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The Christian Discourses of “Chao Zhengzhi” (Supra-Politics) in the Early PRC: A Religio-Political Reappraisal

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Abstract: In the context of the Chinese churches, religio-political relations or interaction is an unavoidable but widely controversial issue. On the one hand, the political control of religion can be regarded as the dominant model of the relationship between state and church in Chinese society. On the other hand, different religions and even diverse traditions within religious bodies have developed divided attitudes and stances on how to deal with their relationships with state and politics. The year 1949 was an important watershed in the contemporary history of China. The new regime carried out a comprehensive remolding and reformation of all sectors of Chinese society, and the religious sphere was not spared. “Supra-politics” (“chao zhengzhi”) was one of the charges that often appeared in the communists’ criticism and reform movement against Christianity after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This article aims to address the following questions: (1) What does “supra-politics” mean? What is the political context of the emergence of this discourse? (2) Why and how did the Communist Party of China (CPC) use the discourse of “supra-politics” to criticize Christian churches? (3) What are the different understandings and interpretations of the “supra-politics” discourse among churches in China? This article offers a review of the controversy and discourse of the “supra-political” position of Christianity, which may contribute to the critical investigation of the religio-political relations of the early PRC.



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1. Introduction

The year 1949 was an important watershed in the contemporary history of China (Ying 2020, pp. 1–17). The new regime carried out a comprehensive remolding and reformation of all sectors of Chinese society, and the religious sphere was not spared. “Supra-politics” (“chao zhengzhi”) was one of the charges that often appeared in the communists’ criticism and reform movement against Christianity¹ after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This article offers a review of the controversy and discourse of the “supra-political” position of Christianity, which may contribute to the critical investigation of the religio-political relations of the early PRC.

In the context of the Chinese churches, religio-political relations or interaction is an unavoidable but widely controversial issue. It is necessary to explain it from four different levels (Shouwangshe 1987): Firstly, the relationship between state and religion involves how the state or government understands religion and its corresponding policies concerning religion. Secondly, the relationship between the state and religious organizations deals with the boundary between political power and religious power at the specific organizational level, from which the common concept of “separation of state and church” is derived. Furthermore, the relationship between religious organizations and politics refers to how different religious groups, whether private or public, understand their public roles (Casanova 1994), which reflects their public (social and political) orientation. Finally, the relationship between politics and religion generally means diverse interactions between two sets of value systems with regards to their concepts and in society. This article discusses the discourse of “supra-politics” and examines the three different dimensions of the relations

between state and church after the founding of the PRC—state and religion, state and church, and church and politics.

This article, which is substantially based on Party reports and religious documents, aims to address the following questions: (1) What does “supra-politics” mean? What is the political context of the emergence of this discourse? (2) Why and how did the Communist Party of China (CPC) use the discourse of “supra-politics” to criticize Christian churches? (3) What are the different understandings and interpretations of the “supra-politics” discourse among churches in China? The study of the emergence and development of the “supra-politics” discourse in Communist China may help us rethink the religio-political context of the Chinese church.

2. Totalism, Politicization, and the Supra-Politics Discourse

2.1. Totalism and the Total Society

The CPC’s full seizure of power in 1949 heralded the reconstruction of the relationship between state and society under a new order. Given that the new regime was mainly founded on the Leninist model of party-state, all power was concentrated in the CPC Central Committee, which governed the country through the “party-state” system. Therefore, the CPC’s primary concern was how to strengthen control of all social elements under its leadership so as to consolidate the new regime.

Tsou Tang, a well-known political scientist, uses the concept of “totalism” to describe the party-state power structure’s intrusion into society and points out that the power of the totalist regime was further deepened in the subsequent political campaigns. According to Tsou, “totalism” refers to a phenomenon where a political organization yields so much power that it is capable of exercising interference and control in all arenas of public and private life. In other words, the freedom and rights of individuals or groups in the society receive no protection from moral values, public opinion, laws, and the constitution but are rather decided by political power (Tsou 1994, p. 7). While totalism reached its peak in China during the Cultural Revolution, it had its beginning in the early years of the PRC and developed through a series of political campaigns since the 1950s (Strauss 2006).

The Chinese society has been transformed into a “total society” under the CPC’s totalist rule. With the establishment of a large number of communist cadres, the bureaucracy covers everything from the central to grassroots levels, easily extending its control from the central government to every township. An example is the formation of street-level neighborhood committees (*juweihui*) in the cities. Since the party-state monopolizes most resources, non-governmental circles no longer have any social power to acquire resources. Every citizen is placed in a “unit” (*danwei*) and must come into contact with the state throughout their lifetime. Under this integrated model of a total society, “the power of the state penetrates into social life of the grassroots with an unprecedented depth and breadth in history,” and the independence and autonomy of society is completely destroyed (Sun 1994, pp. 70–77). Needless to say, this situation also happens in the religious sector.

In connection with this state-centric interpretation, some scholars have advocated a new approach to emphasize the multiplicitous and interactive perspectives on church-state relationship (Ashiwa and Wank 2009, pp. 3–5; Reny 2018, pp. 2–18). It is worth noticing that although the emerging consensus on the study of China’s state-church relations is to abandon the dichotomous framework, the party-state control on religions approach nevertheless still occupies the center stage of research. The controversy and discourse of the “supra-political” position of Christianity, as illustrated in this article, attempts to reconstruct the multiple levels of religio-political relations involved after the founding of the PRC.

