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# The Tragic Irony of a Patriotic Mission: The Indigenous Leadership of Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, Radicalized Patriotism, and the Reversal of Protestant Missions in China

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**Abstract:** Motivated by a patriotic zeal for the national salvation of China, in the 1910s, US-trained Chinese intellectuals like Francis Wei and T. C. Chao embraced a progressive version of Protestantism. While Christian colleges established by liberal missionaries during this time initially contributed greatly to nurturing a generation of intellectual elites for China, its institutionalization of progressive ideas, and its tolerance and protection of revolutionary mobilization under extraterritorial rights, also unintendedly helped invigorate indigenous revolutionary movements. Meanwhile, in the 1920s, anti-Western and anti-Christian student movements radicalized in China's major urban centers. When the communist revolution showed more promise of granting China independence, Francis Wei and T. C. Chao became optimistic supporters. However, neither of them foresaw the reversal of China missions under the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the 1950s.

**Keywords:** Protestant missions; China; nationalism; Chinese communism

Over one hundred years ago, after a surge of Protestant missions in China through educational institution-building (e.g., the founding of thirteen Christian colleges), anti-foreign sentiments fermented, precipitating the Anti-Christian Movement (1921–1927), which then led the Republican Government to launch a nation-wide “Claim Back Education Rights” campaign. Secular liberals strived to nationalize and secularize all education, requiring Christian colleges to register and comply to new standards. After Christian educators compromised to gain a legal foothold, the Japanese invasion and subsequent nationalist movements again disrupted the social environment for Christian colleges. So, within the next two decades, a trend of rapid growth in education missions in China was reversed. Hostile social movements and later continued warfare forced foreign missionaries to retreat. This article brings Chinese Christian intellectual leaders back to the scene of this complicated phase of history. To understand the reversal of Protestant missions in China, we need to consider the complexity of the intellectual, as well as experiential, trajectories of these Chinese leaders who were active cross-cultural interpreters, but also products of their own time.

Both the tasks of indigenizing Christianity and of responding to rising anti-Christian hostility required Chinese Christian leaders to engage with society in the twentieth century. In particular, Western-trained Christian intellectual leaders like Francis Wei (1888–1976) and T. C. Chao (1888–1979), who stepped up as first-generation indigenous leaders in Christian higher education, actively engaged in the dual tasks of indigenizing Christianity and responding to anti-Christian hostility. Nevertheless, in this tumultuous time, their theological and social views with regard to Protestant Christianity, the spread of communism and Chinese society have undergone significant changes in

life. Later, nationalistic pride, pragmatism, and liberal tolerance also made them sympathetic to communist thought. After waves of radicalized patriotism and the dawning of a communist victory in the late 1940s, Wei and Chao enthusiastically supported a new communist regime. However, after the US-Korean War in 1951, the same patriotism that motivated the religious and intellectual commitments of these men worked against them. Not only were they forced to step down from leadership, but their past contributions were attacked as an unpatriotic promotion of Western imperialism.

In this article, we focus on how Chinese indigenous leadership engaged with and responded to the rise and fall of American Protestantism in the first half of the twentieth century. By examining the life trajectories, thoughts and contributions of two US-trained Chinese Christian intellectuals, Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, we identify the political, cultural and theological factors that contributed to the decline of Christian higher education missions. A popular saying testifies to Chao and Wei's comparable prominent statures among Chinese intellectuals in their time: *bei zhao nan wei*, which translates to "in China, one has to know T. C. Chao in the north and Francis Wei in the south."<sup>1</sup> Both played leadership roles in key Christian institutions such as colleges and associations. At the height of his career, T. C. Chao was the Dean of the Divinity School at Yenching University, "the flagship" of Christian colleges in China and "the voice" for liberal Protestant theology (Rosenbaum 2006). In collaboration with Harvard and Princeton, Yenching headed up the development of modernist curriculum in Chinese research universities (Rosenbaum 2006, p. 278). A year after being awarded an honorary doctorate from Princeton University, Chao was elected as one of the six co-presidents, representing Christians from East Asia at the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Enjoying an equally prestigious status, Francis Wei served as president of Huazhong (Central China) University in Wuhan from 1929 to 1952. He represented China twice in the Conference on Life and Work in Oxford and Edinburgh, once in the preparation meetings for the World Christian Council in the Netherlands, and taught at Yale University. Wei also spoke at Columbia University, held the first Henry Luce Visiting Professor of World Christianity at Union Seminary, and preached at Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral in the UK. Both Francis Wei and T. C. Chao inherited the spirit of reformism, self-strengthening and statecraft revival that were common traits of Chinese intellectuals since the late Qing crisis (Row 2009). As the first generation of Chinese Christian educators who treasured ideas of progress and tolerance, a quasi-religious patriotism for China was at the center of their life-long devotion.

## 1. American Protestantism and Christian Higher Education in China

While China has been a center of missionary work since the nineteenth-century, it had also been hard soil. By 1877, when the first Protestant missionary conference convened, traditional methods such as street evangelism and the distribution of gospel tracts were not producing desirable effects. It was not until the second missionary conference in 1890 that more leaders accepted the educational mission model. The eruption of violence by Boxers in 1900 led more to consider educational mission a better way to win respect from the Chinese. After all, the Chinese had a long tradition of valuing educated leadership. So, in the 1910s, western missionaries entering China began to take a different approach. Most American missionaries who came to China during this time still savored the traditional Protestant values of their parents' generation, but they also embraced ideas such as evolution, progress, moral virtue, social service, individualism, and other enlightenment ideas (Crunden 1982). Although they received better education than their parents, the colleges or universities they attended were becoming increasingly secular (Marsden 1996). Progressive concerns also brought about international implications via a revived interest in foreign mission in the 1910s. Historian George Marsden refers to the United States after World War I, as a society that lived with consequences of particularly "intensified hopes and fears, ... [and] brought out an aggressive and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peter Tze Ming Ng. "Lecture III: On T. C. Chao" (Ng 2006).

idealistic theological modernism.”<sup>2</sup> Many were interested in spreading democracy as much as the gospel as God’s plan for the New World. So, when American missionaries arrived in post-Boxer China, they searched for a more strategic approach to missions. Partnering with American philanthropists and distinguished research universities, such as Yale and Harvard, they not only founded Christian colleges in China, but also nurtured Chinese educators like Francis Wei and T. C. Chao.

By the 1910s, educational missions in China had undergone fast and surprising changes, creating a rare “niche market.” Primarily, the size and scale of educational projects underwent unprecedented expansion. For example, by 1914, the number of mission stations had more than quadrupled (from 1296) since the year 1888, and almost every mission station operated a school (Deng 1997). Such expansions invited more foreigners of liberal persuasions to join. By 1917, over seventy percent of American Protestants working in China came from liberal groups, as estimated by historian William Hutchison (Hutchison 1987). In the early 1920s, Protestant missions were operating 6599 elementary schools with 184,481 pupils, and 291 middle schools with 15,213 students.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the educational mission was no longer composed of primary-level schools; Christian colleges were founded and expanded. China’s thirteen Christian colleges funded by American Protestant missionary societies reached over 3500 students in 1925.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, the Republican Chinese government only founded two public universities. This fast growth in educational mission was an acknowledged anomaly in global mission history (Sunquist 2017).<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the expansion of educational missions inevitably created Chinese churches’ over-dependence on foreign funding. The overdevelopment of universities outstripped the growth of the indigenous church (Sunquist 2017).<sup>6</sup> Although higher education missions embraced Western liberal theological trends of this era and succeeded in training indigenous leaders, it simultaneously exacerbated the gap between educated Chinese Christians and existing indigenous churches. Liberal organizations such as the YMCA attracted more young leaders who had studied overseas.<sup>7</sup> As a result, indigenous churches in China were increasingly divided by the spread of liberal Protestantism (Lian 2013).<sup>8</sup> Take US-trained Christian intellectuals such as Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, for example. Both found themselves quite detached from more conservative rank and file churches in China (Liang 2010).

