

Three-Self Church Leaders' Thoughts and Deeds in the Early Days of the People's Republic of China

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*Názory a činy vrcholných predstaviteľov 'troch samostatností'
v ranom období Čínskej ľudovej republiky*

Resumé V 50-tych rokoch 20. storočia vznikla v Číne kresťanská denominácia tzv. troch samostatností, ktorá je jedinou kresťanskou denomináciou, ktorú uznáva aj čínsky komunistický režim. Aj preto býva často označovaná za cirkev slúžiacu režimu. No nie je to celkom tak. Podmienky, historické a politické pozadie jej vzniku sú veľmi komplikované. V článku sa autorky usilujú ukázať tento proces ako súčasť širšej problematiky, aj ako súčasť snahy čínskych kresťanských kruhov o samotné prežitie kresťanstva v Číne.

Keywords China (1949–66), Christianity, Protestantism · Three-Self Movement · Wu Leichuan 吳雷川 (1870–1944) · Zhao Zichen 趙紫宸 (1888–1979) · Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗 (1890–1979) · Wang Mingdao 王明道 (1900–1991)

Since the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949, the destiny of Chinese Christianity corresponded to the famous line by Shakespeare: »To be or not to be?« The choice of Three-Self Church leaders was »to be«, which was not quite understood by many 'orthodox' Christians. Since its conception, the Three-Self Church had received harsh criticism from the Western Christian world as well as from leaders of many independent Chinese churches. For instance: Wang Mingdao 王明道 (1900–1991), the founder of »Christian Churches in Christ« (or Christian Tabernacle, 基督徒會堂), denounced Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗 (»Wu Yao-tsung«, 1890–1979), the founder of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and his fellow clergies of being »unbelievers«, and refused to take part

in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He then published series of articles, such as *To Be Obedient to Man or to God?*, *The Truth or the Toxin?*, and *For the Sake of Our Belief!*, to criticize those »unbelievers«. ¹ Wang Mingdao's action deeply provoked the Chinese government; he was arrested in 1955 and spent 22 years in a labour camp near Shanghai. This would have been the destiny of many Three-Self Church leaders if they haven't chosen differently.

There is a handful of studies on the history of Christianity after the establishment of the Communist regime that accentuate the opposition against the Three-Self Patriotic movement. ² These studies have sufficiently discussed the State-Church relationships in the newly consolidated Communist China and their understandings of religious freedom and human dignity. What has not been discussed yet is what lies ahead of Chinese Christianity if the Three-Self Church had not been formed.

Right after the consolidation of power by the Chinese Communist Party, the new regime faced a lot of opposition from both urban areas and countryside, as studied by Elizabeth J. Perry ³ and Ralph A. Thaxton. ⁴ These oppositions pressured the Communist regime to put effort into eliminating dissent and unifying opinions, and the Three-Self Church became their primary vehicle to

- 1 »Shuncong ren ne? shuncong shen ne?« 順從人呢？順從神呢？, »Zhenli ne? dusu ne? 真理呢？毒素呢？, »Women shi weile xinyang!« 我們是為了信仰！, in Wang Mingdao 王明道, in *Wushinian lai* 五十年來 [My Past Fifty Years; 1950] ([Hong Kong:] Chenxing shuwu, 1967), appendixes 1-50.
- 2 Such as Alan Hunter and Chan Kim-Kwong, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Ying Fuk-Tsang 邢福增, *Dangdai Zhongguo zhengjiao guanxi* 當代中國政教關係 [Relationships Between Church and State in Contemporary China] (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary., 1999); David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003); *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, ed. by Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, »Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China«, *Church History* 74,1 (2005), 68-96. For a general description of the formation of the religious policy in the first years after the foundation of the People's Republic of China see Martin Slobodník, *Buddha a Mao: náboženská politika voči tibetskému buddhizmu v Číne* [Mao and Buddha: Religious Policy Towards Tibetan Buddhism in China] (Bratislava: Chronos, 1997), 61-70.
- 3 Elizabeth J. Perry, »Shanghai's Strike Wave of 1957«, *China Quarterly* no 137 (1994), 1-27.
- 4 Ralph A. Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

accomplish this task in the Chinese world of religions. With that said, how was this ‘vehicle’ formulated? This article attempts to dissect some of the thoughts and deeds of Three-Self Church leaders in the beginning of the People’s Republic in order to present the said history from a different perspective.

1 *How Could the Christian Belief Survive in a Communist Country?*

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party established the regime of New China. Facing the radically changing political environment, Chinese Church leaders began to ponder the questions of how to comfort Chinese Christians and how to encourage them to maintain their faith.

During that time, Yenching University (Yanjing daxue 燕京大學), a noted Christian university in Beiping (now Beijing), well known for its integration of three former Christian colleges, was the first among many to adjust towards the new political environment. When the People’s Liberation Army took control of Beijing in December 1948, the university canceled all courses and divided students into 40 groups to study Mao Zedong’s 毛澤東 (1893–1976) «On New Democracy» (1940), «On Coalition Government» (1945), and the agrarian law of the Communist Party. These groups made in-depth discussions regarding their current situation and the possible ways it was heading under the topic of ‘Knowing the New Era’. The faculties of Yenching University formed four seminars to study current affairs and the ‘new democratic education system’.⁵

When Beiping was liberated peacefully by the end of January in 1949, there were still five to six hundred students and 25 foreign missionaries on the campus of Yenching University. Academic affairs were temporarily interrupted by the new government, the main courses were opened as usual. In March of 1949, Zhao Zichen 趙紫宸 (»T. C. Chao«, 1888–1979), one of the most important Christian leaders in mainland China from the 1920s to 1950s, Dean of the Faculty of Religions of Yenching University at that time, wrote in a letter to his friend that Chinese Christianity must go through a reformation in order to adapt to the then situation.⁶ ‘Reformation’ became a common theme of discussion among staff and students of Yenching University. Professors frequently dis-

5 »Xin minzhuzhuyi lun« 新民主主義論, »Lun lianhe zhengfu« 論聯合政府, cf. Philip West, *Yenching University and Sino-Western Relations, 1916–1952* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 195–204.

