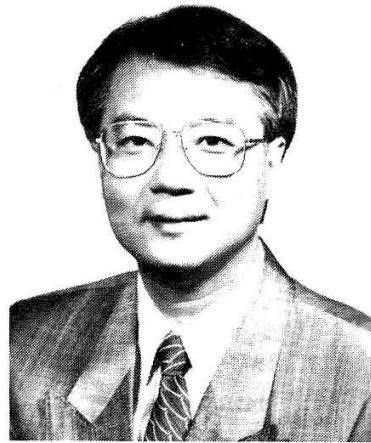


Building Bridges: The Christian Message in Chinese History

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Recent changes in the People's Republic of China have prompted historians of Sino-Western Studies to re-examine two traditional views on Christian missionary activities in China's past. One is that with the Communist takeover in 1949, Christianity had more or less "failed" in China.¹ From a statistical perspective, this may still be true, but it is now acknowledged that Christianity in China today is an



important aspect of the Chinese religious scene. The other conventional interpretation which requires re-evaluation is the argument that without the presence of imperialism in China, Christianity would have made a greater impact on China.²

Both schools of thought require modifications partly because of an increased knowledge of the history of Christianity in China, and partly because China is once again confronted with the question of dealing with external and foreign influences. Surely Marxism-Leninism is an alien import, but the Chinese communist leadership has always insisted that Mao Zedong Thought has somehow helped to create a brand of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics". In other words, communism is acceptable because it has been naturalized (or Sinicized). All foreign ideas, especially capitalist ones, must be kept away.

Political rhetoric aside, however, those familiar with current events in China know that socialism with Chinese characteristics will continue to be eroded--the younger generations view it with disdain, and look upon the West as their source of inspiration. Of course, as is the case in the history of the last few hundred years, the West comes in different shapes and forms.

It may be premature to argue that communism-in-China is heading for an exit, but clearly the signs are all there. Even if it should remain as a political orthodoxy, in the immediate future China is more than ready for other beliefs and ideas.

With tremendous changes in the now defunct Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, it is inconceivable that communism-in-China will be able to resist all challenges. The June Fourth Democracy Movement may have been suppressed, but its impact has guaranteed that Chinese communism must go through rapid transformations itself, if it were to survive in the future.

Foreign Ideas in Historical Perspective

Historically speaking, regardless of the political context, there was room for influx of "foreign" systems of thought in China. As a matter of fact, interestingly enough it was precisely when there were political turmoils and social disorders that the Chinese embraced non-indigenous beliefs, the best example being Buddhism.

Another more recent example is Christianity. When the pioneer Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci first arrived in Peking in 1610, the Ming dynastic cycle was nearing its end, and in that crisis situation, Ricci and his associates tried to present Christianity as an alternative, a moral religion which would "supplement" Confucianism.³

Matteo Ricci's "policy of accommodation" apparently worked. There was no imperialism to speak of in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and many members of the Confucian literati responded to his Christian message favourably.⁴ Those Confucian-Christian converts, men like Hsu Kuang-ch'i and Yang T'ing-yun, believed that a true Confucian-Christian syncretism was possible. And their intellectual legacy has remained, in the sense that today there are still some Chinese scholars who believe that Christian doctrines and Confucian morality are compatible, in spite of the actual historical context.⁵

There is no intention here to digress into the perennial debate over exactly how Confucian is Christianity and vice versa, in my personal view a largely philosophical and theological issue.⁶

The historically significant observation is: Ricci and his

Jesuit-missionary companions did consciously attempt to "smuggle" ⁷ Christianity into China via the Great Tradition. To them, it was the Confucian orthodoxy which required persuasion. Once the majority of the Confucian literati realized the possibility of a Confucianized Christianity, the rest of the Chinese population would follow suit. So Ricci and his supporters believed.

In a nutshell, the Jesuit accommodation approach primarily limited itself to the orthodox line; there were no efforts made to compromise with the small traditions of China. Hence it is not surprising that the Jesuits became mandarins and close advisors of many of the late-Ming early-Ch'ing emperors.

