Christian Missions in 18th Century China: Book Review

by William Dockery

Christian Missions and Their Impact to 1900 by Paul A. Cohen in The Cambridge History of China (General Editors Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank) Volume 10, Late Qing 1800-1911, Part I (edited by John K. Fairbank) Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 543-590.

I

Much has been written on missionary activities in China in the nineteenth century. Depending on what one reads, one could get either the picture of a group of noble, dedicated evangelists who bravely faced a host of perils in their efforts to bring Christianity to China, or a band of cultural imperialists determined to take control of the Chinese mind as their compatriots were attempting to dominate the Chinese economy.

This review-article will not choose between these two improbable alternatives. Rather an attempt will be made to assess the effect that missionaries had upon China in the nineteenth century, leaving aside, for the most part, the motivations of the various Christian missionaries.

The vehicle for accomplishing this will be Paul Cohen's chapter entitled "Christian Missions and their Impact to 1900" contained in Volume 10 of "The Cambridge History of China".

Apart from shedding some light on the history of Christianity in China in the nineteenth century, it is hoped that this article will also serve to introduce readers of Tripod to the work of Paul Cohen and The Cambridge History of China. With the publication of China and Christianity (Harvard University Press, 1963), Paul Cohen, Professor of History at Wellesley College (U.S.A.) established himself as the leading academic authority on Christian missions in China in the nineteenth century. Cohen was one of a group of John King Fairbank's students at Harvard University after World War II who became leaders in the field of Chinese history in the West. Others included Mary Wright, Joseph Levenson and Immanuel C.Y. Hsu.

Even if Cohen were not already the acknowledged authority in this field, the inclusion of his essay in one of the late Qing volumes of The Cambridge History of China would give his work a status of great importance. In 1966, when this project was first envisioned six volumes were contemplated;now that number has increased to 14. (Not all volumes have been published to date). This, as Fairbank notes in the introduction to Volume 10, reflects the tremendous increase in Western scholarly activity concerning China in the past few decades.

It will be a marvellous reference for decades to come. It is thorough - there are two 600 page volumes on the late Qing (1800-1911) alone. It ranges widely, not confining itself to the fields of diplomatic and political history, as many other histories of China have done, but also includes social and intellectual history as well. It follows the general pattern of Cambridge Histories in that individual scholars contribute separate chapters to a single volume, in contrast to the Oxford Histories in which each volume in a series is the work of a single author. Contributors to Volume 10 include such noted historians as John K. Fairbank, Philip Kuhn, Frederic Wakeman, Liu Kwang-ching and Kuo Ting-yee.

There is one regrettable feature of this series. The editors decided, somewhat reluctantly, in 1976 to continue using the Wade-Giles romanization, even though they recognized the pin-yin system to be the superior one. Their reason was that at that date all English language works on Chinese history (outside of the few being published in the Peoples Republic at the time) were using the Wade-Giles system. Now of

course the pin-yin system is widely used. Readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Wade-Giles system may have some difficulty. Outweighing this disadvantage, however, is a complete glossary of Chinese characters at the end of the volume. This will be of help to those Chinese readers unfamiliar with any romanization system and to those students of Chinese language who wish to learn additional characters.

The length of The Cambridge History of China renders it a reference work, rather than something that can be digested whole. Also, the high price of each volume (around $500 HK) makes it far more likely to be found in a library than in one's personal collection.

II

Cohen begins his chapter by giving an account of the missionary activity in China before 1800. He very artfully interrelates developments in China and Europe to give a brief history of the rise and fall of Christian missionary activity in China before the nineteenth century.

Readers of Tripod will be familiar with the work of the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who with his colleagues achieved a fair amount of success in converting Chinese to Catholicism. Cohen estimates that by 1700 there were 300,000 Catholics in China.

The eighteenth century, however, was not a good era for Christianity in China. Various issues, the most famous being the Rites Controversy (the dispute over ancestor "worship"), exasperated the Qing government and led to the Yongzheng Emperor's proscription of Christianity in 1724. Christianity, though not extinguished, was driven underground. It was also relegated to the category of heterodoxy (xie or zuodao) as opposed to orthodoxy (zhengdao), generally taken to be Song Neo-Confucianism. An association of Christianity with illegality or even immorality was formed in the minds of many Chinese. This association was to have a great impact on later Christian efforts in China.