6 Winfried Glüer, »The Legacy of T. C. Chao«, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6,4 (1982), 165–169.

cussed 'reformation' of seminary education system. Students of Yenching University adopted a simple and unadorned lifestyle in order to display their ideological remolding. They actively participated in physical labour and worked as diligently as they could.

In August, the Faculty of Religions of Yenching University issued a reformation plan, which includes shortening the time required for graduation in order to put more graduates into churches to carry out the reformation, and adding new courses such as Christianity and Marxism-Leninism and Christianity and Chinese Culture. Zhao Zichen, Wu Yaozong, and some other Christian scholars published series of articles on the Yenching monthly *Enyou* 恩友 (Devoted Friend) to express their opinions regarding the autonomy of Chinese Christian Churches.

As Yenching University went through its transitions, most other Christian-affiliated Chinese schools and hospitals have undergone similar changes—from sitting and watching in hesitation to superficial reformation, to finally deep down remoulding of ideology. In the midst of change, Christian believers throughout the nation were pondering an inevitable question: How could Chinese churches survive under an atheist Marxist regime? Most of them came to a common conclusion: The Chinese Church must gather great effort to change its image perceived by the Chinese proletariat.

2 *What is the Real Image of Christianity Perceived by Chinese Lay People?*

In order to understand the image of Christianity perceived by the Chinese proletariat and the events that happened during the historical and political encounters between Christianity and modern China, one cannot ignore the fact that »the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 19th century occurred in the context of China's increasing humiliation before the Western powers.«⁷ Just as Wang Aiming wrote in his dissertation:

In 1840, the British army forced the authorities of China to accept the Nanjing Treaty with injustice and unequal content. [...] At this time, the Empire fell into trouble and wars with Western powers, and unfortunately, the missionaries benefited from all the unequal treaties.⁸

7 Rudolf G. Wagner, »China«, in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 5 vols., ed. by E. Fahlbusch & al., tr. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999–2008), 1: 416.

8 Wang Aiming, *Church in China: Faith, Ethics, Structure —The Heritage of the Reformation for the Future of the Church in China* (Bern [etc.]: Lang, 2009), 491.

After the Opium War (1839–42), Christianity spread rapidly into inner China under the refuge of gunboats and the protection of unfair treaties. The missionaries »arrived in China through the naval vessels and the opium warships of colonists«. ⁹ Even the very first Protestant missionary to China, Robert Morrison (Ma Lisun 馬禮遜, 1782–1834), obtained his legitimate residency in China through working as an interpreter for the British East India Company, which traded opium to China. It is not surprising that »the image of the missionaries was mixed with the Western colonists and the British opium businessmen.« ¹⁰ Although missionaries served the poor through hospitals, schools, diaconal services and charities, ¹¹ Chinese people could not change their perception that »Buddha came to China on white elephants, Christ was borne on cannon balls«. ¹²

During the Boxer Uprising from June 29th to August 14th of 1900, »many thousands of Chinese Christians had been slaughtered; 250 foreigners, mainly missionaries, had been killed across North China«. ¹³ The Boxer Uprising was a giant outburst of Chinese nationalism and aggressive anti-aggression; it showed that evangelization based on conquest and unfair treaties can not really plant Christian belief into people's heart.

In the beginning of the 20th century, China was looked down upon and oppressed by advanced Western powers. After the First World War, China wasn't able to retrieve the dominion of Shandong peninsula from Germany as a victorious member of the Entente Powers. Instead, article 156 of the Treaty of Versailles brought up by Britain, United States, and France, transferred the ownership of German possessed Shandong Peninsula to Japan. ¹⁴ The outrage of this provision again provoked Chinese nationalism. In 1922, during the famous Non-Christian Movement, Christianity was accused of being an instrument for the imperial penetration of China. Facing such accusation, Chinese Christians of

9 *Ibid.*, 488.

10 Christopher Tang, *The First Hundred Years of Protestant Mission in China* (Hong Kong: Taosheng Publishing House, 2001), 145.

11 Murray A. Rubinstein, *The Origins of the Anglo-American Missionary Enterprises in China, 1807–1840* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1996), 331.

12 Chiang Monlin [Jiang Menglin 蔣夢麟], *Tides from the West: A Chinese Autobiography* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1947), 4.

13 John K. Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 231.

14 Marc Trachtenberg, »Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference«, *The Journal of Modern History* 51,1 (March 1979), 24–55.

that time began to think of ways to free Christianity from imperialistic influence and make Christianity acceptable in Chinese society.

