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From Christianity in China to Chinese Christianity: Missing History Since 1583 and Recent Academic Debates in English

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Abstract

The history of Christianity in China can be roughly divided into four periods of growth, decline, revival, and indigenisation. After briefly reviewing each period of the history of Christianity in China, I will examine a variety of influential books written by western scholars of different perspectives, reveal their disparate or even contradictory points of view, and evaluate their effectiveness in examining the three phases of the Christian presence in China: accommodation, inculturation, and indigenisation. As the historical evidence presented by these authors develops from a discussion of the introduced presence of Christianity in China to a look at indigenised Chinese Christianity, I will try to find the voids, biases and omissions, and conclude by indicating the possible directions which, I believe, scholarship should take to provide a more complete picture of the history of Christianity in China.

Christianity was first introduced to China as early as the seventh century, but it failed to firmly implant and was all but extinguished during the Tang dynasty (618-907). At the same time, however, imperial patronage helped to develop Buddhism, another imported religion, brought to China from India in the first century. It was not until the late sixteenth century that Christianity once again entered into China and managed to embed itself in the Chinese social structure. Christianity was not able to reach the status of the three dominant faiths, practiced in China for over one thousand years: Buddhism and the indigenous traditions of Daoism and Confucianism. Christianity has remained a marginal religion in China, with variable influence, for the past four hundred years.

In the present article, I will solely focus on the debates of western scholarship regarding the history of Christianity in China from 1583 to present. This history can be divided into four eras of growth, decline and revival, roughly demarcated by significant events in the path from the early role of Christianity in China towards an indigenised Chinese Christianity. These events include Jesuit Matteo Ricci's first visit to China in 1583, Emperor Yong Zheng's Imperial Edict banning Christianity in 1724 and the Nanjing Treaty of 1842 guaranteeing foreign

missionaries the right to proselytise in China, and the ascent to power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 followed by the Three-Self Movement. My article is, thus, organised into four sections. After reviewing some major events in each period, I will examine a variety of influential books by western scholars to reveal disparate and sometimes contradictory points of view on Christianity in China, evaluating their recognition and effectiveness in addressing the uneven growth from accommodation to inculturation to indigenisation. I will locate the voids and biases of scholarship in this field in order to indicate possible directions which I believe future research should take to provide a more complete picture of the history of Chinese Christianity.

The Early Growth of Christianity in China, 1583-1724

Early Catholic Jesuit missionaries to Asia adopted strategies of accommodation to communicate cross-culturally. St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), the pioneer of Christian missionaries to eastern Asia during the sixteenth century, asserted that effective Christian evangelisation and proselytisation required that "a missionary was to become an integral part of a particular civilization."¹ Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) followed Xavier's ideas and lived the typical life of Chinese literati after coming to China in 1583. Achieving Confucian-Christian syncretism, Ricci won respect among celebrated scholar-officials. Some were converted, including Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao and Yang Tingyun, who became known in China as the "Three Pillars of the Early Christian Church."² While Ricci and his fellow missionaries worked with literati primarily in south China, other Jesuits such as Joachim Bouvet cultivated close relationships with the throne at Beijing, obtaining imperial patronage and protection. Pro-court missionaries naively believed that if they

¹ John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983), p. 9.

² David E. Mungello, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp.15-17.

could convert Emperor Kangxi then China would become a Christian country. However, the arrival of the Papal Legation around 1705, which spread the Chinese Rites Controversy from Europe to China, annoyed Kangxi, and he abandoned Christianity. Though he would continue to allow the Jesuit missionaries to reside in China, the situation would change after his death with Emperor Yong Zheng's edict. When dealing with the early Jesuit experience in China, western scholars inevitably approach it as a set of intellectual issues, arising from the cultural encounter of two ancient civilisations. They either stress Christianity's accommodation of Chinese culture and the similarities between Christianity and Confucianism or they focus on the conflicts and unbridgeable differences.

In his book *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, David E. Mungello traces and confirms the evolution of accommodation from Ricci's association with Confucian literati to Bouvet's "displacement of Confucius with Kangxi Emperor as the model of exaltation."³ As the salient feature of this book, he points out that "the framework of the Jesuits' Confucian-Christian blending became the intellectual funnel through which most information from the Jesuits about China flowed."⁴ In my opinion, the significance of this book lies in the fact that it shows the interactions of European and Chinese civilisations. From a European perspective, it presents the way in which the European missionaries, as media, not only disseminated Christianity in China and exerted influence on Chinese intellectuals, but also, in return, brought back "information about China – its geography, language, government, philosophy, history and society – and provided intellectual foundation for those European savants who became proto-sinologists."⁵ By examining the books written by the missionaries, such as Ricci-Trigault's *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas* (1615), Martini's *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655), and a group translation of the Confucian Four Books *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687), Mungello demonstrates that these published writings shaped the seventeenth-century European assimilation of information about China, among which two most important areas are China's "historical chronology" and "the Chinese

language."⁶ This laid the initial foundation for sinology.⁷ In spite of Timothy Brook's criticism of Mungello's cursory treatment of the chronologies, I still confirm the success of the synthetic study conducted by Mungello⁸ because he emphasises that the dynamic mediation of the missionaries was influenced by their practices of accommodation.