2.2. Pan-Politicization and the Supra-Politics Discourse

Totalism and the total society share the “total” in common, which means the totalitarian regime’s attempt to ban all sources of power outside of its leadership (Hui 2018, p. 56). With the establishment and strengthening of official ideology in every sphere, everything has

to follow political propaganda and education to form a set of specific explanations. Ding Xueliang asserts that the full penetration of state power and official ideology into all social spheres has formed a “politicized society,” that is, “politics directly extends to every aspect of human activities.” There is a “standard of political ideology” behind this penetration (Ding 1994, p. 29). Some scholars put forward the concept of “structural politicization” to describe politicization as a dominant feature in public life and an identifiable structural factor (Mattlin 2018, p. 7). The Chinese society before the economic reform in the 1980s was undoubtedly a typical pan-politicized and structurally politicized society.

In the politicized Chinese society, any dissident view against the official ideology, refusal to conform to a proposition in line with the official position, or even keeping silent to remain “neutral” was unacceptable and therefore regarded as antagonistic toward the state (Dutton 2009, p. 35). Any detached attitude that attempted to maintain neutrality in the face of politics was “supra-political” in the eyes of the party-state.

In March 1949, the Cultural and Art Working Committee of the North China People’s Government and the North China Cultural and Art Association co-organized a tea party. Zhou Yang, the committee director, stated clearly in his address that there was no such thing as “supra-politics” in cultural and art activities. Such activities should consciously obey and reflect politics (Huabei Wenyijie 1949). Another example is a student from the Nursing School of Peking University, who said,

In the past, nurses thought that they were supra-politics and supra-class (*chao jieji*) and worked from the perspective of fraternity. Now when I think about it carefully, workers of science do not go beyond politics as well. The so-called supra-political attitude in the past actually served the bourgeoisie. (Wang 1950)

The author searched the database of the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*, hereafter cited as *PD*) with “supra-politics” (*chao zhengzhi*) as keyword. The results showed that from 1 March 1949 to 31 December 1955 there were 118 articles carrying criticisms of “supra-politics,” with the peak in 1951 of as many as 77 articles. The criticisms basically involved different sectors, among which Christianity (Catholic and Protestant churches) had the most (32), followed by the sectors of education (24) and of culture and art (14). Among Christian churches, the Catholic Church accounts for an overwhelming proportion (22).

Given that “supra-politics” mainly concerned the thought reform of the intelligentsia, another search was conducted from the database of *Guangming Daily* (hereafter cited as *GMD*), which was targeted at intellectuals. As shown in Table 1, there are 269 articles between 1949 and 1955 in the results, with the most from 1951 and 1952. As for those involving Protestant and Catholic churches, they concentrate in 1951—35 articles, accounting for 30.4% of the results in that year. It is believed that they were related to the struggle against American cultural aggression around the country and the patriotic movement opposing American imperialism in the Christian churches launched in 1951.

Table 1. Statistics of articles in *GMD* carrying criticisms of “supra-politics” (1949–1955).

	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955
Supra-politics	5	25	115	84	14	12	14
Catholic	0	0	16	1	0	0	0
Protestant	0	0	15	2	0	0	0
Religion	0	0	4 ²	1 ³	0	0	0

Since the beginning of the thought reform campaign in 1951, “supra-politics” was alleged to be the political fault of intellectuals working in different fields. Regarding the religious sphere, for example, in a forum convened by the China Democratic League⁴ on 1 March 1951, 20 Protestants in Beijing discussed Christianity and patriotism from different perspectives. Zhang Shichong, chairman of the Christian Students’ Association of Yenching

University, mentioned the need to correct the “surreal” (“*chao xianshi*”) and “supra-political” mindset of many Christians. Ceng Zhaolun, a director of the League, responded in his concluding remarks that Christianity is by no means surreal and supra-political because it stands with the oppressed and the exploited. Therefore, he noted that Christian churches have their class standpoint and are closely linked with reality and politics (Zhongguo Minzhu Tongmeng 1951). It can be said that the relationship between “supra-politics” and Christianity was only touched on superficially in this meeting, and an in-depth discourse was yet to be constructed. One might conjecture that Zhang’s speech was only a vague appropriation of a fashionable political concept in a political meeting. After the launch of the Protestant and Catholic reform movements, however, the criticism of “supra-politics” began to enter the religious sector and became a major pretext for political purges.

3. Criticism of the “Supra-Politics” Problem of Christianity

3.1. Christianity, Imperialism, and Religious Reform

When Chairman Mao Zedong met Anastas Mikoyan, a representative of the Soviet Union, in February 1949, he depicted the influences of imperialism in China as akin to “dirtiness” in a house—in particular, he perceived the missionary activities of Christianity as a main target of “sweeping” and “cleaning” (Shi 1991, p. 379). Subsequently, Mao regarded all American missionary, charitable, and cultural undertakings in China as “spiritually aggressive activities” (Mao [1949] 1970, p. 1395).

On 23 July 1950, the CPC Central Committee issued the “Directive on the Issues of Catholicism and Protestantism,” which clearly stated that a signature campaign in support of a patriotic manifesto would be launched in these two religions (Zhongyang [1950a] 1958, p. 1912). In the wake of the Resist-America Aid-Korea Campaign, the cultural aggression of Protestant and Catholic Christianity became the main theme of the party-state’s anti-imperialist struggle. On 29 December, Guo Moruo, Vice Premier of the Government Administration Council (now the State Council), spoke on imperialist cultural aggression at the Council meeting, saying that the aggression of American imperialism had lasted for more than 100 years and was especially perpetuated through cultural activities. He pointed out that the imperialists exerted control over China mainly by subsidizing religious, educational, cultural, medical care, publishing, and relief undertakings with huge sums of money to “deceive, numb, and instill enslavement ideas to the Chinese people” (Guo [1950] 1992, p. 511).