Representing the first indigenous leadership in China’s best Christian colleges in the 1920s, Francis Wei and T. C. Chao are often viewed as two of the most prominent advocates for liberal Protestantism mission through Christian higher education and Christianity’s indigenization in China. Although both were US-trained, the complexity of their intellectual as well as experiential trajectories cannot be reduced to the fact that they were merely passive recipients of American liberal thoughts. Nor was liberal Protestantism alone to blame for the dramatic missional reversal from the 1920s to the 1950s. We argue that there were a diverse range of parameters, such as geo-political conflicts, regime changes, social movements, and individual-level ideological shifts, that coalesced with historical circumstances to produce this outcome in China. In the following sections, we divide their historiographies into five phases: (1) reception of Western-style education, (2) advocacy for liberal Protestantism to save China, (3) response to radical patriotism and revolutionary impulses, (4) assumption of indigenous Christian leadership, (5) sympathy with Chinese communists. In each phase, after reviewing the overall social climate in which Wei’s and Chao’s life trajectories and

<sup>2</sup> Theological liberalism and mission strategies in China became a focal point in the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy which divided American evangelicals in the 1920s and 1930s (Marsden 2006). (Deng 1997, p. 68).

<sup>3</sup> (Deng 1997, p. 68).  
<sup>4</sup> (Bays and Ellen 2009, Deng 1997, p. 69).

<sup>5</sup> Sunquist. *Explorations in Asian Christianity*, p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> Sunquist. *Explorations in Asian Christianity*, p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> (Liang 2010, p. 55). Many used their participation in YMCA events as an excuse for not becoming a member of any local church.

<sup>8</sup> A well-known evangelical fundamentalist, Wang Mingdao, once proffered the YMCA as a prime example of “adulterated Christianity” and liberal reforms as “fake medicine.” Wang, Mingdao. “A Voice Crying in a World of Evils,” in the *Collected Works of Wang Mingdao*, Volume 1, 202. Cited in (Lian 2010).

reflections were embedded, we offer an analysis of their respective contributions. In the concluding section, we revisit some overarching themes that help explain their patriotic commitments.

## 2. Recipients of Western-Style Education (1900s–1910s)

With the collapse of imperial social order in the early 1900s, China had to search for remedy and look to the West. After the abolition of the 1300-year-old Imperial Exam in 1905, more and more students attended mission schools to learn English so they could do business with foreigners, a route of upward social mobility previously unavailable. Even conservative Confucian families considered sending their children to mission schools that taught English.<sup>9</sup> It was against this backdrop that opportunism also became prevalent in business and politics. Although missionaries optimistically envisioned training a generation of “selfless Chinese leaders” for the church and society, some educational projects, in many cases, churned out students who “either became unscrupulous businessmen or self-serving politicians.” (Trexler 1991). After the Nationalist Revolution in 1911, many leaders of the Republic of China government and military, such as Sun Yat-sen, were known as baptized Christians with a liberal and reformist accent. It seemed that the missionaries’ desire for Christianity to gain respect and desirability was being realized. Westerner’s uninformed optimism is best shown in the example of Yuan Shi-kai, the president of the new Chinese republic, who in 1913, set aside a day for prayer for the newly formed Chinese parliament. This excited Americans, who considered it as the fulfillment of their missionary purpose—the beginning of a Christian China. According to the *Christian Herald*, the day of prayer echoed no other than the victories of Constantine and Charlemagne “in subjecting pagan nations to the yoke of Christ.” (Latourette 2009). Some even called it China’s first “Christian Republic.” (Vincent and Palmer 2011).

The son of a merchant, Francis Wei (also known as Wei Zhuomin) first received a classical Chinese education until he was aged fourteen. Then, his father sent Wei to Macao for English study. Later, Wei returned and attended a missionary middle school in Wuhan.<sup>10</sup> During this time (1904–1905), because missionary schools were protected by extra-territorial laws, they became vibrant places where anti-Qing and revolutionary speech was tolerated and flourished. Francis Wei himself once wrote that “some people with revolutionary thoughts used the church as a protection.” (Wei 2016a). They organized reading clubs and seminars, propagating revolutionary and nationalistic thoughts. Wei recalls that “some students organized crusades under the guise of evangelism, but they were actually propagating about revolutions.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, during this time, although Wei’s father forbade him from accepting Christianity, Wei became increasingly inclined towards this religion.

At the age of twenty, Wei completed his graduation thesis, titled *Religious Beliefs of the Ancient Chinese and Their Influence on the National Character of the Chinese People* (1908). A Shanghai-based journal, *The Chinese Recorder*, published it in 1911, as the first English article written by a Chinese person. In this article, Wei wrote that the concept of God is not particular to the West or Christianity, for all humanity (ancient Chinese included) had a God-worshipping culture. Wei also discussed the revolutionary traditions in ancient China, implying the necessity of a revolution for his time. Lastly, Wei considered a new religion (Christianity) as potentially influential for this ancient empire.<sup>12</sup> Due to Wei’s academic excellence, after graduation, he stayed in Wuhan Wenhua College as an instructor. Wei later befriended a chemistry teacher from Yale, who impressed him with deep Christian love. He was then baptized and formally committed to the Christian religion. As he recalled, “spiritually I have been captured by the spirit of Christ, so after graduation, I turned against the religion of my father who warned me not to ‘eat a foreign religion’ and surrendered to Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The use of a Western language in mission schools is just one example of many cultural trends that first flourished but would later ferment dramatically in the anti-foreign movements, when good mastery of English was criticized as a sin in favoring Western imperialists.

<sup>10</sup> (Wei 1997) Or see (Li and Zhang 2010, pp. 1–3).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> (Wei 2016a, pp. 80–81).

<sup>13</sup> (Wei 2016a, p. 81).

Francis Wei further studied for a Master's degree under the president of this college and two other professors. At the age of twenty-seven, he completed a Master's thesis titled *The Political Thought of Mencius* (1915), which was published by the Christian Literature Society, founded by British missionary pioneer Timothy Richard in Shanghai. In this thesis, Wei affirmed Mencius' contribution, but attributed Mencius' lack of practical suggestions for China's political life to the lack of belief in supernatural powers. In order to live out her political ideals, Wei wrote, China needed new religious inspirations. Wei considered Christianity fit for the job: "Only Christianity was founded by Jesus Christ, the only son of God. He is God and man, the true Lord, such as predicted by Mencius, the kingly flourisher, whom Mencius waited for but did not meet." (Wei 2016b). These writings by the young Francis Wei gained him great fame in the Anglican church and churches across China. Wei himself even marveled that "I had not expected that I became somebody after that."<sup>14</sup> An Anglican priest helped him apply for funding at Harvard University, where Wei studied with William E. Hocking, a philosopher of idealism.<sup>15</sup> In 1920, Wei returned with a Master's degree to teach at Boone College in Wuhan as Professor of Philosophy.