During Christianity's interaction with China from the 19th to the 20th century, there were many attempts by Chinese Christians to cleanse their belief of the title 'Foreign Religion' (*yangjiao* 洋教), including the vigorous expansion of independent churches in Mainland China¹⁵ and the merging of 19 foreign-titled Christian denominations (such as the London Missionary Society, the Episcopal Church, and the British Baptist Missionary Society) into a Church of Christ in China (Zhonghua Jidu jiaohui 中華基督教會).¹⁶

3 *Early Chinese Church Leaders' Thoughts on 'Indigenization'* (bensehua 本色化)

In addition to localizing the names of churches, Chinese Christian leaders of the 1920s and 1930s also engaged in the discussions of theological sinicization of Christianity. The following are representative ideas that emerged from the discussions:

- 1) Fuse the Christian belief into the ideology of Confucianism.
- 2) Optimize traditional Confucian ideology using Christian doctrines in order to elevate the integrity of citizens of China with the morality of Jesus Christ; form a new 'oriental religion' by blending the essence of Christianity with the essence of Confucianism.
- 3) Contextually root the Christian belief into Chinese society in order to improve social condition.

The advocate of the first idea was Wu Leichuan 吳雷川 (1870–1944), a famous Confucian scholar of Yenching University. He was a very influential author during the last years of the Qing dynasty, and a champion of the highest imperial examination. Wu Leichuan was baptized by the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1915, and in 1925 he began his career as a professor in Yenching University. Because he was educated by traditional Confucian scholars in his early years, his understanding of Christianity was different from most Chinese Christian leaders of his time. Being a strong believer of both, he sought to merge Christianity into Confucianism.

15 Daniel H. Bays, »The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900–1937«, in *Christianity on China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. by D. H. Bays (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 31.

16 »Introduction of Church of Christ in China«, *The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China* 中華基督教會香港區會 <hkccccc.org/1main.php> (last retrieval Aug 7, 2009).

According to Wu Leichuan, there is an overwhelming amount of similarities between Christianity and Confucianism. He believed that Confucian classics contain fundamental doctrines of Christianity, that the concepts of God and angels can be found in the Book of Songs (*Shijing* 詩經) and the Book of History (*Shujing* 書經), that the Christian Holy Spirit is analogous to the Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 ('love' or 'benevolence') because both purify the soul and lead to good deeds, and that even the central pillar of Christianity—the messianic construct—is contextualized in the book *Zhongyong* 中庸 (The Doctrine of the Mean).¹⁷ Wu Leichuan thought that the traditional Chinese concept of *dao* 道, (literally the 'way' or 'doctrine') is equivalent to the 'truth' of the Christian belief. According to him, Christianity and Confucianism both are religions; anyone can become a believer of a religion, but few can discover truth through it. He thought that the only way to help Chinese Christian believers to see the *dao*, or Truth, is to combine Christianity with Chinese culture and reinterpret Christianity in a Confucian context; for that purpose, Chinese churches need to be rebuilt in accordance to the Chinese social condition.¹⁸

The advocate of the second idea was Fan Zimei 範子美 (1866–1939), editor of the Protestant monthly periodical *Wanguo gongbao* 萬國公報 (A Review of the Times).¹⁹ Fan Zimei was born in Suzhou, received his provincial candidacy to the imperial examination in 1893, and became the editor of the Review of the Times in 1902; he was baptized in the same year. Fan Zimei witnessed China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–95) and the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898). Subsequently, he began to study comprehensively Western politics, economy, and natural sciences. After some research, he concluded that the source of the superiority of the Western world was Christianity. He thought that Christianity was the 'true enlightenment', unlike the 'false enlightenment' of traditional Confucianism. He acknowledged the weakness of Chinese morals for the 'debility' of the nation, and advocated the salvation of China through an elevation in people's morals by educating them with the integrity of Jesus Christ. He used his periodical to propagate philanthropism (serving society with the

17 Wu Leichuan, »Jidujiao jing yu Rujiao jing« 基督教經與儒教經 [The Classics of Christianity and Confucianism], *Shenghuo* 生活 [Life] 3,6 (Mar 1923), 1–6.

18 Wu Leichuan, *Jidujiao yu Zhongguo wenhua* 基督教與中國文化 [Christianity and Chinese Culture] (Shanghai: Qingnian shehui chubanshe, 1936), 19.

19 The *Wanguo gongbao* was published monthly from 1868 to 1907. It was founded and edited by the American Methodist missionary the Rev. Young John Allen (Lin Lezhi 林樂知, 1836–1907) of Georgia. Its subject matter ranged from discussions on the politics of Western states to the virtues and advantages of Christianity.

character of Christ), populism (taking care of people from lower classes of society), and patriotism (saving the nation by action instead of words).²⁰ He came up with a concept that blends Confucianism into Christianity and amends Confucianism with Christianity. This concept utilizes Christian elements such as the kingdom of God and the love of God to improve Confucian ethics and morals, such as loyalty, forgiveness, filial piety, and love and respect for the elder.²¹

The advocate of the third idea was Zhao Zichen, who was dubbed »the chief scholar to interpret the Christian belief to souls of the East« and »the most influential theologian in contemporary China«. He was the author of a series of Christian writings and theories on 'indigenized theology'.²²

According to Zhao Zichen, in order for Christianity to live, it must bear practical meaning in lives of people. Christianity itself is about life—the life of Christ which contains the most interesting duality of Godhood and humanity, »it is spiritually connected to God, but is experienced from a human perspective. If either one of these two are given up, either the inspiration of God or the works of humans, then Christianity would be practically dead.«²³ He also stressed that »human values are absolute, and therefore all human activities, no matter whether minuscule or significant, are all targeted towards more individual happiness or better social condition.«²⁴ Therefore the goal of Christianity in China should also be to provide more individuals with happiness and to better social condition. In order to reach that goal, Chinese Christians should work hard to integrate Christianity into Chinese culture and lives of Chinese people. He said:

Chinese Christians are legacies of an awakened Christian nature and the vigor of Chinese culture; therefore there is necessity for Chinese culture and Christianity to be integrated. The vivacity of the Christian belief could infiltrate Chinese culture and become its fresh blood and new life, and Chinese cultural heritage could

20 *Salt and Light: Lives Of Faith That Shaped Modern China*, ed. by Carol Lee Hamrin (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 64–79.