The Chinese opposition to Christianity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was on both philosophical and political grounds. Many late Ming scholars contributed to the Poxieji ("A Collection of Writings Exposing Heterodoxy"), attacking Christianity from the point of view of Buddhism, Taoism and scepticism. The Chinese government was more concerned with its political impact. (This has usually been the case in China; the government would move against heterodoxy only when it perceived it to be a threat to the political order.) The Qing feared that

Christian missionaries and their converts might upset the social order and promote disunity in China. The Tokugawa government in Japan banned Christianity for similar reasons in the early seventeenth century.

In addition, developments in Europe during the eighteenth century hindered the missionary effort in China. Spain and Portugal, the two countries which had been in the forefront of the missionary activity, declined precipitously in wealth and power; the French Enlightenment spread anti-clericalism throughout Europe; in 1773 the Pope dissolved the Jesuit order; and, finally, the French Revolution and the ensuing wars led Europeans to neglect the outside world.

By the time peace was restored in 1815, many of these developments had been reversed - Europe, or at least its ruling elites, was in a conservative mood and religion was more in favour. French Catholics had formed the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in 1822. New forces were also at work. The most significant was the entry of Protestant nations into the mission field. Hitherto, Protestant churches had mainly concentrated their efforts on domestic activities; but the Great Awakening in America and the Evangelistic Revival in Great Britain in the previous century had stirred up a resolve among religious people to spread the Gospel.

Also, the increasing wealth of Europe made it possible to support religious efforts in far-off lands and improving technology made it possible to reach these lands relatively quickly and safely. Western Europe, which had been a dynamic area since 1500, was on the threshold of an age when it would dominate the world.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century European and American missionaries ventured out to China full of confidence. Unfortunately, few possessed the sophistication and tolerance of their Jesuit predecessors. They were often accompanied by merchants and diplomats, whose motives in coming to China were quite different from their own. This difference was often not perceived by those towards whom their mission was directed.

III

At this time in China, of course, little had changed in regard to Christianity. The religion was still proscribed and missionary activity was limited to Macau and the area around Guangzhou, whose authorities seem not to have been too zealous in enforcing the ban.

The period before 1842 was one of preparation and foundation-laying. When the door to China was finally opened (if only in part) the British, French and American missionaries were ready and anxious to move. So great was their enthusiasm that few, if any, paused to reflect upon the circumstances of their entry.

The right of missionaries to preach and reside in five Chinese coastal cities was secured by the Treaty of Nanjing signed by Great Britain and China in 1842 at the end of the Opium War. The same treaty also included the cession of Hong Kong, an indemnity to Britain, and several concessions desired by the British merchants trading with China. It cannot be denied that the British victory in the Opium War facilitated the missionaries' entry into China; Christianity in China has been troubled by this link ever since.

Cohen focuses his efforts not upon the intentions of the foreign missionaries in China but upon their impact on Chinese society. Given the unfavourable opinion of Christianity held by many Chinese literati and its association with foreign imperialism, it is not surprising that the missionaries encountered difficulties in their initial efforts. Their problems were soon to be compounded by the Taiping Rebellion which began in Guangxi in 1851.

Its leader, Hong Xiuquan, a failed imperial examination candidate who had had some exposure to missionaries in Guangzhou, imagined himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ and advocated a religion with some resemblance to Christianity. Most missionaries in China regarded it as blasphemous. Some Chinese, however, saw it as yet further proof that Christianity was evil. In the 1850's Zeng Guofan and other scholars led a campaign to suppress the rebellion which had spread into central China. Their avowed motive in defending the alien Qing dynasty was to save Chinese culture from the hands of the heterodox Taiping. Through no fault of the missionaries, Christianity (or a version of it) was placed in opposition to traditional Chinese values in the minds of many Chinese.