T. C. Chao's life had many parallels to that of Francis Wei. Born into a declining merchant family, T. C. Chao (also known as Zhao Zichen) also had a classical Chinese education in his youth. Since his mother practiced Buddhism, Chao had an early curiosity about religion.<sup>16</sup> He was also a sincere mystic and even performed as a Taoist monk at a local festival ceremony. Then at age fifteen, he decided to transfer into a mission school. On Chao's choice for western-style education, his parents favored the learning of the English language as a skill for his future business profession. His father repeatedly cautioned him "not to abandon the ancestors" by embracing a foreign religion. When he became a baptized Christian while attending Soochow University, Chao's conversion strained his relationships with his family. However, Chao patiently continued conversations with his family members by presenting Jesus Christ as "the best Confucian sage." He eventually succeeded at convincing his wife and parents that the teachings of Christianity were indeed compatible with Confucian ethics.

Chao was also motivated by world evangelist John Mott's claim at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, that China would be Christianized in one generation. Chao embraced this vision as his own calling from God. In 1917, Chao went abroad to study theology, sociology, and philosophy in Vanderbilt University and later obtained a B.A. and then a M.A. degree in theology and sociology. His graduation thesis was *The Problem of Evil*. His academic records surpassed his American peers, and he was honored with the University Founder's Medal. Although Chao wrote little about his educational experience at Vanderbilt University, there was a noticeable change in his faith. When he engaged in campus evangelism at Soochow University prior to his overseas experience, Chao often used traditional theological terms, such as sin, personal salvation, heaven, and hell. However, after his return from the US, Chao became inclined to a more scientific, ethical, and social version of Christianity (West 1976). He apparently turned from a more pietistic and mystic past. Chao wrote in 1920 that "in the West today there are great outbursts of religious fervor and upheavals of religious forces" and he would like college students in China to know them (Chao 2009a).

Francis Wei's and T. C. Chao's early exposures to western-style education in China were both accompanied by warnings from their fathers about not following the foreign religion of Christianity. It would jeopardize their Chinese ethnicity and filial duties. However, both families endorsed their education out of pragmatism when China's local industries waned in a time of foreign business

<sup>14</sup> (Wei 2016a, p. 81).

<sup>15</sup> Although Wei never explicitly commented on his overseas study experience, his later disapproval of sending young students abroad in the 1930s reveals that it probably left him with mixed feelings, both accomplishment and detachment. Speaking to young students and educators in the 1930s, he commented that "the loss of Chinese cultural background for a student going abroad before his intellectual maturity more than counter-balances whatever advantages he may get from travel and contact with another civilization." See (Wei 2016g).

<sup>16</sup> Chao wrote two biographical accounts of his childhood titled "My Religious Experience," addressing young Chinese intellectuals.

boom. Their overseas study in America was made possible through the same program funded by the Boxer Indemnity.<sup>17</sup> As recipients of western-style education, both in China and overseas, Wei and Chao gradually found in Protestantism a vehicle to realize their patriotic desires. They shared a lot in common when it comes to how liberal Protestantism can help China. However, compared with Francis Wei, Chao's views on how Chinese traditional culture relates to Christianity underwent significant changes over time. Take Confucianism, for example. Although defending Christianity as compatible with Confucianism early on, within a few years, in an article titled *Christianity and Confucianism* (1927), Chao stated that "The restlessness of the human soul will find Confucianism utterly inadequate to meet its deep needs. It needs the mystery of salvation that comes to man from a source both internal and external to himself." (Chao 1927). Throughout his life, T. C. Chao's understandings with regard to how Christianity relates to Chinese culture had more shifts and syntheses.

### 3. Advocates for Liberal Protestantism to Save China (1910s–1920s)

In 1920, when John R. Mott and Sherwood Eddy, two well-known world liberal Christian crusaders, preached to young students in China, promoting western civilization and Christianity, they estimated that the Chinese would be ready to embrace both the ideas of progress and Christianity (Lian 2013). These teachings did capture many young Chinese Christian intellectuals, who were generally enamored by a progressive view of history, confidence in Christian civilization, intense patriotism, and high hope for China's national rejuvenation (Wu 2017). Many favored Christianity as the best remedy for saving the Chinese national identity and civilization from extinction (Fairbank 1992). They self-consciously claimed a collective calling of ushering a reform, or even a revolution if needed. Their experiences help to illustrate both the appeal of American Protestantism to Chinese intellectuals, as well as its tension with the Chinese nationalistic identity.

The liberal accent of Francis Wei's Christian faith is shown in how he treated the basics of Christian doctrines in his article titled "Ten Lectures on the Apostles' Creed." (Wei 2016h). He dismissed the virgin birth as "not essential" and concluded "we ought not pursue the basis of such traditional stories."<sup>18</sup> Mentioning the influence of his liberal Harvard professor Kirshop Lake, Wei also cast doubt on the authenticity of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>19</sup> Wei held a developmental and scientific view of history: "when science is more developed, God's will is more revealed too."<sup>20</sup> He dismissed the doctrine of the final divine judgment, by saying that "most Christian ideas about the future are speculations... like uncertain and ambiguous metaphors."<sup>21</sup> In addition, Wei also admitted that his "personal theology leans towards universalism" and stated "when all people in history and now submit to God, then the final judgment will begin."<sup>22</sup> He viewed ecumenism as "the direction of the Holy Spirit... for prophetic leaders of the church."<sup>23</sup> Wei's earlier universalist view is consistent with his later career trajectory as an influential promoter of ecumenical movements.

During this time, T. C. Chao also embraced science and progressive thoughts as "new blood" for modern society (Chao 2009a). "When new thoughts come in," he said, "the superstition within religions no longer holds, and thus religion needs to be renewed in order to adapt." He further listed evolution, socialism, humanitarianism, and empiricism as "good examples of such re-orientation." (Chao 2007a). Regarding the mission of Christianity, he thought China presented an opportunity as well as a crisis for its adaptability. Reforms to revamp the political institutions and cultural movements and to critique traditionalism in the Chinese society required the Christian gospel to

<sup>17</sup> The United States believed that the Boxer violence against foreigners was due to a lack of education (Elleman 1998).

<sup>18</sup> (Wei 2016h, p. 86.)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

“adapt, mentor, change and move” China’s fledgling nationalistic awareness (Chao 2007b). Chao continued his usual eclectic approach and wrote in 1925 that:

Blind indeed is he who being Christian cannot see the word ‘atonement’ written large in any mathematical proposition, in the precipitate of a chemical solution, in the molecular theory, in the theory of evolution, in the great historical and social movements throughout human experience, in literature, art, philosophy and religion. (Chao 2009b)

Based on this historical argument, he challenged “the old version” that includes “heaven, judgment, end time and the return of Christ” but embraced the “new version” of the Social Gospel (Chao 2007c). He wrote that “the ultimate goal of all our efforts” is “to save souls” as well as “to save the nation.” By the latter, he meant “to help China achieve equal status with other nations and fulfil her potential.” An ardent patriot, Chao seemed to regard Christianity as the means and national salvation as the end by admitting that “all that uses Christ for the good cause can serve as our end goal.”