21 Xing Fuzeng 邢福增, »“Ruzhe Jidutu” Fan Zimei (1866–1939)« “儒者基督徒” 範子美 [The Confucian Christian Fan Zimei], *Daofeng* 道風 no 6 (Hong Kong, 1997), 140–174.

22 Gu Aihua 古愛華, *Zhao Zichen de shengxue sixiang* 趙紫宸的神學思想 [The Theological Thought of Zhao Zichen] (Hong Kong: Christian Literature Press, 1998), ii.

23 Zhao Zichen, »Xiandai xinyang xueshuo de shijian—yi tiao zhai erqie chang de lu« 現代信仰學說的實踐——一條窄而且長的路 [The Practice of Modern Religion Theory—A Narrow and Lengthy Road], *Zhenli yu shenghuo* 真理與生活 (1934), 108.

24 Zhao Zichen, »Wo dui Zhongguo gaodeng shenxue jiaoyu de mengxiang« 我對中國高等神學教育的夢想 [My Dream of Advanced Theological Education in China], *Zhenli yu shenghuo*, 344.

contribute to Christianity with its own expressiveness. Once that happens, Christianity can finally shake off the bondage of the West and put on a sinicized style, and then it will be accepted and understood by the Chinese.²⁵

Zhao Zichen longed for the establishment of an ‘indigenized Church’ that »merges all the truths of Christianity and Chinese culture and enables the spiritual lives and experiences of Chinese Christians to suit their national customs.«²⁶

Unfortunately, the above plans to integrate Christianity with Chinese culture were not granted enough time to be put into practice before the nation once again was on the brink of destruction. In 1937, the second Sino-Japanese War broke out, and China was in a huge calamity for more than a decade. Japan surrendered in 1945. Before everyone even began to enjoy the evanescent peace, civil war between the Communist party and the KMT broke out, and lasted until 1949. During this period, Chinese politics were in turmoil, economy was impoverished, and people lived in dire and poverty. Chinese Christian churches weren’t spared of the disaster; they too struggled in dire and poverty for their own survival.

4 *Thoughts on Localization under the Communist Regime*

As mentioned, professors and students at Yenching University already realized that their belief as Christians would not be compatible with the belief of the Communist party as early as back in 1948. During that time, Christian leaders such as Zhao Zichen and Wu Yaozong studied Communist theories and policies in order to find a way for Christianity to live on. Zhao Zichen pointed out that Christianity must go through a complete renovation to cope with the situation of the time.²⁷

When religion and Communist politics are discussed together, connections and associations are easily be made to the famous phrase by Karl Marx (1818–1883):

25 Zhao Zichen, »Jidujiao yu Zhongguo wenhua«, *Zhenli yu shenghuo* 2,9/10 (1927), 248.

26 Duan Qi 段琦, »Cong Zhongguo Jidujiao lishi kan jiaohui de bensehua« 從中國基督教歷史看教會的本色化 [On the Indigenization of the Church from the Perspective of the History of Chinese Christianity], *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 1/1998, 141.

27 Glüer, »The Legacy of T. C. Chao«, 165–169.

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.²⁸

The Chinese Communists' understanding of the above phrase is: Religion is an anesthesia manufactured by the ruling class to pacify the ruled masses. Thus, they use this interpretation to delimit the definition of religion. Some Chinese intellectuals and elites also view religion from this same position. For example, when Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910–1998) compared Chinese culture and literature to those of the West in his famous study titled *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 (The Pipe-and-Awl Compilation), he quoted criticisms about religion from various romantic poets, novelists, and philosophers such as Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804–1872), Marx, and others. He specifically highlighted Marx' abovementioned statement and quoted it in both Chinese and German »die Protestation gegen das wirkliche Elend, das Opium des Volks«. ²⁹ Qian Zhongshu thinks that among all the criticisms he cited, »K. Marx's words are the most lucid and vivid.«³⁰

In order to make the Chinese Communist interpretation of Marx' words true, the ruler and the ruled must both exist. During the first years of the Chinese Communist regime, the proletariat, as stated in the Common Program (*Gongtong gangling* 共同綱領, the interim Constitution of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1954), has undoubtedly constituted the force that determined China's fate. They were supposed to be the actual rulers. Below is an excerpt from the Common Programme that declares:

Article 1 The People's Republic of China is a New Democratic or a People's Democratic state. It carries out the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class, based on the alliance of workers and peasants, and uniting all democratic classes and all nationalities in China. It opposes imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism and strives for independence, democracy, peace, unity, prosperity and strength of China.³¹

Since the line that separates ruling from ruled was so obscure, who was »the oppressed creature« of that time? Marx's theory no longer fit the situation of the newborn China since the proletariat was neither the manufacturer nor the user

28 Karl Marx, Introduction to »Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie«, in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* nos 7 & 10 (Feb 1844).

29 Qian Zhongshu, *Guanzhui bian*, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 1: 21.

30 *Ibid.*, 1: 22.

31 »The Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 1949«, in *The Important Documents of the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1949), 2.

of the opium. Not only did religion not serve the role of Marx's opium, it also had to struggle for its own survival. This can be seen from many official documents as well.