Guo further noted that after the founding of the PRC, American imperialism “continued its attempt to use these institutions and groups to carry out its reactionary propaganda and activities secretly,” and that the government must put an end to the imperialist cultural aggression thoroughly, completely, and permanently. In addition, he instructed that all American-subsidized religious groups in China “should be changed into entities wholly run by Chinese Christians, and the government should encourage their movement of self-governance, self-support and self-propagation” (Guo [1950] 1992, pp. 513–15).

Under the active planning of the CPC Central Committee, some Protestants led by Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu) started a signature campaign for the publication of a reform manifesto (known as the Three-Self Manifesto) and received full support from the PD in September, which praised it as a “patriotic movement of Christians.”⁵ In December, Father Wang Liangzuo in Guangyuan county, Sichuan province, also initiated a similar manifesto (Sichuan Guangyuan 1950).

On 16–21 April 1951, the Government Administration Council’s Culture and Education Committee called a conference on the taking over of American-subsidized Christian organizations. Its vice-director, Lu Dingyi, stressed that the purge of the impact of American imperialist cultural aggression on China should not be regarded as a technical and administrative issue but rather as “a political struggle.” He reiterated that Chinese Christians must stand on the political ground of patriotism and accused American imperialists of using Christianity to carry out cultural aggression in the past and at present (Lu 1951, pp. 6–10). This conference established the Preparatory Committee for the Resist-America,

Aid-Korea Three-Self Reform Movement of the Christian Churches (hereafter the Three-Self Committee), which officially started the Christian denunciation movement.

3.2. *Supra-Politics: Catholics' Opposition to the Reform Movement*

As for Roman Catholicism, the Sacred Congregation of Holy Office issued an anti-communist decree in June 1949. It emphasized that the Communist Party, as the facts had proven, was against God and the Church of Christ. Consequently, in accordance with Canon 1399 of the Canon Law, the decree prohibited Catholics from publishing, disseminating, or reading books, periodicals, newspapers, or leaflets supporting communist doctrine, or writing for them. Catholics were not allowed to propagate or defend communist doctrine, or otherwise they would be regarded as apostates from the faith (Shengzhi Bu [1949] 1977, pp. 76–77; Lo and Wu 1986, p. 8).

Under this circumstance, the CPC is fully aware of the strong anti-communist position of the Holy See. According to a party document of September 1950, the Holy See was described as a “reactionary force.” The document further admitted that the promotion of the reform movement in the Catholic Church had faced certain resistance. It concluded that the struggle to launch the reform movement would be more severe within the Catholic Church than elsewhere (Zhongyang [1950b] 1958, p. 1917).

It is evident that local party committees actively promoted the Catholic reform movement. Following the publication of the Guangyuan Manifesto in November 1950, the CPC successfully helped a group of Catholics in Tianjin publish a patriotic declaration in January 1951 and establish the Preparatory Committee for the Promotion of Catholic Reform Movement in the city (Jinbu Daily 1951a). Similar Catholic manifestos then appeared in Suiyuan, Shanxi, and Hubei provinces (Jinbu Daily 1951b).

In response to the external challenges, the Holy See's Apostolic Internuncio, Antonio Riberi, issued a pastoral letter entitled “A Time of Trial” in early 1951 to encourage missionaries in China to have confidence that God's work could not be stopped in the face of persecution but would instead grow stronger (Chen 2016, p. 244).

From 1951 onwards, criticism of the Catholic anti-reform discourse began to appear in public circles. On 13 March, the GMD published a Catholic pamphlet called *Reference for Study* (Xuexi cankao) to expose the conspiracy of Catholic imperialists to sabotage the Three-Self Movement. Later on, the *China Missionary Bulletin* of the Catholic Central Bureau also published the full text of the pamphlet. The editor's note pointed out that it laid down the fundamental principles of how Catholics should respond to “patriotism” (Declaration of Principles 1951, pp. 384–86). This document was directed against the CPC's promotion of the Three-Self Movement among the Catholics, in which it mentioned “supra-politics”:

The Catholic religion was established by Jesus Christ Himself, coming down to us from the Apostles, one, holy and Catholic; one body, like unto the human body, with Jesus' own representative—the Holy Father—as its head, it is super-political [*sic*], indivisible by national boundaries or political differences. (Declaration of Principles 1951, p. 384)

It reiterated the detached position of the Church: “Fellow Catholics, we know that the Catholic Church is . . . super-national [*sic*] and uninterested in intervening in politics that go beyond the scope of faith and morals.” Hence, the Church as a whole should not engage in any political activity. When the Catholic faithful take part in political activities “as citizens,” they “must refrain from using the name of the Church as a political instrument,” otherwise the “impartial nature” of the Church would be violated (Declaration of Principles 1951, p. 386).

Owing to the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, the Holy See's opposing stance became a major obstacle to the progress of the reform movement. On 17 March, the GMD published an editorial entitled “Irrefutable Evidence of Imperialist Elements' Sabotage of the Catholic Independent Patriotic Movement,” which solemnly refuted the view of “supra-politics” (Guangming Daily 1951). On the same day, articles penned by President

Chen Yuan and Vice Academic Dean Zhao Guangxian of Fu Jen Catholic University were published, also touching on the criticism of “supra-politics.”