During this time, both Wei’s and Chao’s indigenizing efforts to make Christianity relevant to the endangered fate of China largely followed a utilitarian approach. They both advocated for Christianity to fit the Chinese context. A slight difference lies in Francis Wei’s relatively more conservative cultural emphasis on the organic nature of history for a nation which forms the foundation of a civilization. It is based on this historical argument that he challenged a rigid and mechanic replication of western Christianity in China. This is also why Wei stressed that indigenization needs to be done by the Chinese themselves. In comparison, T. C. Chao resorted to the importance of a Social Gospel for China. By a Chinese Social Gospel, Chao not only proposed an indigenized Christianity, but a religion that would foster social solidarity among the Chinese (Chao 2007d). It would entail fulfilling Christ in society, he argued. Intentionally distinguishing institutional churches from Christian individuals, Chao thought that churches “should not manage the government or participate in politics, economics, or social movements, but Christian believers should engage in all.” (Chao 2007c). Due to this understanding, Chao considered Christianity and revolutionary thoughts as sharing something in common. However, he stressed that the former does not achieve the social goals, not through violence.

#### 4. Responding to Radicalized Patriotism and Revolutionary Impulses (1920s)

Since the late Qing dynasty, China’s involvement in geo-political conflicts had left profound imprints on Chinese society. By 1919, grassroots Chinese resistance to the diplomatic failures of their governments and to foreign invasion grew from popular uprisings to radicalized student movements and later revolutionary impulses. For example, waves of social movements after the May Fourth Movement by college students in 1919 revived the later Anti-Christian Movement, which brought attacks on missionary institutions such as the YMCA and Christian colleges. Within two years the Chinese Communist Party was founded. It not only fused patriotism with a Chinese identity that had little to do with Christianity, but also served as a harbinger of a hostile intellectual trend among the educated secular elite.<sup>24</sup> The earliest communist leaders viewed Christian organizations such as the YMCA and the YWCA as popular but competing influences among students (Tao and Leung 2003, pp. 116, 122). In fact, many early communist leaders joined the YMCA to learn successful mobilization strategies.<sup>25</sup>

Embedded within such popular anti-foreign resistance was the Anti-Christian Movement (1921–1927) (Hodous 1930; Tatsuro and Sumiko 1953; Cohen 1961), a campaign which was preceded and triggered by the publication of *The Christian Occupation of China* (1922), a large-scale study of China’s Protestant Christian churches and ministries. Although a supposed preparation for turning church

<sup>24</sup> In fact, Chinese nationalism also went through a process of metamorphosis: conceived in military defeat around 1905, born through the May Fourth Movement in 1919, and matured into a more radical anti-Christian form by the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925 (Chow 1960).

<sup>25</sup> One founding member of Chinese Communist Party Yun Daiying was active in the YMCA before 1920 (Han 1988; Tan and Yu 2009).

leadership to the Chinese, the book's militant title invited hostile responses from the Chinese public. Scholars who study the historical context of this time list "the growth of national feeling, the spread of the spirit of new learning, the support which Christianity gave to the warring countries, the attitude of indifference of the Peace Conference to the problems of the Far East and of China, the lack of recognition by the League of Nations given to China, the example of soviet Russia and of Turkey, and last but not least the influence of Chinese returned students from Russia and France" as causes that have "added to the rising tide of hostility to the Christian cause." (Hodous 1930). Meanwhile, the spread of communism from Russia has formed an alternative ideology to compete with Christianity. As early as 1920, Soviet leaders strategically canceled the unequal treaties with China, in order to win her over as a communist ally. This important step freed the Soviet Union from Chinese charges of imperialism and won the goodwill of the Chinese, especially secular intellectuals. In contrast, some Western missionaries only proposed treaty revision but never overthrew them (Varg 1965). Russian Communists found fertile soil among Chinese intelligentsia for the spread of their ideas.

In 1923, a "Claim Back Education Rights" campaign by the Republican government triggered a nation-wide popular movement against Christian colleges. Educational sovereignty became the rallying point of secular intellectuals against the massive Christian presence in higher education. Leading secular scholars such as Hu Shih, Ding Wenjiang, and Tao Menghe argued that education should not serve as an instrument for religion.<sup>26</sup> Cai Yuanpei, the renowned chancellor of Beijing University, called for the separation of education and religion and argued that good morals could be cultivated through aesthetic education instead.<sup>27</sup> Their views profoundly shaped the ethos of young students. Progressive public opinions were shifting. For example, *Young China* magazine, founded by the anti-imperialist Young China Association, published three issues about similar discussions against Christian education.<sup>28</sup> In 1925, the Republican government's Ministry of Education banned proselyting, even on private college campuses founded by foreigners.<sup>29</sup> Another group of Chinese intellectuals attacked Christianity with an awareness of growing secularism in the West. They affirmed that China could learn from the West without accepting Christianity.

In 1924, Francis Wei published an article titled *On the Preservation of Chinese Culture and Morality in a Changing Condition*. He pointed out that radical reformers in China, who accused Chinese culture for having inhibited social progress and thought that they should thus be abolished, were actually promoting a Social Darwinism. These people saw the need of social competition, but neglected the organic nature of historical foundation of civilization. One cannot abandon Chinese culture altogether, because it was based on historical traditions that had their own merits. So, the key problem lies in how to transform tradition through Christian truths. In 1926, Francis Wei gave a speech in Shanghai, "Making Christianity Alive in China." (Wei 2016f). He stressed that churches in China need to reflect on their own history, culture and social background when indigenizing the Christian religion. Wei listed a few criteria for such indigenization: leadership positions by indigenous people, congregational and liturgical ceremonies with Chinese cultural elements, and independence from foreign denominations in church governance and management (Wei 2016i).

From 1926 to 1928, with the goal of unifying China, the Nationalist Party initiated the Northern Expedition, a military campaign against the Beiyang government and warlords. Francis Wei published his supportive views, with emphasis on the necessity of an indigenous Christianity. He even claimed that "the success of Christianity is determined by how it responds to the revolutionary movements." (Wei 1927). Wei affirmed that his university could continue "because we have adopted a collaborative attitude towards students, workers and the revolutionary movement."<sup>30</sup> He encouraged students to join the revolution if their Christian conscience did not deter them. "If

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<sup>26</sup> (Deng 1997, p. 74)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Wei, Francis. Viewpoints on Present Situation: Some Aspects of the Relation of the 'People's Revolution' to the Christian Movement (Wei 1927, pp. 32–33).