From the 21st to the 30th of September in 1949, the First Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (»Di yi jie Zhongguo renmin Zhengzhixie shang huiyi« 第一屆中國人民政治協商會議, 1st CPPCC) was held in Beijing. Eight participants from religious circles were invited by high Communist officials to participate in the conference: two represented Buddhism, one represented Islam, and five represented Protestant Christianity. There was no Catholic delegate since the Catholic churches were affiliated with the Vatican, which opposed the Chinese Communist Party.³²

In order to have a more thorough understanding of the situation, Protestant churches were under a field investigation team that was assembled by the said Protestant representatives after the conference. The team visited 18 cities in eastern, central, northern, northeastern and southern China from the end of 1949 to April 1950.³³ During the investigation, several major difficulties of churches were exposed: »church buildings were officially occupied, appliances for worship were confiscated, religious affairs were intermeddled and missionaries were impounded for certain suspicions.«³⁴ After those issues were revealed, members of churches across China were expecting the team to report them to the Communist Central Committee so that they can be resolved. At this point, Christianity, and religion in general, played the role of the »oppressed creature«— but they needed more than just opium, they needed a saviour.

Facing such a gruesome situation, how should Christianity renovate itself to suit the times? How can it ensure the survival of its faith in a Communist China? Christian personages actively engaged in discussions regarding the issue.

In June 1949, Wu Yaozong took part in a preliminary meeting of the People's Political Consultative Conference as a person without affiliation to any political party. One of the main goals of this meeting was to prepare for the foundation of multiple organizations including organization of social sciences,

32 Deng Yuzhi 鄧裕志, »Jianshe Zhongguohua de jiaohui—zongjiaojie zai yi jie Zhengxie huiyi shang« 建設中國化的教會——宗教界在一屆政協會議上 [Construction of a Sinicized Church—The Religious Circles in the 1st Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference], *Renmin Zhengxie bao* 人民政協報 Aug 25, 1989.

33 »Jidujiao tuanti zuzhi fangwentuan« 基督教團體組織訪問團 [Protestant Organizations Founded a Field Investigation], *Tianfeng* no 188 (Nov 12, 1949), 12.

34 Wu Yaozong, »Jidujiao fangwentuan ji« 基督教訪問團記 [Notes on the Protestant Field Investigation in Central China], *Tianfeng* no 204 (Mar 31st, 1950), 12.

natural sciences, religions, and media. In the same month, the quality paper *Dagong bao* 大公報 (*Ta Kung Pao*, »L'Impartial«) in Shanghai published an article titled The Awakening of Christians (»Jidu jiaotu de juexing« 基督教徒的覺醒), in which they published letters from five protestant Christians. The main content of these letters was opposition to exploitation of Christianity by imperialism. The article created a powerful echo in the Chinese Christian world, many people submitted articles to the paper to express their own views on it. Shortly after, *Da gongbao* published letters of different perspectives from five readers. Wu Yaozong just happened to have returned to Shanghai from the preliminary meeting in Beijing during that time, thus the editor of *Da gongbao* interviewed him and asked him to make a prescriptive conclusion to the controversy, in order to »instruct Christians regarding their necessary ideological renovations of the current stage, and the goal they should work towards in the future.«³⁵

Therefore, Wu Yaozong published The Reconstruction of Christianity³⁶ to point out that religious beliefs and ideologies were closely related to the social system and social environment, and that Protestantism was born with the system of capitalism—the Lutheran revolution happened to prepare the period of the industrial revolution which overthrew feudalism and founded capitalism. Wu Yaozong thought that the Lutheran Revolution broke off the new emerging forces of Christianity from the heavily feudal Catholicism, and made it a new individualistic belief much similar to capitalism in both form and spirit. He believed that Protestantism was born with capitalism, and thus it would grow, thrive, and fall with capitalism, and that the Christianity brought to China by missionaries from capitalist and imperialist countries also carried the values of capitalism and imperialism. He wrote:

Currently, the Chinese Church is only seemingly independent, but it has not yet broke away from the influence and control of Western denominations. Under this circumstance, it would be untruthful to say that Chinese Christianity has nothing to do with imperialism.³⁷

Wu Yaozong's article further planned the target for the future reconstruction of Chinese Christianity:

First of all, Christianity must struggle to extract itself from capitalistic and imperialistic systems. This is not easy, but it is necessary. Second, Chinese Church must put in practice the principle of administration, support, and preaching without interference of the West brought up long ago by Church leaders. Third, Christianity

35 Deng Yuzhi, »Jianshe Zhongguohua de jiaohui«, 25.

36 Wu Yaozong, »Jidujiao de gaizao« 基督教的改造, *Tianjia* 16,3 (1949), 9.

37 Ibid.

must know the times and reflect on its history. Because of this history, Christianity must regret and severely self-criticize. In such regret, it must be reborn—let the old shell die, and let the new life come.