As Zhao pointed out: “Since the establishment of a state, it has been by no means possible for any human social activity to be ‘supra-political.’” He asserted that the saying of “supra-politics” was used by capitalists and imperialists to deceive people. Catholics were urged to cooperate with the government, lest the people boycott them (Zhao 1951). Chen Yuan supposed that the “supra-political” mindset among Catholics in Beijing had delayed their declaration of reform manifesto up to then (Y. Chen 1951).

Meanwhile, the party-state made a formal repudiation of “supra-politics” internally. The CPC Central Committee issued a directive on the religious reform movement on 18 April, stating that it was necessary to suppress discourses such as “religion is supra-political” and “reform is schismatic” raised by die-hard anti-reform forces in the church, so as to eliminate the influence of imperialist cultural aggression. This document instructed progressives in the church to “make certain accurate and realistic interpretations of religious doctrines to explain that patriotism and profession of religion are not contradictory, for a good Christian should first love his country” (Zhongyang [1951] 1996, p. 199).

Besides Fu Jen, the mobilization for denunciation against imperialists also took place at another Catholic tertiary educational institution, Jingu University in Tianjin. Professor Zhang Yushi stated clearly that the question of how the Catholics should look upon the new Chinese regime was behind the discourse of “supra-politics”:

If one says the Catholic Church is detached from any class, politics, regime and political system, it means that the church does not agree with the people’s democratic dictatorship and is not opposed to American imperialism’s enslavement of the Chinese people. So it is not difficult to understand why members of the society criticize Catholics for not being patriotic. [. . .] There are two kinds of regimes in this world, either for the people or against the people. You must declare whether you love the people or are an enemy of the people. You must lean on one side. It is absolutely impossible to be “supra-politics,” “supra-class” (“*chao jieji*”), and “supra-regime-and-system” (“*chao zhengquan zhidu*”). How absurd that you are in the standpoint of Jesus and the standpoint of the Pharisee chief priests who crucified Jesus at the same time. (Zhang 1951)

Due to the differences in their ecclesiastical structures, the anti-imperialist patriotic movement could not proceed in the Catholic Church as smoothly as in the Protestant churches. The discourse of “supra-politics” was first proposed by the Catholics as a basis for resisting the reform movement within their church. The communist regime spared no efforts to suppress this move immediately. It explains why the *PD* published more articles criticizing the “supra-politics” discourse of the Catholic Church than that of the Protestant churches in 1951. After a series of press attacks, the party-state set Ribéri, the Papal Internuncio, as the main target of criticism and expelled him from China in September (Mariani 2011, pp. 69–71). Initially, the CPC anticipated that a national conference would be held in the second half of 1951 to implement the reform of the Church (Zhonggong Zhongyang [1951] 1958, p. 1932). However, owing to the Catholics’ persevering resistance to the movement, the conference did not convene as scheduled—it was eventually postponed to 1957, during which time the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association was established (Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association 1957).

While launching the struggle against the Catholic Church, the CPC applied the criticism of “supra-politics” to the Protestant reform movement and gradually focused on the Christian fundamentalists (Shulingpai).⁶

3.3. Protestantism and “Supra-Politics”

Among the Protestant progressives, Liu Liangmo took the lead in expressing his view on the problem of “supra-politics” after the party-state had launched its criticism on the Catholic Church. According to his article published by the *GMD* on 16 March, he expounded upon the error of “supra-politics”:

Some Christians say that Christians should not get involved with politics and should adopt a “supra-political” attitude. In fact, the “supra-political” attitude is a political attitude, which is an excuse used by some bad elements in the Christian churches to deceive Christians and to sow division between Christians and our People’s Government. There are a lot of good Christians deceived by it. Jesus was crucified on the cross by the Roman Empire because he had got involved in politics. He opposed the Roman Empire and the chief priests, is that not a political action? “Supra-politics” is a detached attitude from worldly affairs, while Christianity is a religion that has entered the world. Therefore, if a Christian embraces the “supra-political” attitude, it is inconsistent with the basic spirit of Christianity. (Liu 1951b)

Liu Liangmo was one of the five Protestant representatives in the religious sector of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and had long established a close relationship with the communists. Zhang Bilai, an underground CPC member of the China Democratic League, referred to Liu as “comrade” (*tongzhi*) in his memoir (Zhang 1982, pp. 49, 55).⁷ In addition, although the Three-Self Manifesto that began the Protestant reform movement was initiated by Wu Yaozong, it was called the “Wu-Liu Movement” within the CPC, which shows the important role of Liu Liangmo (Mao [1950] 1987, p. 497). He also made a key contribution to the construction of discourses on how to carry out the anti-imperialist patriotic struggle in the Christian churches. Under the guidance of Liu, the discourse of “supra-politics” became a principal thought to be purged in the reform of Christianity.

At the conference on the taking over of American-subsidized Protestant organizations (hereafter the Beijing conference) in April 1951, Lu Dingyi also spoke on the problem of “supra-politics” and criticized imperialists for using it to cover up their political stance and invade China under the cloak of religion (Lu 1951, p. 9). Nevertheless, the discourse of “supra-politics” was not the main target of criticism in this conference, and instead the participants denounced Christian leaders who were the targets for the CPC: foreign missionaries (such as Frank W. Price and E. H. Lockwood), Chinese Christian leaders (Liang Xiaochu (S. C. Leung), Chen Wenyuan (Wen-yan Chen) and Zhu Youyu (Yu-yue Tsu)) and evangelists (Gu Ren’en), and organizations (National Christian Council of China and Christian Literature Society for China).