With historical hindsight, it is interesting to note that once the Christian missionaries got into trouble with the Confucianists, or the "mainstream", its success slowly turned into disaster, for the whole Christian effort. Once Christianity was no longer viewed as "morally absolute", as reflected by the behaviour of its followers, the Christian message fell upon deaf ears (such was the case with the K'ang-hsi Emperor).⁸

By contrast, the Christian effort in the nineteenth-century took on a rather different approach from that of the Jesuits.

Foreign Ideas and Cultural Imperialism

In a general sense, by the nineteenth-century, the Rites Controversy had basically over-shadowed Ricci's by and large successful accommodation strategy. At the same time, Protestant missionaries took on a more uncompromising stand, especially in reference to Chinese customs and religious beliefs. This is not to suggest that some of those traditional practices were acceptable even to the Chinese themselves, for instance foot-binding and opium-smoking.

It can not be denied, however, that in the nineteenth-century, gunboat diplomacy was an essential component of the Western presence in China, and that Christian missionaries were often in the midst of (if not the cause of) many violent disputes between China and the West.⁹

Christianity of the Renaissance and Christianity of the nineteenth-century were two different species. But for the ordinary Chinese who could not tell the difference between Catholicism

and Protestantism, Christianity was one and the same as Western imperialism.¹⁰

Ironically, on the other extreme, Christianity was seen as a "weapon" against Chinese "feudalism". It was no accident that converts like Hung Hsiu-ch'uan or Sun Yat-sen both attacked the Confucian tradition in their different ways. Hung believed in universal brotherhood, and female soldiers were employed to fight Manchu troops. Sun desecrated idols in the temples of his native village. The two men's Christian orientations must have helped to inspire such "anti-feudal" behaviour; perhaps there are good reasons that Christian missionaries are considered in Chinese communist historiography as cultural imperialists!

Still, it can not be denied that some cultural imperialists did attempt to change local customs and beliefs, by force. Not a few of them were convinced that Chinese culture was backward, barbaric, and generally unacceptable. Many of them were insensitive towards local feelings, and quite a number of well-documented anti-missionary "incidents" (chiao-an) were the direct results of missionary interference in local affairs. Clashes became inevitable.¹¹

Precise details of those confrontations are still being investigated by historians. The larger picture, however, is clear. By the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, Christian missionaries, except for a minority (men like James Legge and Timothy Richard), had generally abandoned the idea of approaching China's elite. If anything, Confucianism was perceived to be something of a hindrance. Members of the gentry were by and large responsible for China's backwardness. Without question, China's local traditions were manifestations of Chinese superstitions and other corrupt forces.

After a series of hostile encounters which ended in defeat and humiliation for the Chinese, in particular for the Confucian literati, Western "things" and institutions were reluctantly accepted. But Western values and beliefs were a different matter. Accept Western "morality" and ideas, and the essence of Chineseness would forever be lost. A more enlightened monarchy could save China politically. Spiritually, however, the Chinese must maintain (and retain) their roots.¹² It was in such a frame of mind that Chang Chih-tung arrived at this notion of *t'i-yung*,

Western things for application, Chinese learning for essence. Take away the essence, and there would be no Chinese

civilization left. Perhaps there are good reasons why Chang's cultural-nationalism has been inherited by the Chinese communists: communist ideology in China must have Chinese characteristics.

Part of Mao Tse-tung Thought was to locate those characteristics in the "people's tradition". The feudal tradition, according to Mao, must be destroyed, but the small traditions should be preserved (of course, the unacceptable side of those small traditions were a direct result of bad influences from the top--hence Chinese intellectuals must be kept under control continuously).

Whilst the Chinese communists championed local and regional beliefs, albeit selectively, Christian missionaries were attempting a concentrated confrontation. Small wonder that the communists relied so heavily on anti-Christian propaganda in their village-level activities.¹³

The Search for Other Options

The continuation of Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy means that Christian activities in China will continue to be tolerated. Now and then, however, the state intervenes whenever it sees itself "threatened", and then some form of persecution takes place.