He calls upon all Chinese Christians to »work with all lovers of peace and democracy hand in hand to construct the New China«. ³⁸

Under the encouragement and urging of Wu Yaozong, the vice president of Chinese Young Men's Christian Association, Jiang Wenhan 江文漢 (1908–1984), published a book »for fellow Christians« titled *Christianity and Marxism-Leninism*. ³⁹ This book discussed the reasons for Christians to study Marxism-Leninism. It pointed out that it was inevitable for Chinese people of that time, Christian or not, to be influenced by Marxism-Leninism. Jiang Wenhan wrote that »in the near future, China will proceed from new democracy onto socialism and communism«. Thus, the difficult mission of Chinese Christianity was to find a way to escape the nest of Western ideologies and establish its own religious principles. He then urged Chinese Christians to get acquainted with Marxism-Leninism in depth before they begin carrying out this mission. ⁴⁰ In his book, Jiang delineated some of the fears and misunderstandings of Chinese Christians towards Marxism-Leninism, and searched for the foundation of coexistence between Christianity and Marxism-Leninism. He also analyzed Marxism-Leninism's negative attitude towards religion, and pointed out that according to Marxism-Leninism, when classes are destroyed, »religion will be destroyed with it.« ⁴¹ However, Jiang Wenhan believed that under the banner of a United Front, atheists and believers could work together to construct the New China since freedom of religion was ensured in the Common Program—the temporary constitution of that time. Thus he said:

Our Christians need not to worry too much of the future. The most important thing right now is our action, which needs to display the spirit of love and service. ⁴²

Jiang Wenhan's perspective reflects the expectation of the Chinese Christian world of the time that seeks reconciliation and recognition from the new regime. Jiang's book also compared the case of Eastern Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union to the situation of the Chinese Church in the new regime. He stated that the Chinese Church had not existed as long as the Eastern Orthodox Church in

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jiang Wenhan, *Jidujiao yu Ma-Lie zhuyi* 基督教與馬列主義 [Christianity and Marxism-Leninism] (Chengdu: Qinggong chubanshe, 1950), Prologue.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1–7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

Soviet Union, which already had nearly one thousand years of history. Economically, Chinese churches »mostly depend on foreign donations« for support, unlike the Eastern Orthodox Church, which had lasted long enough to have a deep root in the Russian society, and was thus able to support itself. Because of that, »in order for Chinese Christianity to avoid misunderstanding from the society, it needs to draw a clear line from imperialism and establish the foundation of true self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation.«⁴³ Although Jiang Wenhan's words don't seem as intense as those of Wu Yaozong, they too advocated the self-reconstruction and extraction from the West of Chinese Christianity.

5 *Self-Rescue: The Process of Issuing the 'Three-Self Declaration'*

On April 21st of 1950, the field investigation team of Protestant churches mentioned in the previous section arrived in Beijing. There they held a forum in order to exchange information they had gathered from churches in Beijing and Tianjin. The participants from Beijing and Tianjin reported many issues of their own, and expected the team leaders to convey their feelings of suffering to the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CPCC).

While the forum was being held, Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898–1976, Prime Minister of the PRC 1949–76) interviewed representatives from the forum three times.⁴⁴ The representatives appealed to him »to solve the problems of Christian churches.«⁴⁵ After the first interview, Wu Yaozong was entrusted by the representatives to write an official report to the CPCC. This report was originally named Preliminary Opinions on Dealing with the Problems of Christianity.⁴⁶

According to an article Wu Yaozong wrote later, his report only talked about »the means to eliminate imperialism's impact on Chinese Christianity and improve national consciousness« in the first paragraph, and the rest was about the topics of »registration of Christian groups«, »dealing with the occupation of

43 *Ibid.*, 63–64.

44 There were 19 representatives participated in the interview, including 6 people from the field investigation and 13 church leaders from Beijing and Tianjin. Cf. Wu Yaozong, »Zhankai Jidujiao gexin yundong de qizhi« 展開基督教革新運動的旗幟 [Raise a Flag of the Reformation Movement of Christianity], *Tianfeng* no 233–234 (Sep 30, 1950), 15.

45 *Ibid.*, 17.

46 »Guanyu chuli Jidujiao wenti de chubu yijian« 關於處理基督教問題的初步意見, *Ibid.*

the Church properties«, »drafting comprehensive provisions for the protection of freedom of religion«, and »establishing central religious institutions«. ⁴⁷

Zhou Enlai read Wu Yaozong's report and expressed his opinion on Chinese Christianity: He believed that spiritualism and materialism can co-exist under the New Democracy, and that believers and atheists can have long-term cooperation on the basis of the Common Program. ⁴⁸

The article of the Common Program Zhou Enlai referred to is Article 5:

The people of the People's Republic of China shall have freedom of thought, speech, publication, assembly, association, correspondence, person, domicile, change of domicile, religious belief and the freedom of holding processions and demonstrations. ⁴⁹

This article was an assurance to religious personages in the beginning of the People's Republic; it originated from the Communist Party's will to create a harmonized society and a strengthened new regime through the creation of a United Front—a political union proposed by Mao Zedong. From various writings of Mao that mention the United Front, one point regarding religion stands out: »In the field of political action Communists may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal united front with some idealists and even religious people, but we can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrines.«⁵⁰ Thus, when Zhou Enlai mentioned the Common Program in the context of his opinion on Christianity, his main focus was »to point out Chinese Christianity's historical affiliation with imperialism and the possibility of it being used by imperialists to carry out antirevolutionary actions«. ⁵¹

Zhou Enlai's position was firm, he pointed out that the source of the difficulties Chinese Christianity was facing is its relationship with imperialism; although Christianity has had its impact on Chinese culture in the past century, its introduction to China was accompanied by gunboats and unfair treaties. Therefore, Chinese people were »hostile to Christianity« and referred to it as a »foreign religion«. ⁵² Therefore, Chinese churches had to »eliminate the under-

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 15.

49 »The Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 1949«, 2. in *The Important Documents of the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1949), 2.

50 Mao Zedong, »On New Democracy« (Jan 1940), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, 5 vols. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967–79), 2: 381.