Those who took part in the denunciation were primarily leaders of mainline denominations and persons in charge of Christian organizations.⁸ The only figure from *Shulungpai* was Chen Chonggui (Marcus Cheng), whose criticism was about how missionaries misinterpreted the Bible to serve imperialism. It can be said that Chen’s criticism was the closest to the “supra-politics” issue, but he did not mention the term “supra-politics” explicitly throughout his speech (C. Chen 1951, pp. 1–3).

On 8 May, Protestant churches in Shanghai organized an assembly to convey the messages of the Beijing conference. About 1000 Christians were present. The problem of “supra-politics” began to receive more attention. Liu Liangmo pointed out that “supra-politics” was an “ideological narcotic” (*sixiang mazui*) of American imperialism. Zhu Guishen (K. S. Tsoh, Federation of Pentecostal Churches, *Linggongtuan*), who had a fundamentalist background, also criticized the error of “supra-politics.” He admitted that in the past “it was enough for us Christians to live up to our duties and doctrines, and politics belong to the government.” Unfortunately, according to Zhu, foreign missionaries “had ‘supra-politics’ on their lips, but in fact they used Christianity to conduct political activities” (Hao 1951, p. 9). Cui Xianxiang (H. H. Tsui) (General Secretary, General Assembly of the Church of Christ in China), the first church leader who voiced his criticism, shared his experience that he had believed the church was always “supra-political,” but now thanks to his political “awareness” he realized that the church must cooperate with government policies to serve the people (Cui 1951, p. 4).

To coordinate with the launch of the Protestant denunciation movement, the Three-Self Committee drafted a study syllabus on denunciation and patriotism in May, in which the

“supra-politics” issue was discussed: “Why does imperialism deceive us and want us to be ‘supra-politics’? How does this erroneous view of ‘supra-politics’ hinder us from loving our country” (*Xuexi Tigang* 1951, pp. 8–9)? Liu Liangmo, chairman of the propaganda sub-committee of the Three-Self Committee (Shen 2000, p. 24), was responsible for directing the denunciation work. He published an article “How to hold a denunciation meeting of the church?” in the *Tianfeng* magazine (hereafter cited as *TF*), which required churches in various parts of China to eliminate the influence of imperialism within themselves. He pointed out that many Christians had misgivings about denunciation because they had been affected by the “outdated thought” of “supra-politics” (Liu 1951c, p. 5).

In another article, “The Patriotic Jesus Christ,” Liu noted that the “most vicious influence” left by imperialism in Chinese Christianity was the thought of “supra-politics.” He specifically criticized two frequently misinterpreted Bible verses of Jesus: “You do not belong to the world” and “pay Caesar (the Roman emperor) what belongs to Caesar, and God what belongs to God”. The “conspiracy” behind the imperialists, he pointed out, was to make Chinese Christians “not love their motherland” and “regard religious belief and patriotism as two opposites”. Liu emphasized that Jesus Himself was not supra-political, because “His words and deeds were inseparable from the Jewish movement for liberation”. Given that Jesus “loved His motherland,” Chinese Protestants and Catholics should also “love our motherland and report any time on the scum of the church like Judas who betrayed Jesus and his motherland” (Liu 1951a, p. 5).

As a result, the struggle against “supra-politics” was formally adopted into the Protestant churches thanks to the active planning of the Protestant progressives.

3.4. *Shulingpai Christianity and “Supra-Politics”*

During a large-scale denunciation meeting in Shanghai on 10 June 1951, Wu Yaozong, chairman of the Three-Self Committee, made a “general denunciation” against American imperialism’s using Christianity to invade China: (1) Missionaries came to China and pretended to preach the gospel, but they actually conducted intelligence and espionage activities; (2) American imperialism used Christianity to undermine the revolutionary cause of the Chinese people for liberation and spread anti-communist toxins; (3) The so-called American imperialist lackeys and scum, such as Chen Wenyuan, Zhu Youyu, Liang Xiaochu, Zhao Shiguang (Timothy Chao), Zhao Junying (Calvin Zhao), and Gu Renen, penetrated the Chinese churches; (4) American imperialism used *Shulingpai* in Christianity to spread erroneous “supra-political” thought; (5) American imperialism made use of Christian literary and educational undertakings to conduct cultural aggression; (6) The World Council of Churches founded by American imperialists used the Christian ecumenical movement as a tool to invade China, Southeast Asia, and the entire world (Wu 1951a, pp. 3–4). Wu’s general denunciation provided a model for other Christians to follow.

It is noteworthy that this was the first time Wu used the term “supra-politics” and linked “supra-politics” with *Shulingpai* Christianity. Amid the denunciation campaign, *Shulingpai* Christians were accused of being “lackeys of American imperialists,” just like Chinese leaders of mainline denominations (such as the Anglican Church and the Methodist Church) inclined to liberal theology. However, the CPC discerned different “toxins” in distinct denominations, thus charging Christians with different allegations correspondingly. “Supra-politics” turned out to be the main charge against Charismatic Christians.

Since “supra-politics” was perceived the toxin of imperialism manipulating *Shulingpai* Christians, their representatives had to assume the denunciation work. Jia Yuming (Yu Ming Chia), a prominent leader of *Shulingpai* Christianity, initially showed reluctance to participate in the Three-Self Movement. However, in August 1951 he succumbed and published an article in *TF*, contending from the biblical perspective that Christians should not be “supra-political”. As he pointed out, Christians must enter the world and bear witness in society. They should fulfill their obligations and duties of a citizen and obey government orders. At the same time, Christians should be patriotic and offer prayer for

their country. He also clarified the concept of “separation of politics and religion” and pointed out that “politics and religion” have different “scopes”; thus, it was not the case that “when people have religious faith, they no longer get involved with politics”. His argument was mainly from the perspective of Christian social responsibility. He emphasized that the churches and the faithful should show concern to society and “be salt and light”. Jia Yuming’s reaction to the reform movement was indeed an important reminder to some Christians who had been deeply influenced by aloof spirituality. Nevertheless, he avoided addressing the conflict between government policies and religious belief and merely said: “We should trust the government that it would respect our freedom of religious belief” (Jia 1951, p. 5).

Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee) was another *Shulingpai* Christian leader who expressed his view on the issue of “supra-politics”. The Christian Assembly (also known as the Little Flock) he founded was the fastest growing among the independent churches in China. Ni initially had reservations toward the reform movement. However, as he attended the Beijing conference in April 1951, he had no choice but to support the Protestant denunciation campaign in Shanghai (Ying 2005). On August 20, he gave a sermon on “How I took a turn” at the Nanyang Road Christian Assembly, in which he made a comprehensive self-criticism on “supra-politics”. He stressed that religious belief and political views are two different things. An individual may be pure in religious belief, but his political view could be imperialist. From the standpoint of the people, it is obvious that “if you are not pro-imperialist, you have to be anti-imperialist; if you are not anti-imperialist, you are pro-imperialist”. Therefore, “supra-politics” is absolutely impossible:

Although you speak of supra-politics, naturally there is a political view to support you, like a teacup with a plate. This cup is religion, but what is your plate? It suddenly dawned on me that the government is not asking about your cup but about your plate. The government does not care about what you believe in, whether your religion is rectangular or square. What concerns the government is what kind of plate you have chosen, [namely] what your political stance is. Are you an anti-imperialist Christian, or an anti-people Christian? (Ni [1951] 2004)

Ni had to admit that imperialism had taken advantage of Christianity, including fundamentalist Christianity. As long as Chinese Christians discarded their error of “supra-politics,” they were able to join in the denouncing of imperialists, and such an act would not affect their spirituality (Ni [1951] 2004).

Obviously, Jia Yuming and Ni Tuosheng opposed “supra-politics” with different approaches. The elaboration of Jia was still based on the Bible and the Christian tradition. It affirmed that Christians should care about society and perform their duties as citizens. This was indeed a breakthrough in the socio-political view of fundamentalist Christianity. As a matter of course, his understanding would inevitably be restricted by politics in the circumstances of “pan-politicization” at that time. Relatively speaking, Ni’s understanding of “supra-politics” can be said to have fully grasped the essence of the CPC’s expectation and expressed it with spiritual vocabularies.

3.5. Behind “Supra-Politics”

In the early 1950s, the criticism of “supra-politics” in the Protestant and Catholic churches not only referred to the influence of the spirituality that made Christians distance themselves from worldly affairs but also pointed to what socio-political stance they should take. Huang Peixin, an activist of the Protestant Three-Self Movement, opposed the proposition that “Christians should obey the government” to prove themselves not “supra-political” (Jia Yuming held this view as aforementioned). It was because, in line with this position, Christians in Taiwan should obey the reactionary Nationalist Government, and American preachers might also ask their believers to obey the policies of the reactionary ruling class. “This is a trick played by the reactionary ruling class to suppress the growth of the people’s revolution. Unprincipled obedience and ambiguous position are serious political errors” (Huang 1951, p. 14).

In fact, behind the “supra-politics” controversy, the question of political stance was involved—namely “the people’s standpoint” (*renmin lichang*) and the “Christian standpoint” (*jidutu lichang*). The CPC regarded anybody who did not stand on the side of “the people’s standpoint” (socialist revolution) as “anti-people” (counter-revolution). A short commentary in *TF* from December 1951 gave a clear instruction:

Christians who love their country and the church are part of the Chinese people. We cannot remove Christians from the people, thinking that there is a so-called Christian standpoint besides the Chinese people’s standpoint. What makes Christians different from other people lies in the question of faith, not the question of “standpoint” (*lichang*). [. . .] Regardless of one’s belief, we are all on the same front and hold a common goal—to defeat imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism and to build our great country. [. . .] The proposition that Christians should have a “Christian standpoint” misleads them and confuses their role and subsequently gives imperialism a loophole to manipulate the Christians. (Tianfeng 1951, p. 2)

Another Three-Self reform activist, Shen Derong, also pointed out that the “Christian standpoint” was only an excuse used by imperialism to sabotage the revolution. Since Christians are part of the people, they should stand on “the people’s standpoint” (Shen 1951, p. 1).

In a nutshell, the charge of “supra-politics” in the denunciation campaign referred to Christians’ attempt to use their religious belief (Christian standpoint) as a reason for not supporting the socialist revolution, the communist line, and policies (the people’s standpoint). After all, as Liu Liangmo said: “The attitude of ‘supra-politics’ is a political attitude” (Liu 1951b). A Catholic in Shenyang also emphasized:

The so-called supra-political attitude is precisely a political attitude, that is to say, an “uncooperative” attitude toward current politics. Today, our People’s Republic of China is unanimously supported by the people nationwide because the political stance of the New China is to protect their interests. If someone adopts a “supra-political” and “uncooperative” attitude toward the politics, for whom he is acting and expressing such an attitude? (Yi 1951)

To renounce the attitude of “supra-politics” means to stand firm on “the people’s standpoint” and accept the party’s leadership wholeheartedly. In the face of “the people’s standpoint,” both modernist Christians (liberal theology and the social gospel) and *Shulingpai* Christians (fundamentalists) had to adopt self-criticism. Wu Yaozong specifically pointed out in September 1951 that imperialist toxins in Christianity included “supra-political” thought and “reformism”. The former is reflected in *Shulingpai* Christianity and the latter in liberal theology and the social gospel (Wu 1951b, p. 14). The so-called reformism referred to the churches’ concern for the reconstruction of Chinese society, which highlighted the role of Christianity in steering social reform. Moreover, it implied a dichotomy between reform and revolution, which, from the perspective of CPC, inferring that a (communist-led) revolution is not necessary. Due to the opposition between reformism and revolution, the CPC regarded reformism as a counter-revolutionary toxin. *Shulingpai* Christians, by contrast, had paid no attention to social issues and only cared about the salvation of souls. From the communist perspective, however, they often used the personal gospel to maintain their political neutrality and therefore fell into the “supra-political” trap.