Christians stay put,” Wei wrote, “they might lose the rare opportunity of positive impact brought by this profoundly meaningful revolutionary movement.”<sup>31</sup> In September of 1927, Wei went to London University as a doctoral student and studied with philosopher and social liberalist Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse. Two years later, Francis Wei completed his doctoral dissertation, titled *A Study of The Chinese Moral Tradition and Its Social Value*. Afterwards, Wei was invited to become the first Chinese president of Hua Chung University (its predecessor institution was Yale-in-China) in Wuhan. While in this position, he wrote on the goal of Christian colleges as places nurturing future leaders for China. “When this great nation faces fateful decisions at crossroads, these leaders will be able to discern the many complicated issues facing the next generations and the nation as a whole.”<sup>32</sup>

These statements by Francis Wei represent a very typical stance among Chinese Christian intellectuals of that time. They were actively reflecting on how the indigenization of Christianity could be realized in a heightened nationalistic moment. They expected Christianity to gain its legitimate and respectful status by joining in the Chinese revolution. Only through this way could they counter the emerging criticisms from secular Chinese intellectuals during the anti-Christian movement. Christianity may serve as an intellectual force in driving social progress. This mentality became an inherent motif within Christian education circles with regard to Christianity’s relevance with China’s political future.

In comparison, T. C. Chao’s response during the Anti-Christianity Movement was more of self-criticism on behalf of Chinese Christians. His optimism for the role of liberal Protestantism did not dampen his critical reflections on foreign mission work in China. In 1923, Chao humbly admitted the many “weaknesses” of Chinese Christianity: “it ...tolerates filth and chaos within, which made it powerless to respond.” (Chao 2007e). He criticized it as arbitrary in theology, over-ritualized, morally disappointing, collaborative with capitalism, while lacking economic justice and authentic unity, tolerant of deceits, and narrow in mission scope.<sup>33</sup> Chao was also critical of many manipulative behaviors of some missionaries. He saw the divide between Christian intellectuals and secular scholars and lamented the first group’s inability to take over “such intellectual leadership”, because “the way of thinking within the church has become stale and increasingly autocratic.”<sup>34</sup> Chao pointed out causes such as fundamental Biblicism and adherence to orthodoxy, which irritated secular intellectuals and the general public in China. By way of a constructive response, Chao offered a cosmopolitan defense for the church’s association with the West. He praised the church in China as “a laboratory for international living.” (Chao 2007f). While confident in the advantage of international collaboration, however, Chao did admit again that Western control over Chinese Christianity made indigenization a difficult and prolonged process. Churches in China did look like “a worn-out suit” with western characteristics.<sup>35</sup> He even showed sympathy to anti-Christian claims, by provocatively asking “Is Christ coming to claim our nation? Is he coming to humiliate us?” Chao pointed out that Chinese converts’ tendency to seek foreign protection and foreigners’ distrust towards indigenous leaders had jointly led to this current hostility from their neighbors. No wonder “we are called by our own countrymen ‘foreign slaves,’” he said. Chao even boldly said that “such foreign protection and the indemnity transferred from foreigners were obstacles for the preaching of the gospel.”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Chao also later criticized the anti-Christian movement as “a blind juxtaposition of things without a historical perspective,” for secular intellectuals failed to grasp that “Western civilization cannot be understood without Christianity just as a man cannot walk without life.”<sup>37</sup>

During this time, Wei and Chao actively responded to the anti-Christian campaigns. Francis Wei continued to emphasize the importance of Christian higher education in preparing future leadership

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Wei, “The Goal of Christian Education” (1930) in *Hankou Communication*, included in (Li and Zhang 2010, pp. 58–59).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 118–19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 160–62.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 165.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

for China. He warned Chinese Christians of their lack of activism. In comparison, Chao was more vocal in addressing the problems of corruption within the Chinese church, over-reliance on the West, and missionaries' delayed handover to indigenous leadership. Chao's cosmopolitan defense for the Christian cause seemed quite weak, for after all, communism also appeared progressive and cosmopolitan to secular Chinese intellectuals.

Amid his rebuttals to anti-Christian agitators, Chao stressed the importance of winning secular scholars' friendship towards Christianity, because "[t]hese men are bound to influence greatly the collective life and activities of the nation. Their ideals will certainly become the common ideals of Chinese society." (Chao 2009c). Additionally, he was still optimistic that "they are the most open-minded element of the Chinese nation."<sup>38</sup> However, Chao had overestimated the "open-mindedness" of these secular scholars, whose patriotic identities, just like Chao's own, would finally become definitive in shaping their approach. The intellectual battlefield was surrendered to Marxism, partly because of the overwhelmingly intense patriotic sentiments on all sides. During this time, many notable Chinese intellectuals of this time had traveled the road from liberal Protestantism to communism. For example, the founding father of Chinese Communist Party and its first Chairman-elect, Chen Duxiu, had an early exposure to Christianity and was an admirer of Jesus. Writing in 1920, Chen admitted being attracted by "the personality of Jesus." (Chen 1965). He praised Christianity for being an "extremely effective religion" and observed that "Confucianism has not seemed to be able to combat it." He wanted to boost the image of Christianity among Chinese intellectuals. However, soon after his short pilgrimage, Chen grew disappointed with Christianity, because he was not satisfied with its promise of national salvation for China.

Championing the option to "sinicize" (to make something Chinese) or to synthesize Christianity with other liberal ideals, Francis Wei, T. C. Chao and other Christian Chinese intellectuals were scorned by other camps of educated Chinese people. Their voices were drowned out by other popular radical agendas. Imprinted with liberal pragmatism, both Wei and Chao demonstrated favorable tolerance towards communism as another ideological resource in China's crucial revolutionary moment. Nevertheless, Francis Wei was cautious about the Social Darwinist side of Chinese communism, and T. C. Chao was concerned about its tendency for violence.

## 5. Rise to Indigenous Christian Leadership (late 1920s to 1940s)

In the late 1920s, Francis Wei and T. C. Chao became the first Chinese Christian leaders in their respective higher education institutions. They actively engaged in works of administration, teaching, writing, and conferencing. Even during the anti-Japanese war, both of them continued to be active in international mission circles. However, in the 1930s, the Japanese war further destabilized the educational missions. For both Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, their path of indigenous leadership became troubled and truncated. Nevertheless, patriotism remained an enduring theme of their pursuits.

Francis Wei continued to synthesize many cultural elements of Confucianism with Christianity. Take ancestor worship, a common practice in Chinese society, for example. Wei thought that it "does not conflict with Christian doctrines, but rather unites with the doctrine of the communion of saints." (Wei 2016j). Wei also tried to reconcile Christianity with the New Culture Movement, by emphasizing the ideal of "Da Tong (great community)" as a unifying principle which surpasses ethnic, national and other boundaries.<sup>39</sup> He commended Christianity as an "agile" and adaptable religion, by reasoning that "Christianity has fought out its issues with the natural sciences, has passed through the pursuit of scientific study of itself as an object, its 'higher criticism,' its comparative science of religion, its psychology of religion." (Wei 2016k).