51 Wu Yaozong. »Zhankai Jidujiao gexin yundong de qizhi«, 15.

52 Luo Guanzong, »Zhou Enlai tongyi zhangxian wenxuan« 周恩來統一戰線文選 [Selected

lying impact of imperialism« and »enhance the national conscious«⁵³ in order to be accepted by Chinese people.

Zhou Enlai's attitude surprised Wu Yaozong and other Christian leaders. They realized the prerequisite for solving the problems that plagued the Chinese Church is a thorough reformation of Chinese Christianity that would draw a line between Christianity and imperialism. Wu Yaozong wrote in an article that »Premier Zhou's clear analysis has given us deep impression and distinctive inspiration: Chinese Christianity should eliminate the influence of imperialism within it by itself«, otherwise »the situation will not be thoroughly improved even if the government gives an instruction for the protection of the Church« because the Church would encounter troubles from society. Thus, there was »one thing we must do—we should make a public declaration.«⁵⁴

Thereafter, Wu Yaozong and other representatives from the forum modified Wu Yaozong's original report and renamed it The Approach of Chinese Christianity's Endeavor in Constructing the New China, or in short, Three-Self Declaration.⁵⁵ The latter label received its name from the three main principles of the declaration—self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation, whose intention was to reform the Chinese Church and separate it from imperialism. The Declaration was finalized and a printed copy was delivered to Zhou Enlai, and then submitted to the State Council for approval.

The Declaration was approved by the central Government leader Mao Zedong. Mao made the following comment on July 19, 1950:

Wu Yaozong's file is very useful, please consider telegraphing it to central bureaus and provincial and municipal party committees as an internal file, and tell cadres to pay attention to the sponsorship of his efforts.⁵⁶

Documents by Zhou Enlai on the United Front], in *Zhongguo Jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong wenxuan 1950–1992* 中國基督教三自愛國運動文選 [Selected Documents on the the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement], 2 vols., ed. by Luo Guanzong (Shanghai: Zhongguo Jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui, 1993–2008), 1: 475–480.

53 Ibid., 480.

54 Wu Yaozong, »Zhankai Jidujiao gexin yundong de qizhi«, 17.

55 »Zhongguo Jidujiao zai Xin Zhongguo jianshe zhong nuli de tujing« 中國基督教在新中國建設中努力的途徑 and »Sanzi xuanyuan« 三自宣言.

56 Mao Zedong, »Dui Wu Yaozong deng de Zhongguo Jidujiaohui sanzi xuanyan de piyu« 對吳耀宗等的中國基督教三自宣言的批語 [Critical Comments on Wu Yaozong's Three-Self Declaration; July 19, 1950], in *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 建國以來毛澤東文稿 [Writings of Mao Zedong after the Establishment of the People's Republic of China], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1987–93), 1: 438.

On July 20th of 1950, the Central Committee issued Instructions Regarding the Problems of Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity, which stated that Party cadres, in order to progressively achieve the goal of cutting off economic ties and other relations between Christianity and imperialists, uniting majority of believers under the banner of patriotism to fight against imperialists and their conspiracies, must use every available opportunity to enhance patriotism of believers, and encourage believers to expose imperialistic cultural aggression and conspiracy of espionage.⁵⁷

The positive attitude displayed by the Communist Party towards Wu Yaozong's document is no coincidence. Earlier in June of that same year, Mao Zedong made a speech entitled »Don't Hit Out in All Directions« (June 6, 1950) during the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Mao Zedong pointed out in his speech that, after the nation-wide victory and the foundation of People's Republic of China, the Communist Party was confronted with very complex struggles and various difficulties. He said to his cadres:

[...] our enemies are as numerous as they are powerful. Against us are arrayed, first, the imperialists, second, the reactionaries in Taiwan and Tibet, third, the remnant Kuomintang forces, the secret agents and the bandits, fourth, the landlord class and, fifth, the reactionary forces in the missionary schools established in China by the imperialists and in religious circles and those in the cultural and educational institutions taken over from the Kuomintang.⁵⁸

He instructed as follows: »In order to isolate and attack our immediate enemies, we must convert those among the people who are dissatisfied with us into our supporters.«⁵⁹ And furthermore: »The whole Party should try earnestly and painstakingly to make a success of its united front work.«⁶⁰ Obviously, the Chinese Communist Party was in need for strategic isolation of various enemies for the construction of the United Front that would »concentrate our attack in one direction«,⁶¹ and the Three-Self Declaration gave them a shortcut.

57 »Guanyu tianzhujiao, Jidujiao wenti de zhishi« 關於天主教、基督教問題的指示, in *Zhongguo Gongchandang tongyi zhanxian shi (shehuizhuyi shiqi)* 中國共產黨統一戰線史 (社會主義時期) [History of the United Front of the Communist Party of China (Socialist Period)], ed. by Beijing shehuizhuyi xueyuan (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1993), 105-106.

58 Mao Zedong, »Don't Hit Out in All Directions« [»Buyao simian chujie« 不要四面出擊], in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, 5: 33-34.

59 Ibid., 34.

60 Ibid., 35.

61 Ibid.

Wu Yaozong later recorded the original intentions of the representatives who participated in the interview with Premier Zhou Enlai when they first drafted what is now called the Three-Self Declaration, and the frustrations they had throughout the stages of development of the affair. He said:

The document has been rewritten eight times. It was originally not a declaration, but later became a declaration. It was originally a request for Government to solve the problems of Christianity, but later became a document in which Chinese Christianity expresses its own attitude.⁶²

Wu Yaozong recorded that the representatives still kept one request for solving the Church's problem in the last sentence of the fifth edition of the Declaration:

If local churches encounter any problems, such as occupation of church buildings, they should report to the local government or the Central People's Government, and the government should solve the issues encountered.