The round of treaties which followed the Second Opium War (1856-1860) improved the position of both the missionaries and traders in China. The French government secured nation-wide toleration for Christianity, the right to preach throughout China, and the restoration of Church properties confiscated in the early eighteenth century. These rights were extended to missionaries of other countries through "most favoured nation" provisions contained in the various treaties.

As we have seen, the circumstances surrounding the missionaries'

entry into China made a hostile reception likely. Official records of the nineteenth century abound with incidents, some involving violence and loss of life, involving missionary activity. Sometimes the missionaries themselves were tactless and insensitive in their approach: Cohen cites examples of missionaries preaching against Chinese religious belief and practices in front of Chinese temples.

Cohen does not deny that missionaries came to China full of good intentions; nonetheless, their behaviour in some instances seemed almost calculated to arouse the ire of the people. It should be noted too that the diplomatic, tactful missionary was less likely to cause trouble and, therefore, would not come to official notice. So reading through the "missionary cases" (jiao-an), numerous though they are, will not give a complete picture of missionary activity in China.

IV

There were never very many foreign missionaries in China, or even Chinese Christians, in terms of China's huge population. Cohen sets a ratio of one missionary to 100,000 Chinese for the year 1900. Yet the foreign presence in China in the nineteenth century (and the missionaries' presence was the most extensive and visible, as they ventured all over China) has left a legacy of bitterness which has extended down to the present day. Peter Barry's review of Missionaries and Modern China by Gu Changsheng in Tripod #21 demonstrates that a present-day scholar in China has little good to say about missionaries as a whole.

Cohen tries to explain the strong Chinese reaction to the foreigners in general by drawing a medical analogy: the Chinese reacted to a rather small amount of foreign activity in China in the way in which a large organism may react to a foreign body of even microscopic proportions. A less refined simile might be that the foreign presence in China was like a fly on the ear of an elephant - insignificant but highly irritating.

These comparisons may be apt and illustrative but they are insufficient to explain the phenomenon. How did missionary activity evoke such a hostile response in China?

The Chinese upper class, the gentry, have long been identified as the leading opponents of Christianity in China. Most missionaries believed that the gentry were the source of their problems, that they goaded the common people into action against them. Certainly the gentry had reasons to resent the missionaries and their activities, for the missionaries

threatened their monopoly over education and learning. They especially disliked the missionaries' sometimes insensitive assaults on Confucianism.

Cohen cites the "psychological necessity" of missionaries believing that the common people were basically receptive to them and that it was the suspicious gentry who misled the people into committing acts of anti-missionary violence. Cohen emphatically asserts that this was not the case. The common people had their own grievances - real and imagined - against the missionaries. Some converts to Christianity were often unscrupulous in using the protection afforded by their new religion as a shield for illegal activities; some missionaries naively offered this protection, feeling that any official action against their converts was the result of anti-Christian prejudice. In addition, the cost of imdemnities awarded to the victims of anti-Christian outbursts was often met by levying additional taxes on the common people.

The less justified reasons for people's hostility towards Christianity were no less strongly held for their lack of substance. Missionaries were often mistrusted because they were foreign and had strange ways. Secondly, by the latter part of the nineteenth century a virulently anti-Christian folklore had arisen in China. Missionaries and their converts were accused of unspeakable perversions and brutality. Xenophobia and a willingness to believe the worst of people one neither knows well nor likes are not unique to China.

Chinese officials at the local level were also unfriendly to the missionaries and their efforts, despite a national policy after 1860 to abide by the treaties, however hateful they might be. At the time many believed that this unfriendliness was merely a further manifestation of the Chinese gentry's antipathy towards Christianity and its propagation,

or that it reflected the insincerity of the Chinese government's new policies. Actually, the officials' hostility most often resulted from the extremely difficult situation the missionary activities put them in. To wit, local officials were caught between the demands of official policy and a public sentiment which they could hardly ignore. Officials in China depended upon the support and cooperation of the local gentry and the acquiescence of the populace if they were to govern at all. If local officials upheld the treaties to the letter they could well arouse the hostility of the local population and make their own position untenable. In practice, most tried to walk a fine line between the two sides and satisfied neither.

