chinese Christians and the West?

#### FOOT NOTES:-

<sup>1</sup>The five port cities are: Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Ningbo and Shanghai.

<sup>2</sup>See 徐昌治訂《聖朝破邪案》Vol. II.

<sup>3</sup>See《辟邪紀實》.

<sup>4</sup>See 呂實強：《中國官紳反教原因》。

<sup>5</sup>See 王炳燮“上湘鄉曾侯相書”，《毋自欺言文集》。

<sup>6</sup>“江西教務” Vol. I 《教務檔》 edited by Chinese modern History Research Centre, Beijing.

<sup>7</sup>See “湖南教務”——《教務檔》in which an official letter from the German ambassador is attached. (1838)

<sup>8</sup>See 余棟臣：“四川大足縣志” Vol. V.

<sup>9</sup>In《國朝表遠記》Vol VIII. It states: "Recently in coastal areas people were enchanted by Catholicism as the rebels in Gangdong made use of Jesus Christ to win over the people. The capital is the area of primary goodness. If people there were influenced by the Christians, then it means overthrowing a nation of rites, music and culture in exchange for a generation of beasts."

<sup>10</sup>See《辟邪紀實》。

<sup>11</sup>See “浙江教務”《教務檔》in which a letter from the French ambassador is attached. (1826)

BILIOGRAPHY Cf. p. 30