Some evangelists are optimistic, and some are cautious. Some think that things have improved, and others feel that more effort is necessary. Whatever the approach, historical lessons of the Christian experience in China do provide some useful perspectives. One important lesson (or strategy) is that dialogue with the state's orthodoxy must continue. As long as the Chinese Communist Party is in charge, those who are involved with spreading the Christian message (or even other religious beliefs) have no choice but to co-operate whenever necessary.

Meanwhile, inside China Christianity continues to be associated with the West; rightly or wrongly, it is considered to be of Western origin, and that it is alien to the Chinese scheme of things. In short, it is still a potentially dangerous ideology.

One approach, hitherto untried, is perhaps to present Christianity in the context of local systems (beliefs, customs, practices, etc.). One historical perspective is that so far Christian missionaries have yet attempted to "localize" Christianity, to

"adapt" it in the context of local or regional needs and circumstances. Instead of attacking local traditions, the Christian missionary could accommodate them, or better yet, turn them into vehicles for explaining the Christian message.

Despite over forty years of communist "centralized" rule, Chinese regional variations and differences remain as strong as ever. Thus it is not surprising that the southern-coastal regions have developed far more speedily than other parts of China proper. The reasons behind this phenomenon are indeed complex. But the point is a valid one: whatever the reasons, even within south China, there are vast cultural and economic differences (putting aside the larger question of totalitarian politics).

It is true that some nineteenth-century missionaries had attempted to proselytize Christianity by employing local dialects, such as preaching in Cantonese or Fukienese. To engraft Christianity onto the local scene, however, requires further steps beyond the language barrier.

It is not in the scope of this essay to make concrete proposals in regard to how Christian beliefs are to be systematically introduced to a "de-Confucianized" audience. The only suggestion here is that historical perspectives on the possibility of Christian proselytization in China are vital for understanding the future option(s) of Christianity in a "post-revolutionary" China.

NOTES:

1. Many Sinologists and historians of Chinese history continue to subscribe to this view. See, for example, John K. Fairbank ed., *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974).
2. This interpretation can be found in Lu Shih-ch'iang, *Chung-kuo kuan-shen fan-chiao ti yuan yin, 1864-1874* (The Causes of the Anti-Christian Movement among Chinese Officials and Gentry, 1860-1874) (Taipei, Institute of Modern History, Academic Sinic, 1966).
3. On Matteo Ricci's "supplement" approach, see my monograph, "East-West Synthesis: Matteo Ricci and Confucianism" (Hong Kong, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1980).
4. On Hsu Kuang-ch'i's understanding of Christianity, see my work, *Confucianism and Christianity, the First Encounter* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 1983), Chapter III.
5. See the introduction to Matteo Ricci's *T'ien-chu Shih-i* (The True Doctrine of the Master-of-Tien), various contemporary reprint editions.
6. See Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity* (Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1977).
7. The word is used by Joseph Levenson in his *Confucian China and Its*

- Modern Fate, a Trilogy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968).
8. See John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity, the First Encounter*, Chapter VII.
 9. See Paul Cohen, *China and Christianity: the Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism, 1860-1870* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963).
 10. Many Confucian literati assumed that Catholicism and Protestantism were the same thing (for example, Wei Yuan, the famous statecraft scholar who wrote about foreign geography).
 11. See the works by Lu Shih-ch'iang and Paul Cohen.
 12. On the modern significance of Chang Chih-tung's *t'i-yung* formula, see Yin Hai-kuang, *Chung-kuo wen-hua te chan-wang*, (An Appraisal of Chinese Culture and Its Prospects) (Taipei, 1966).
 13. C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967). See also the works by Hinton on the low village (*Fanshen*, etc.).

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Newly Opened National Seminary

On May 6, the National Seminary in Beijing, named the Theological and Philosophical Seminary of the Catholic Church in China, officially opened in its newly completed headquarters in Haidan district.



Sixty-two students, all with previous training in philosophy in diocesan or regional seminaries, and selected through interviews and examinations, are enrolled in first year theology.