Wei also persisted in advocating that the mission of Christian higher education could save China. He said that the purpose of the Christian college was first of all "to provide for the youth of China a college education of high standards with a view to developing character and intellectual

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

capacity... in order that they may be loyal and useful citizens of China.” (Wei 2016l). Further, as “a part of the Christian movement in China to spread Christianity,” the college should help to “formulate an intelligent and reasonable policy for the program of Christianizing life in China, both individual and social, as an integral part of the promotion of Christian culture in the world, and to try to think through problems confronting Christendom in the present day world.”<sup>40</sup> A few years later, Wei optimistically reflected on his administration at Hua Chung College and celebrated that “only American optimism, British fair play and Chinese good humor plus Christian charity could make the enterprise a success.” (Wei 2016m). He also hoped that this college would “make forceful and lasting impact[s] upon the life and thought of the nation as a whole, to make our Christian contribution to the reconstruction of China” and to revive “this oldest country seeking to become young again.”<sup>41</sup> Wei made preserving Christian higher education his top priority, even when the Japanese war broke out in 1937. Although many higher education institutions either suspended classes or moved to interior regions of China, Wei stressed that “the great task of modernizing China has just begun,” and that “had this progress been uninterrupted, we would soon be able to catch up with the American universities and colleges.” (Wei 2016n). Nevertheless, he later came to the approval of “[war-time] migration of many institutions... into the more backward parts of the country”, so that young students were protected from joining the fighting forces.<sup>42</sup> Wei said that since “it takes many years to bring them up to the university level... should they all be massacred in this war, there would be a serious gap in the intellectual life of the nation.”

Raising the stakes of the educational mission, Wei was especially gifted at integrating Chinese and biblical images in his persuasive speeches. Trying to help raise funds for his college during China’s civil war, Wei emphasized the need for indigenous “educated leadership”: “For centuries the people of China have been taught by their sages to believe that men live not only by bread alone, but must, for the existence of the nation, retain at all costs the accumulated experiences of the past.” (Wei 2016o). He stressed that the Chinese “have learned to look to an educated leadership.”<sup>43</sup> In 1940, he published an article titled “Education in Wartime China.” In it, Wei stressed that the goal of education for a nation is to counter the cultural invasion and brainwashing suffered by the youth, as a way to preserve the spiritual civilization of a nation (Wei 2016c). To him, the mission of a Chinese scholar through commitment to higher education is “for serving the highest interests of the nation.” (Wei 2016d). After the war, in 1946, Francis Wei again proposed that the goal of Christian education is not just for evangelism, but also for nurturing knowledgeable leaders. “For Christianity to become a creative force in China, do we just rely on the increasing number of Christians each year? Or its impact on changing the culture of this nation?” (Wei 2016e). This rationale did not change much until the Civil War, when Wei continued to advocate for the educational mission, so that “the church in China” could “command the respect of the people.” (Wei 1946). Wei hoped that Christian academic leadership could obtain the same authority in China as it had in the US.

Benefiting from the extraterritorial rights guaranteed by unequal treaties, China’s foreign-founded Christian colleges, including schools where Wei and Chao worked as administrators and professors, became freer hubs, where all streams of intellectual thoughts were circulated and discussed. In the 1930s, communist thought spread quickly among students in these Christian colleges.<sup>44</sup> Such developments were even observed by conservatives in America, who lamented the fact that schools in China had been turned into “strongholds of the modernists” where “children of the Chinese Christians... are initiated into the first principles of Modernism.” (Trumbull 1935). They were also alarmed by Yenching University’s “drift away towards the extreme left... and [that it] advocated Soviet ideas among the students.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 124–25.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Although there are no statistics, many memoirs mention this phenomenon. See (Cheng 2010; Chao 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Meanwhile, when Chinese communists shifted their strong anti-Christian rhetoric to protest against Japanese imperialism in 1936, they showed friendliness towards American missionaries, who reciprocated with increasing commendation. American missionary Lewis Gilbert wrote that “[Chinese communists] they are earnest, idealistic, unselfish, honest, determined—*determined to get something done for others.*”<sup>46</sup> Missionaries had positive hopes for students who joined the Communist propaganda work, that they would influence the revolutionists in Christian ways.<sup>47</sup> Some missionaries, like Hugh Hubbard, went so far as to assist the Communist guerrillas in rural China.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, it did not occur to them that they were assisting a social trend (or a consolidating young regime) that, under intensified geopolitical conflicts, would completely sever the ties between Chinese Christianity and the outside world.

Compared to the more predictable developments in the life of Francis Wei, T. C. Chao’s life and thought underwent dramatic changes in the 1930s and 1940s, partly due to his imprisonment by the Japanese. In the 1930s, T. C. Chao continued his liberal Christian apologetics by affirming that the belief in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is “also a matter of ethical concern and social consequence”, especially during a “national crisis of China.” (Chao 2009a). As a nation that had become only “superficially modernized,” China faced international hostility, that was trying to “rob her of her sovereign rights.”<sup>49</sup> He reckoned that the world’s economy was “in a fundamentally wrong system”, which “needs deliverance from its troubles.” China’s struggle to exist as an independent nation “constitutes a challenge to the Christian religion” because Chinese Christians must be concerned with “the moral implications of the crisis.”<sup>50</sup> Chao stated that this crisis is also a challenge “for all the missionaries who work in China.”<sup>51</sup>

After the Japanese occupation of China, Chao and other faculties of Yenching University were imprisoned in 1941 for their American connections. This treatment marked a milestone for him to turn away from liberal theology. Burdened by intense human suffering and unjust war, Chao discarded some of his earlier optimism. A few supernatural dreams during this difficult time of prison life sustained his faith, and he wrote:

Although I did not believe in dreams, whenever there was a trial, I always had a dream to show what was about to happen. Can God really reveal His guidance through dreams? Was God encouraging me through it during my weakest days? Could scientists explain these away by mere psychological effects?<sup>52</sup>

Chao even evangelized a few unbelieving inmates, by telling them that “the Lord saves,”<sup>53</sup> which sounded more like the “old version” of the Gospel that he used to criticize. Later, a period of solitary confinement intensified his penitence. As Chao wrote, “The Japanese have isolated me from others, and the only communication I had was between myself and God.”<sup>54</sup> During his sickness in a dark cell, Chao lamented that “the world is soaked in sin, and as a Chinese intellectual, I had to repent deeply for my sin.” (Chao 2004). He recalled spending hours of penitence and prayers before God. Chao found himself drawing closer to a revelation-centered neo-orthodox theology, two years after his translation and critique of Karl Barth’s works. “My pride was subdued in jail, and I then submitted to the Bible. I used to believe only in the personality of Jesus, .... However, then I understood why the death of Jesus was the only salvation.”<sup>55</sup> He thus embraced the historic Christian idea that “Jesus

<sup>46</sup> Lewis Gilbert, Tehchow, Jan 1937, ABCFM, Vol. 67, item 163. Quoted in (Liu 1966, p. 289).

<sup>47</sup> Harold Robinson, Tehchow, Aug 17, 1938, ABCFM, Vol. 70, item 331. Quoted in (Liu 1966, p. 286).

<sup>48</sup> Diary of Hugh Hubbard, May 18, 1938, ABCFM, Vol. 69, item 258. Quoted in (Liu 1966, p. 287).

<sup>49</sup> (Chao 2009d, p. 399).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 401.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 419.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 433.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

indeed took our place in suffering. ... He died in our place so that we can be forgiven.”<sup>56</sup> After this intense experience, Chao began to produce a prolific collection of works.

Through teaching, lecturing, writing and conferencing, both Wei and Chao strove to achieve two goals: for Christianity to take root in China through reconciling with and transforming indigenous history and culture, and for Christianity to play a transformative role in the social progress of Chinese society. While Francis Wei largely continued his earlier convictions, T. C. Chao experienced a transformation in a Japanese prison, which made him abandon some of his previous liberal theological positions. Instead, Chao rediscovered the relevance of historical Christianity to human suffering. However, this humiliating experience also fueled Chao’s patriotism to a higher level.