V

This unhappy situation persisted throughout the nineteenth century. There is, however, a brighter side of the story, which began to emerge toward the end of the century.

Cohen entitles the last part of his article "The Missionary Enterprise and the New Order." The "new order" refers to the growing number of Chinese intellectuals who believed that a basic change in China's traditional institutions was necessary if China was to survive in the modern world.

The rise of this group (like the missionaries themselves, small in absolute terms, but significant in their impact) coincided with an increasing professionalism among the missionaries, many of whom came to devote the bulk of their effort to medical and educational enterprises. It is the latter group with whom we are concerned here.

They did more than establish schools; they attempted through publications and personal contact, to spread knowledge about the West to the Chinese intelligentsia. This was in large part an effort to attract Chinese intellectuals to appreciate Christianity's role in the progressive, dynamic West.

As Cohen notes, this use of secular knowledge as a "sweetener" was no guarantee that Chinese reformers would embrace Christianity itself. A few, Wang Tao and Ho Kai (He Qi), did, many more did not. Also some Western ideologies were incompatible with Christianity and could even be used against it. Social Darwinism, a distortion of the work of Charles Darwin, which was popular with Yan Fu and some other Chinese intellectuals, seems to me to be farther removed from Christianity than the traditional Chinese religions.

Nonetheless, the impact of the missionary efforts in this sphere is undeniable. It broadened the scope of many people's knowledge and this is a result which only the narrow-minded could disparage. Kang Youwei, the leader of the failed 1898 Reform Movement and a staunch Confucian, credited the missionary writings with converting (Cohen uses this word) him to reform.

We must remember, however, that there were other forces about that led some Chinese to seek a new order. The pitfall of monocausality must be avoided. Increasing imperialism, most especially the galling defeat by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War, and the increasingly obvious inability of the Qing government to deal with the many problems which beset China, were perhaps even greater stimuli to reform. Yet the missionaries efforts to spread Western knowledge and their own sincere commitment to reform must be acknowledged.

VI

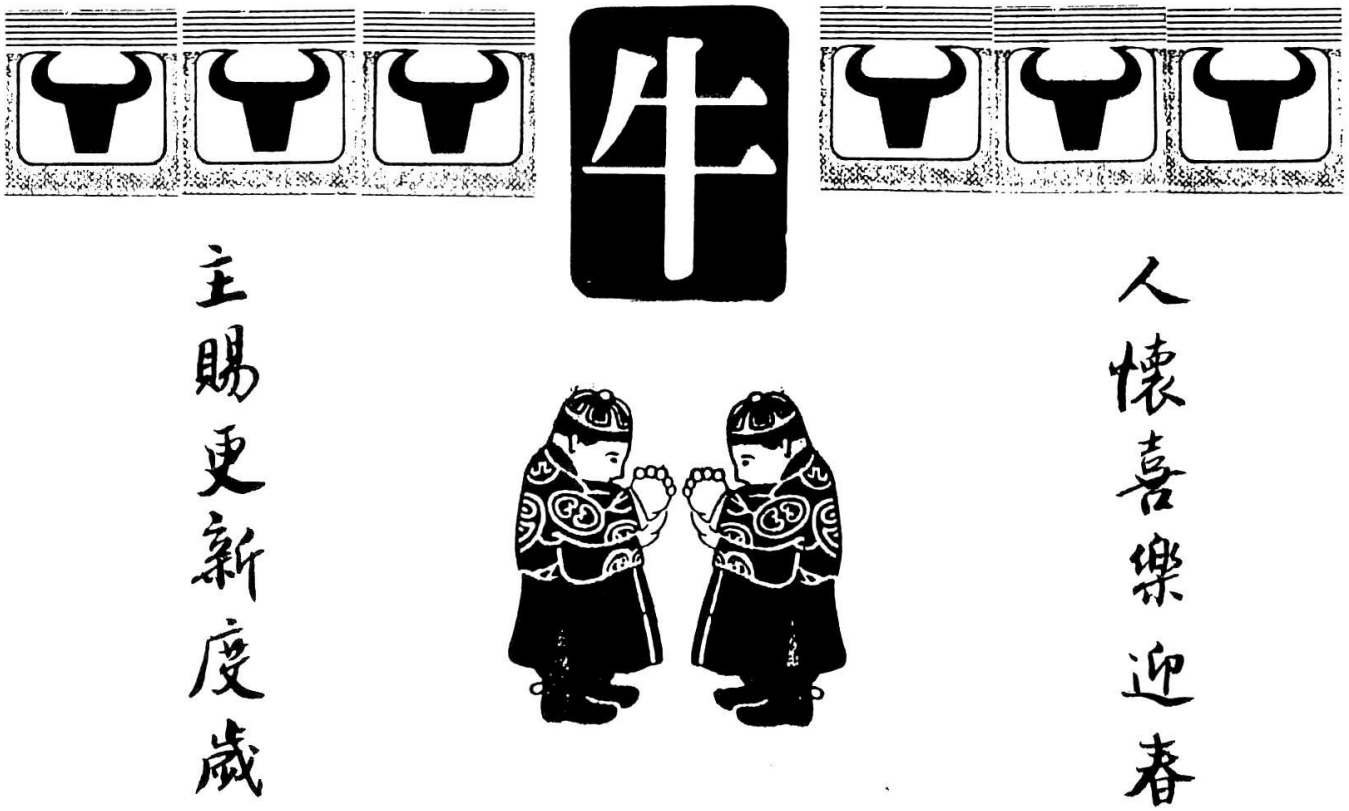
Cohen begins his essay with a question: In comparison with other foreigners in China "Christian missionaries came not to take but to give ... why, then, ... was it the missionary who inspired the greatest fear and hatred?"