Similarly, Lionel M. Jensen devotes an entire chapter to the Jesuit missionary's accommodation in his controversial book *Manufacturing Confucianism*, published in 1997.⁹ In the first chapter, he makes a profound and persuasive analysis about why and how those early Jesuit missionaries decided to turn themselves into Chinese literati in order to draw parallels between concepts in Christianity and Confucianism. The most striking point is his scrutiny of the missionaries' psychological state when they first landed at China. He describes them as "victims of cultural shock" that "could only be overcome through invention based on analogy."¹⁰ Like any man who comes to a strange land, he will instinctively grasp at something familiar in order to feel safe. So the Jesuit missionaries tried to find similarities between Christianity and Chinese traditions, especially Confucianism, and in this way to accommodate themselves into Chinese culture. In Jensen's view, their accommodation was a "more thorough form of cultural assimilation than was sinification and could not have been accomplished without significant Chinese indulgence,"¹¹ and had three distinct expressions in their adaptations of culture, theology and literature.¹² Jensen's chapter on accommodation can be regarded as a good supplement to Mungello's book.

Though Jensen provides readers with his deep insights into accommodationism, his thesis that "Confucius" and "Confucianism" are the inventions of the Jesuit missionaries, jointly manufactured by European and Chinese scholars through all these years, is arguable.¹³ Kong Fuzi's philosophy had been the mainstream ideology for more than fifteen

³David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 17.

⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵ Mungello, *Curious Land*, p. 14.

⁶ Timothy Brook, 'Book Review on Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 5 (1986), p. 1067.

⁷ Ibid., p. 1067.

⁸ Ibid., p. 1067.

⁹Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization*, pp. 31-75.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 41.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹² Ibid., p. 40.

¹³ In my opinion, this parallels Edward Said's argument that Orientalism did not exist before scholars invented it in their offices.

hundred years when Ricci arrived in China and *Sangang Wuchang* (Three Bonds and Five Relations) had long been the dominant set of rules in Chinese life. It is possible that Ricci imparted something of himself into the ideas that he transported to Europe. Though it may be true there were no Latin equivalents for “Kong Fuzi” and his philosophy before Ricci and his fellow missionaries introduced them to Europe, and that Ricci invented the terms “Confucius” and “Confucianism,” the practice of Confucianism itself could not have been invented. An outsider may use postmodern theory to explain Confucianism as an invention, but an insider such as myself, who grew up within Chinese culture, knows that Confucianism penetrates into ways of thinking, the practice of religion, and all aspects of life.

David Mungello’s focus on the efforts of the Jesuits to achieve accommodation between Western Christianity and Chinese civilisation is used in his work to try to justify Christianity by presenting the similarities between Christianity and Confucianism. This is in contrast to the “culture-conflict” view, represented in my article by two studies conducted in the 1980s: *China and The Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* by Jacques Gernet¹⁴ and *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter* by John Young.¹⁵ Gernet and Young do not simply treat the Chinese critics of Christianity as “xenophobes or hidebound resisters of change,”¹⁶ but make great attempts to introduce the Chinese perspective into the historical record, and to probe the question of how deeply the religious thinking of the two civilisations differed. In their limited historical studies, this leads to the conclusion that Christianity indeed failed to be assimilated into seventeenth and eighteenth-century China, merely playing an ephemeral and peripheral role in Chinese history during this period of time.

On the philosophical level, Gernet underlines the contrast between Chinese and Christian views of morality, Heaven and God, relationships between religion and politics, and makes a “cynical casuistry”

of the policy of accommodation.¹⁷ His main concern is the intellectual engagement between the Jesuit missionaries and their Neo-Confucian literati critics, and he stresses the challenge posed for the Jesuits by the Chinese world. First hand research materials from a variety of Chinese social groups, including the literate elite, Buddhist monks and common people, are applied to disclose the generally negative reactions toward Christianity and Christian missionaries. Furthermore, he portrays Jesuit missionaries as fearful of too much compromise with Chinese philosophy and culture after Ricci’s death. Ultimately, Gernet believes that “different languages express, through different logics, different visions of the world and man.”¹⁸ Therefore, he makes a very striking point in this book: the reason why Chinese people were basically unable to absorb and understand the essential concepts of Christianity is due to their cultural, including linguistic, predispositions.

However, this book should be approached with some caution. Paul A Cohen, in his review of *China and The Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, makes a pertinent and persuasive evaluation of Gernet’s cultural-contrast approach based on three facets. Firstly, Gernet uncritically incorporates materials, in which “the Chinese enemies of Christianity might have overstated the differences between Chinese culture and the culture of the Christian West,” into his own portrayal of cultural differences.¹⁹ Secondly, he overgeneralises about Chinese cultural orientations and ahistorically suggests that these orientations were fixed. Thirdly, Gernet’s linguistic/conceptual relativism and determinism potentially jeopardise “any sort of meaningful cross-cultural inquiry or understanding.”²⁰

One year later, Gernet’s book was followed by John Young’s *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter*, which, although of narrow scope, strengthened many of Gernet’s points. However, in contrast to Gernet’s philosophical, cultural-conflict approach, Young examines the important individuals, such as Xavier, Ricci, and Xu Guanqi,

¹⁴Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁵John Young, *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983).