## 6. Sympathy and Support for Communists (1940s to 1950s)

During and after the Civil War between the Nationalists and Communists, both Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, although not without reservations about revolutionary radicalism, showed increasing support for communism. As David Paton, a missionary of the same period, wrote, “although large numbers of intellectuals were educated in mission schools, they sided with the Communist Party rather than the church.” (Paton 1953). Such sympathetic attitudes were not unusual, even among American Protestant missionaries of that time. For example, Sherwood Eddy once approved Russian communism as “an application of practical Christianity on a vast scale... heralded by Russian leadership toward a humanly achieved millennium.”<sup>57</sup> Missionaries were prone to sympathize with Chinese Communists, as either sincere patriots or agrarian reformers. Some tried to convince their American donors that the anti-Christian sentiments among communist mobilizers did not reflect the true sentiments of the Chinese people (Trexler 1991). They tried to downplay the role of communism, by saying that “there is nothing in the old foundations of Chinese civilization that constitutes a basis for pessimism in this moment of distraction.”<sup>58</sup>

In 1941, at a political council held by the Chinese Republican Government, Francis Wei objected to another representative’s anti-communist speech, calling for collaboration between the two rival political parties. During the civil war in 1948, Wei protected a group of communist leaders from the police force of the Republican Government in Wuhan. In 1949, when the Nationalist Party arrested communist members and students in Wuhan, Liu Shaoning, a communist mobilizer in Huazhong University, came to Francis Wei for protection. Wei sought help from his American clergy friends who hid Liu from the government’s search.<sup>59</sup> Wei’s optimistic appraisal of the communist regime is also shown in a letter he wrote in 1950: “I do not think anybody should expect a more reasonable policy from the government with regard to Christian schools in times like these.”<sup>60</sup> Other Chinese intellectuals, such as Y. Z. Wu and T. C. Chao, also uttered similar praises for the new regime, hoping for the growth of Christianity to gain more freedom in communist China. In the same year that the US-Korean War broke out, Wei presided over a Christian association that collected donations for the People’s Liberation Army, to purchase ammunition for fighting the Americans.

T. C. Chao’s attitudes towards the possibility of communist victory were also shaped by an optimism about continued Christian presence in China and the true indigenization of the Chinese church. Despite changes in his theological convictions, after the prison experience under the hands of the Japanese, patriotism became even more acute for Chao, and this helped him lay down some previously held bias towards communism. Such sentiments were widely held. John Leighton Stuart, first President of Yenching University, who was imprisoned together with T. C. Chao by the Japanese in 1941, claimed that the “only guarantee against recurrent and ever more disastrous wars” was the “sublimation of patriotism.”<sup>61</sup> Chinese communism, though atheistic in nature, appeared to have a

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 460.

<sup>57</sup> See (Singer 2009, p. 199).

<sup>58</sup> *Yali Quarterly* 8:3 (March 1925), 6; *ibid.*, 11:1 (September 1927), 3. Quoted in (Trexler 1991).

<sup>59</sup> For Liu Shaoning’s memories about Francis Wei, see (Li and Zhang 2010, pp. 334–35).

<sup>60</sup> Francis Wei, “Letter from President Wei, Hua Chung University on March 9, 1950, *The Complete Collection of Francis Wei*. vol. 10, p. 489

<sup>61</sup> (Stuart 2012) Quoted in (West 1976, p. 50).

moral affinity with Christianity in their shared pursuits for equality and justice for all. Most important of all, Chinese communist leaders promised “three-self” principles that appealed to Chao, who had been pushing for Chinese Christianity’s self-governance.<sup>62</sup> Although the communists “openly declare that Christianity is the opiate of the people, founded upon the dreams of the human imagination,” and Chao also admitted the challenge of making “Christianity and communism ... live together in China,” he still believed that the church would soon enter into an age of opportunities (Chao 2007g). Like other liberal-minded administrators at Yenching, Chao respected the voice of progressive students, and this sympathy helped channel communist ideas back to influence them. In 1947, the first Chinese president of Yenching University, Lu Zhiwei, a good friend of T. C. Chao, wrote in a letter that “The Chinese Communist Party is the hope of China.”<sup>63</sup> In 1949, upon the independence of China under communist rule, T. C. Chao wrote a public letter of commendation of the new communist regime to the faculty and student body of Yenching University, saying “We who remain have reasons to rejoice in the success of the revolutionary forces, though we are by no means Communists ourselves.” (Chao 2007h). In keeping with the need to “modernize China,” Chao wrote, “the whole structure of Chinese society must be recreated. A revolution is necessary if the task cannot be accomplished by a process of evolution.”<sup>64</sup> He concluded by saying that “no thoughtful Christian in China can regard this unexpected speed without a deep sense of gratitude to God.”<sup>65</sup> Blinded by the enthusiasm for China’s national independence, T. C. Chao and Lu Zhiwei at Yenching University failed to foresee their impending tragedy in the near future.

Within two years of the new regime, China’s thirteen Christian colleges became the first casualties of the Communist takeover.<sup>66</sup> After the US-Korean War in 1951, a group of radical students publicly denounced and humiliated the faculty of Christian higher education institutions, including T. C. Chao and Lu Zhiwei as the “running dogs” of American imperialism. Even Lu’s daughter was mobilized to renounced him at a public denunciation meeting. Francis Wei, just one year after he was a delegate to the first conference of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (1951), formulated plans to rid the church of foreign connections, and intensified communist campaigns soon forced Wei to step down from his presidency of Huazhong University (previously known as Hua Chung College). Later, Wei was marginalized as an instructor in logic, and he spent the rest of his time writing on the philosophical thought of Immanuel Kant. After Maoist campaigns intensified after 1958, Francis Wei and T. C. Chao became common targets of persecution as rightists and pro-imperialists in their institutions. At an old age, Wei was sent down to the countryside for harsh “re-education” labor work, during the Cultural Revolution in 1969. Chao fared better physically, but lost his son-in-law Chen Mengjia, a poet and archeologist, who committed suicide in 1966. Chao’s daughter Lucy Chao became mentally ill afterwards. In their late life, Wei and Chao did not leave behind any writing about their Christian beliefs.<sup>67</sup> Missionary Bob Whyte comments with regret that “the only really promising Chinese theologian in the years leading to 1949 was T. C. Chao, but he was to fall silent before the Revolution and to end his days unsure of his belief in God.”<sup>68</sup>

## 7. Concluding Analysis

Historian Daniel Bays claimed that “the cultural frontier between the missionaries and Chinese society before 1949 looked important for understanding not only the American role but the growth of a Chinese Christianity.” (Bays 2006). It was a truly formative and traumatic time for the history of Chinese Christianity, with many mysteries still untangled. Chinese intellectuals seemed to have had a regrettably inopportune encounter with Protestant mission from the West. Since the late Qing Dynasty, they had been searching for ideas outside the Confucian tradition to save and strengthen

<sup>62</sup> “Three-self” refers to self-governance, self-support and self-propagation.

<sup>63</sup> (Chao 2009a, p. 201).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> (Deng 1997, p. 96).