In this regard, Chen Chonggui, a leader of *Shulingpai* Christianity who had been relatively active in social concerns before 1949, also became thoroughly politically awakened and acknowledged his faults:

Since the liberation, I had undergone a fierce, sometimes extremely painful, ideological struggle, and changed [my mind] bit by bit. In the past, I had a supra-political, surreal, and extremely aloof opinion. Now it can be said that I have made some corrections and become more concerned about the political and economic construction of my motherland, and I am willing to exert myself to

participate in these activities. Furthermore, the doctrine of Christianity has been distorted and misinterpreted by imperialism, so I believed in reformism for many years and lost the will to engage in class struggle and thought that Christianity could save the country. Now I have realized that only Marxism-Leninism is the science of revolution and the weapon for liberating humankind [. . .]. I adore the Communist Party, and I accept communism and Maoism as a social science. (Chen 1952, pp. 4–5)

Given China's ideological and political structure, it is generally believed that the party-state and the Christian progressives were determined to redefine the boundary between the Christian doctrine and socialist ideology. The substitution of "Christian standpoint" by "people's standpoint" aims to regulate the object of Christian loyalty, discipline their understanding of "love of God", and to channel that religious sentiment toward the party-state. With no doubt, behind the discourse of "supra-politics" was a battle for shaping the Christians' ideological and emotional consciousness that contributed to the construction of a new political faith or religion (Guo 2019).⁹

4. Conclusions

4.1. "Supra-Politics" in Religio-Political Interaction

This article examines how the discourse of "supra-politics" became politically erroneous and encountered harsh criticism in the Catholic and Protestant reform movements in 1951. It showcases the long-existing spiritual traditions and theological practices in Chinese churches, and more importantly, it reveals the CPC's precautions against Christianity and how it constructed a set of discourses to criticize "supra-politics" in order to carry out its plan of remolding religions (Ying 2014).

Sabrina P. Ramet, a well-known scholar on international studies specializes in the study of religion-politics interaction and categorizes it into six dimensions. (1) Legitimation: legitimation of religion is applicable not only to the ruling authorities' use of religions "to accomplish or legitimate certain political programs" but also to "religious organizations' potential to perform a legitimating function for political oppositions". (2) Ideology: religious doctrines are "influenced by, and adapted to, changes in political ideology," or they contribute to "reinforc[ing] and underpin[ning] ideological transformation". (3) Group adherence and collective loyalty: this is especially seen in the relationship between religion and nationalism, in which religion can "play a powerful role in creating and reinforcing a sense of nationhood". (4) Organization: This is mainly aimed at the impact of politics or political development on the "organizational structure" and even "ecclesiastical structure" of a religion. Conversely, there is also some kind of theocracy, reflecting the influence of religion on political organizations. (5) Legislation: The government endows religious groups with legal status by legal means and even interferes with their rules and statutes. On the contrary, some religions may also influence the law by religious mobilization. (6) Functionality: the government or religious groups may "affect the functioning of the other by gaining control of some of its resources or by setting an ineluctable agenda" (Ramet 1995, pp. 12–16).

The above six points also give us some inspiration for examining the "supra-politics" discourse in Chinese Christianity after 1949. Obviously, the CPC's discourse against "supra-politics" was aimed at strengthening the Christian churches' support for the party-state, thereby denying the independence and transcendence of religion and its role in criticizing the power of the party-state. The discourse against "supra-politics", especially the expression of "the people's standpoint" overriding the "Christian standpoint," fully reflects how religious doctrines were restricted by the party-state's ideology, in particular patriotism. The Three-Self Committee, which was responsible for guiding Christianity in the anti-imperialist and patriotic movement, was endowed with a unique political role by the party-state and brought about a significant impact on the organizational and ecclesiastical structure of Chinese Christianity. It can be said that the presentation of the "supra-politics" discourse was entirely dominated by the party-state and overwhelmed the

religious sector, and that it involved transformation and control at the organizational and ideological levels.

To comprehensively examine the “supra-politics” discourse, it is necessary to analyze it in the context of religio-political interaction: that is, interaction between state and religion in general, state and church, and church and politics. Behind the criticism of “supra-politics” lies the CPC’s understanding of Christianity: What kind of political role was required of the church, and what political tasks should they assume? In response, how did the church view the political role of the Christian faith?

First of all, regarding the relationship between the party-state and religion, the CPC had long regarded Christianity as a tool of imperialist cultural aggression. The Protestant and Catholic reform movements were therefore launched with the support and planning of the party. Secondly, in terms of the state-church relationship, the party-state established a monolithic apparatus (United Front Work Department–Religious Affairs Bureau–the Patriotic Religious Associations) to strengthen its control over church organizations under the political agenda of anti-imperialism and patriotism. When the Three-Self Movement gradually developed, the party-state used the allegation of “supra-politics” as a pretext to impose “the people’s standpoint” on the Chinese churches. The party-state forced the Chinese churches to accomplish their anti-imperialist and patriotic political tasks through successive political campaigns and mass mobilization.