However, even this last request was deleted in the sixth version.⁶³

Because drafting of the Three-Self Declaration has not been discussed with most believers within the Church, Wu Yaozong invited 40 influential Protestant personages to be the initiators of the Declaration. Among the 40 invited personages, 19 participated in the interview with Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing. On July 28th, copies of the Declaration attached with letters that sought for signatures from supporting believers were sent to churches throughout the country. By the end of August of that year, they managed to collect a total of 1,527 signatures.⁶⁴

On the 23rd of September in 1950, the *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 (People's Daily) gave three pages of 'valuable layouts' (*baogui de banmian* 寶貴的版面)⁶⁵ to publish the full text of the Declaration plus a list of all the signatures⁶⁶ in an editorial entitled Patriotic Movement of Christian Believers. This editorial highly acclaimed that the »Patriotic Movement of Christianity set out to break the belief away from imperialistic influences and set it back to the right track of religion«, and encouraged believers to actively respond to the Declaration. The editorial stated that

the success of the Reformation Movement will enable Chinese Christianity to access its new life and change its image perceived by Chinese people, because it made a

62 Wu Yaozong, »Zhankai Jidujiao gexin yundong de qizhi«, 17.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Cai Yongchun 蔡詠春, »Xin Zhongguo Jidujiao de qianjin daolu« 新中國基督教的前進道路 [The Road Ahead for Christianity in New China], *Xin guancha* 新觀察 1,8 (1950), 13.

66 Wu Yaozong, »Zhankai Jidujiao gexin yundong de qizhi«, 17.

clear distinction between its religious activities and imperialistic aggression against China.⁶⁷

The day when the Three-Self Declaration was published—September 23rd—became the commemoration day of Chinese Christianity's Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

Conclusion

The Korean War (1950–53) broke out in late June of 1950; China entered the military conflict against the Republic of Korea, the United States, and some other countries of the United Nations in October of the same year. In December of that year, the US government froze all private and public property China held in the United States, and foreign missionary societies subsequently ended their support for Chinese churches. Thereafter, foreign missionaries successively departed from mainland China;⁶⁸ the schedule for achieving Self-Support, Self-Propagation, and Self-Administration of Chinese churches, which was originally brought up to be accomplished in five years during the 1950 annual conference of the Three-Self Church, was pushed forward as a result.⁶⁹ Hospitals and schools run by churches were taken over by the Central Government, churches without their foreign preachers began to elect their own speakers, and the Chinese Three-Self Church thereafter divorced from the Western world.

From the above, we can see that Chinese international relations in the 1950s were an important thrust for the Three-Self Patriotic movement. Today, the Three-Self Catholic and Protestant Churches are the only branches of Christianity recognized by the Chinese government.

There was a significant increase in the number of Chinese believers since the politics of 'reform and opening': In 1949, there were 840,000 Protestant and 2,700,000 Catholic Christians in mainland China (not including independent Churches such as the Church Assembly Hall, the Jesus Family, the True Jesus

67 See »Jidujiao renshi de aiguo yundong« 基督教人士的愛國運動 [Patriotic Movement of Christian Believers], editorial of *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 Sep 23rd, 1950.

68 Donald E. MacLinnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 24–26.

69 Wu Yaorong, »Jidujiao gexin yundong de xin jieduan« 基督教革新运动的新阶段 [A New Stage of the Reformation Movement of Christianity; Xinhua News Agency, Shanghai, Jan 14, 1951], quoted from *Huadong xinwen huibian mulu (zhengjun juan)* 華東新聞彙編目錄 (政軍卷) [The News Collection Directory for Eastern China] May 1951, 74–75.

Church, and the Chinese Church in Christ, etc.).⁷⁰ Up to 2006, the Three-Self Catholic Church had 5,000,000 believers,⁷¹ and the Three-Self Protestant Church 16,000,000.⁷² The official statistics—which do not take in account house churches—show an increase of approximately six times in the number of believers in China, while the entire Chinese population only grew three times from 0.45 billion in 1945 to 1.306 in 2007.

Although many Western believers consider the Three-Self Movement a pagan movement thoroughly planned out by Communist Party leaders to persecute Christians, believers of the Three-Self Church were addressed as »brothers and sisters« by generations of Popes when they issued encyclicals to Chinese believers. The authors visited a Three-Self church in Shanghai on the Christmas Eve of 2012. There, they met a Protestant believer from New Zealand. When they asked him about his view on the Three-Self Church, he answered: »The message is the same.« The authors think that a comprehensive understanding for the history of the Three-Self Church could help people to accept its believers in mainland China.

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70 *Tianfeng* 天風 no 210 (18 Feb 1950), 12.

71 »Zhongguo tianzhujiao he jidujiao« 中國天主教和基督教 [Catholicism and Protestantism in China], *Xinbuanet* 新華網 <news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/21/content_699210.htm>.

72 Xu Lingui 許林貴, »Woguo Jidujiao xintu chaoguo 1600 wan ren, reng zai jixu cengchang« 我國基督教信徒超過 1600 萬人，仍在繼續增長 [China's Number of Protestant Believers is Over 16 Million and Continues to Grow], *Xinbuanet*, April 18, 2006 <news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2006-04/18/content_4442927.htm>.