<sup>67</sup> T. C. Chao wrote Chinese traditionally rhyming poems and a play, but few were preserved.

<sup>68</sup> “An Introduction,” in Paton, David. (Whyte 1953, p. 24).

China. They experimented with various paths of national salvation, through commercial industry, military rebuilding, cultural reconstruction, and religious renewal. In the 1910s, many Western-trained Chinese intellectuals, like Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, embraced a progressive version of Christianity, which they thought would offer a final solution. Eager to promote this religion, they even engaged in dialogues trying to make Jesus a revolutionist, a humanist, or a passionate nationalist, so that imitating Jesus meant “guarding one’s own motherland until shedding the last drop of blood as he did.” (Jun 1996).

In a revived market of ideas since the 1920s, liberal Protestant theology competed with the libertarian values, humanism, Soviet Communism, and Confucian conservatism in China. Secular Chinese intellectuals criticized Christianity, because they thought that Buddha came to China riding an elephant, while Jesus’ ambassadors arrived with gunboats.<sup>69</sup> In comparison with secular ideologies from the West and Russia, Christianity enjoyed less advantage, due to its tarnished integrity, through unequal treaties by the West.

With the oversized expansion of educational missions, sometimes with malpractice and favoritism of foreign missionaries, local resistance resurged. Too closely tied to the privileges of external powers, missionaries continued to rely on economic enticement and political privileges. This over-dependence contributed to the compromised integrity of their mission projects (Brook 1996). Furthermore, while Christian colleges established by liberal missionaries during this time initially contributed greatly to nurturing a generation of elites for China, its institutional tolerance of progressive ideas also helped spread communist thoughts.

The radicalization of anti-western campaigns after 1919 pushed the sentiment of Chinese patriotism to a stage beyond just advocacy. The popular sentiment has been radicalized. As Philip West summarizes,

Questions had to be refined: which pattern of change, reform or revolution; which model, socialist Russia or capitalist America; which ideology Marxism or Christian liberalism; whom to serve, the government in power or revolutionary movements...<sup>70</sup>

With continuing warfare, the belief in using education to bring national salvation weakened substantially. Meanwhile, the secular Chinese intelligentsia, viewing themselves as bearing the true spirit of Enlightenment, advocated the idea of separation of church and state to downplay the influence of Christianity in Chinese society. Ironically, the same kind of patriotism that motivated Chinese Christians, such as Wei and Chao, to strive to promote Christianity for national salvation, eventually became the biggest hurdle to the spread of Christianity, because the larger nationalistic sentiments among their countrymen weighed against their efforts. Agitated patriots wanted a quick solution, and they now desired a Soviet-type revolution. As cited, these radical ideas made large inroads into student circles in mission schools and colleges by the early 1930s.

Chinese Christians intellectuals, like Francis Wei and T. C. Chao, may have found communism and Christianity irreconcilable at the beginning, but they soon began to emphasize the affinity between these two for pragmatic concerns. For T. C. Chao, although the prison experience in 1941 led him to believe that one should not identify Christianity with any scheme for social and economic reconstruction, he could offer no alternative for China’s social crisis. When the communist revolution showed more promise of granting China independence, Francis Wei and T. C. Chao were both very optimistic about the continued growth of Christianity under communism. Not only did both Francis Wei and T. C. Chao fail to foresee the closing of China under the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in 1952 after the US-Korean War, they actively contributed to indigenizing the “Three-self” principles among Chinese churches (Sunquist 2017, p. 117). Had they not been patriots, they might have been more inclined to offer criticisms of these policy developments.

The same irony also applies to missionaries from America—they approached the Chinese with a Christianity that promised modern science and progress, but unfortunately, many secular Chinese intellectuals embraced the ideas of progress, while abandoning Christianity itself. When Chinese

<sup>69</sup> (Jiang 1957, pp. 3–4) Quoted in (Ng 2012, p. 153).

<sup>70</sup> (West 1976, p. 146).

intellectuals like Wei and Chao were looking to the West for remedy, the latter was also experiencing an unprecedented crisis. As historians note, when the culminating event of foreign mission expansion, the 1910 World Missionary Conference, took place in Edinburgh, Western Christian civilization was already “on the verge of a final phase of decline.”<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, missionary expansions of this time bore the complexion of empire-building for young America to become the superpower of the century. American missionaries had grown up in a society where the reformist spirit bore good fruits, with stable social structures in place, so they were equally optimistic that their transplantation of progressive Christianity would work, even in a war-torn China.

However, in the Chinese context, the hope of gradual reforms dissipated with subsequent geopolitical conflicts and civil wars. Many Chinese reformers and patriots first favored Christian mission, but later, due to its historical alliance with Western powers, opted for radical change. Repeated despair at China’s prolonged indignity and disorder grew into an agitated patriotic impatience among the urban elites, until communism offered a comprehensive but radical solution to uplift China. The rural and urban poor, who were mired deeper in an increasingly stratified China, also found communist ideology more promising than transcendent religious ideas. Moreover, the once successful educational mission nurtured more Christian leaders who, to their native people, were associated with dependence upon the West. Even after these institutions of higher education began to use indigenous leadership in the 1930s and 1940s, for a long time, a cultural dependency on the West continued. The strategic turn to expand higher education as a form of mission, despite its good intention to train indigenous leaders, aggravated missionary dominance in these ministries and the latter’s dependence on foreign funding. For example, universities like Hua Chung and Yenching, where Francis Wei and T. C. Chao worked respectively as leading administrators, were considered “philosophical, curricular, and administrative transplants” from America (West 2007). With government requirements for private education institutions in China, these schools also underwent further secularization. For example, Yenching made changes in its curriculum to attract faculty and students who were interested in secular topics. Religion and theology moved to the periphery (Ng 2002).

In fact, Protestant missions in China or in larger East Asia have always been entangled with the problem of patriotic nationalism from the very beginning. With the anomaly of Korea, where patriotic identities were successfully fused with Protestantism, all other countries saw resistance and even violence against foreign missions (Kane and Park 2009; Li and Li 2018). Contrary to missionaries’ intention to “gain respect” by nurturing an elite class of Christian leaders, their strategies somehow helped intensify Chinese nationalism, as historian and China missions expert John Fairbank once claimed (Fairbank 1974). Recently, missiologist Scott Sunquist also pointed out that American Protestantism during this time was “a catalyst” to resistance and independence (Sunquist 2017).

Admittedly, missionary efforts did contribute to infrastructure-building and social improvement during famines and civil wars. However, given the complex interplay of geopolitical factors, social movements with nationalistic sentiments, and cross-cultural dissonance, the mission projects of liberal missionaries and their indigenous helpers unintendedly paved the way for Chinese communism. We, of course, do not claim a linear causal relationship between these two processes, because a myriad of causes coalesced to end the Protestant mission and the Chinese experimentation of Christian higher education in China. This end was not foretold in the events preceding its occurrence; nor can it be explained only in terms of Chinese xenophobia, or Western expansionism. A fuller explanation requires the consideration of Chinese intellectual history, social change in America as shown in mission-sending, the global competition between Protestant Christianity and Communism as two competing ideologies, and geopolitical conflicts that gave rise to Chinese nationalism, as the lives of Wei and Chao reveal.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 113.



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