Finally, concerning the relationship between the church and politics, Chinese churches were obliged to abandon the “Christian standpoint” and adhere to the communist ideology. Otherwise, their religious beliefs would be perceived as heterogeneous. As we have seen in the case of Christianity, both the social gospel wings (modernists) and *Shulungpai* Christians (fundamentalists) had no choice but to completely deny their own socio-political positions and the uniqueness of the Christian faith and to conduct self-criticism for their “reformism” and “supra-politics”. It can be said that the socio-political role of Chinese Christianity after 1949 was completely integrated into the party-state’s apparatus of controlling religion and remolding the churches at the cost of destroying the independence of religious beliefs and religious groups.

4.2. Privatized Religion in a Pan-Political Atmosphere

In his book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, José Casanova applies the concept of “deprivatization of religion” to analyze the development of “public religion” in different regions in the 1980s (Casanova 1994, pp. 4–5). When explaining the “deprivatization” of modern religion, Casanova points out that it is “the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation and redrawing of boundaries” (Casanova 1994, pp. 65–66). We can see that after 1949, the CPC’s remolding of the religious sector through the criticism of “supra-politics” seriously undermined the public nature of Christianity and transformed it into a “privatized religion”. This process of “privatization” dismantled Christianity’s heterogeneity and publicness. Meanwhile, Christian churches were required to accept the party’s leadership and play a distinct political role in the revolutionary era of “pan-politicization.”

Wu Yaozong, founder of the Protestant Three-Self Movement, pointed out in 1949 that Christianity must be thrown into the torrent of the times. He explicitly addressed the “detached” and “neutral” stance of Christian communities toward the socio-political situation:

The current situation of China is like a house on fire. A group of people on the right set the fire, while another group on the left are fighting the fire. If we are nearby and still have some human feelings, we should join the firefighting group without hesitation. The so-called detached attitude is the opposite. One looks at such an emergency scene with the eyes of a theologian and makes a calm analysis: Setting fire is not good, but those who set the fire may not be completely bad; firefighting is good, but those who are fighting the fire may not be faultless. Instead of fighting the fire, he puts the two actions of setting

and fighting fire on an equal footing, making the judgment of good and evil meaningless. This attitude seems to be “just” on the surface, but in fact it is hypocritical and cruel. (Wu 1949, p. 4)

It must be pointed out that the biggest difference between Wu Yaozong’s opposition to the detached and neutral attitude and the “supra-politics” discourse constructed by the CPC is that Wu still insisted on the “unique contribution” of Christianity:

When we face the torrent of the times, we are not surrendering to it; we are not passive, but active. We agree with the general direction of this trend. When we discover any “deflection” or “backflow” inside it, however, we still bear the responsibility to make a correction. (Wu 1949, p. 4)

Wu once said that the mission of Christianity is “to challenge the status quo, to be the driving force, yeast, light, and salt in the process of a progressive revolution”. At the same time, Christianity “should also challenge the sins of every era and every group”. Whether in a “new” or “old” era, and no matter it is a “reactionary” or “revolutionary” group, he believed that “everything is only relative under the noble ideals of Christianity”. As he emphasized, Christians may follow any doctrine, engage in any political activity, and even join any political party, but the supreme object of their loyalty is always “God’s absolute truth, goodness, and beauty”. This lofty ideal requires him to “be yeast, driving force, light, and salt for every movement in every era” (Wu 1946, pp. 1–3).

Wu Yaozong hoped to reverse the problems with the personal gospel and curb privatization of Christianity, turning it into a “public religion”. With the advent of totalism, however, he was also embedded in the party-state as an “institutionalized/established intellectual” and had to accept the “infallibility” of the party-state (King 1997, pp. 71–75). As a result of the ideological remolding and indoctrination against “supra-politics,” the independent and transcendental nature of Christianity as Wu envisioned can be said to have disappeared. It could only submit and succumb to the monolithic party-state ideology and system and, peculiarly, became a “(pan-)politicized” yet “private” religion.

Patrick Michel uses the cases of three Eastern European post-communist countries (Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia) to discuss the threefold “active vector” of the Catholic Church in social changes: (1) “disalienation” at the personal level; (2) “detotalization” at the social level; (3) “desovietization” at the national level (Michel 1991, p. 1). In light of the preceding analysis, it is obvious that Christianity in China under the “supra-politics” discourse had to face exactly the opposite: namely the fate of “alienation,” “totalization,” and “Sovietization” (party-stateization).

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Notes

- ¹ The term Christianity in this article generally refers to the Protestant and Catholic churches. Protestantism and Catholicism are also used to distinguish each other.
- ² These four articles were directed against Protestants and Catholics.
- ³ This one was directed against Buddhists.

- 4 The China Democratic League is a minor Chinese political party founded in 1939 and the publisher of the *Guangming Daily*. It is mainly made up by intellectuals in the fields of culture, education, science and technology.
- 5 Regarding the Protestant Three-Self Manifesto, see (Ying 2007, pp. 91–141).
- 6 The so-called *Shulingpai* Christians are conservatives, also known as “fundamentalists,” in the spectrum of Chinese Christian theology.
- 7 In the context of Chinese Communist Revolution, *tongzhi* was used as a term address for Chinese Communist Party members.
- 8 In regard to the Protestant denunciation movement, see (Ying 2012, pp. 77–152).
- 9 This point has benefited from the insightful comments and helpful suggestions from one of the anonymous reviews.

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