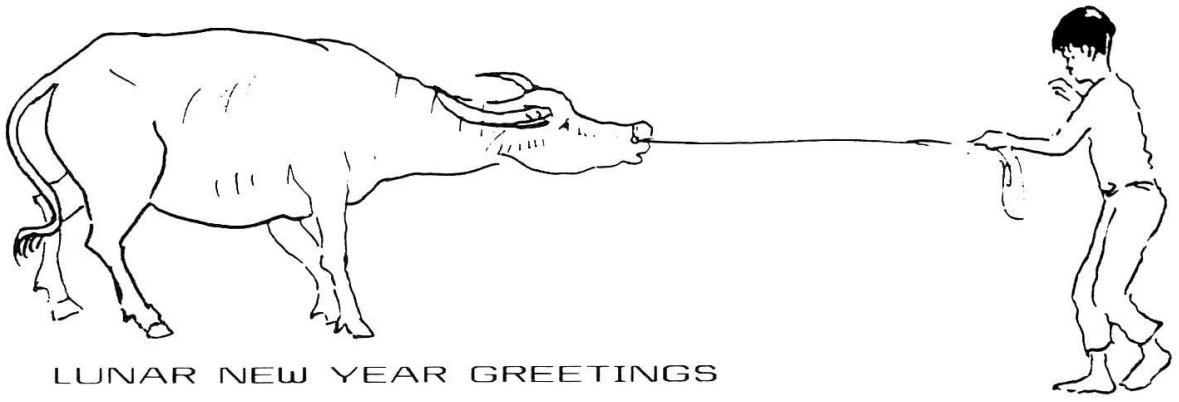
The simple answer is that good intentions are not always perceived as such; that foreign altruism was less easy to accommodate than was foreign greed; that missionaries who sought the "hearts and minds" of the people were seen as more offensive than those who simply hungered after profit.

This review-article has sought to account for the unfriendly reception missionary efforts, by and large, received in nineteenth century China. They began their efforts in a climate that was most unpropitious. Events beyond their control burdened them with unfavourable association which

they had difficulty in overcoming since they were often oblivious to them.

Those who would discount the necessity and importance of bringing to light this unhappy past are wrong. In the 1980's many Christians outside China desire to begin a new approach to China. They may wonder why their efforts may be met by suspicion, even by Chinese Christians themselves. Many of the reasons lie in the past and they can only be understood by studying the history of Christianity and China in the nineteenth century.





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