¹⁶Daniel H. Bays, ‘Book Review on China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1987), p. 115.

¹⁷ Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism – Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 60.

¹⁸ Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Paul A. Cohen, ‘Book Review on China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1987), p. 679.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

and significant events, such as the Nanjing incident of 1616-1617, Schall and Bouvet's defenses of Christianity, and the Rites controversy. Young's case study echoes Gernet's view that Catholic Christianity and Chinese culture were fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed. However, he gives more weight to the moral absoluteness of Confucianism to account for Christianity's difficulties in China.

Though both Gernet's culture-conflict approach and Young's case study endeavour to demonstrate the incompatibility and irreconcilability between Christianity and Chinese culture, they overemphasise the objective difficulties the missionaries encountered in their proselytising activities, such as the opposition of the local literate elite, Buddhist monks and common people, as well as some incidents of anti-Christianity. The two authors also tend to ignore the other side of reality – the friendly relationship between some missionaries and Chinese literary men, and the prominent Chinese converts, such as Li Zhizao and the Confucian official scholar Xu Guangxi. Most importantly, they overlook the extent of missionaries' efforts to bridge the gap between Christianity and Confucianism, seeking to identify with the Chinese literati, thereby accommodating Christian belief with Chinese cultural tradition. Their analyses are also limited by their grasp of historical perspective, as will become clear in the following sections.

The Imperial Ban on Christianity and its Effects, 1724-1842

One year after Emperor Kangxi's death, the new emperor, Yong Zheng, banned Christianity in China by issuing an imperial edict. Emperor Yong Zheng's anti-Western stand was a turning point for the encounter between China and the West. Following the imperial proscription in 1724, Christianity witnessed a low ebb in China, and proselytising activities were forced underground.

Nine years after the publication of *Curious Land*, Mungello presented another book, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou*, in which he emphasises the Christian "inculturation" in China, which "refers to the absorption of Christianity into a culture to the degree that it not only finds expression in the elements of that culture but also becomes an animating force that transforms the culture."²¹ Inculturation affects a society to a greater extent than accommodation. Mungello discusses the life story of

Zhang Xingyao, who was part of the third generation of Chinese Christians in Hangzhou, to demonstrate the reconciliation of Confucianism and Christianity in China. This example of Christian inculturation directly contradicts Gernet and Young's belief that Christianity was not and could not be assimilated into Chinese culture.

Mungello's point of Christian "inculturation" into Chinese society is strengthened by two papers from *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* by Robert E. Entenmann. Entenmann describes Christian evangelisation under the Imperial Ban of 1724. While persecution and apostasy dramatically reduced the number of Catholics from about 300,000 to 200,000,²² in the frontier environment of Sichuan, the immigrant population provided Catholicism with a relatively hospitable atmosphere.²³ Discussing the leading evangelistic roles of Chinese priests and their families, the author also describes their experiences of persecution in Jiangjin, in 1746 and 1755. Entenmann points out that Catholics did not all belong to one social stratum but came from both indigent and middle classes. He also provides impressions of local Catholic life and worship. In his discussion of the phenomenon of the "Christian Virgins" he says that the Catholic Church offered Chinese women a channel for their religious passions that was the only respectable alternative to marriage. The Christian Virgins remained central to the growth and maintenance of the Catholic community through their education of girls in Sichuan.²⁴ The author concludes that by "the mid-eighteenth century Catholicism had become a popular religion with roots in Chinese society."²⁵

Though Entenmann only touches a tiny part of Catholic Christianity during the period of Qing imperial proscription of Christianity from 1724 to 1842, his writings suggest that missionaries persevered and made gradual progress, and the whole

²² Robert E. Entenmann, 'Catholics and Society in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan', Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 8.

²³ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁴ This Catholic institution, a parallel of the White Lotus sect, comprised of teaching-women, flourished into the twentieth century. Robert E. Entenmann, 'Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan', Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 193.

²⁵ Ibid., p.193.

²¹ Mungello, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou*, p. 2.

issue of the Christian presence outside the court appears to be much more complex than previously thought. Catholic communities increased in parts of the empire, despite imperial banning.²⁶ The survival of Christianity in this period may be attributed to the inculturation of Christianity within Chinese society. Unfortunately, most western scholars refrain from probing this religious history and fail to detect the hidden development of Christianity in eighteenth-century China. Neglect impedes the recognition of Christianity's adaptations within Chinese society. Further research into this period is necessary and will help elucidate the ongoing process, from accommodation to inculturation to indigenisation.

The Official Revival of Christian Proselytisation in China, 1842-1949

Through the Nanjing Treaty of 1842, western missionaries again obtained the right to proselytise in China and a guarantee of toleration for Chinese converts. In this favourable political setting, European Catholic missionaries intensified their evangelical activities in China, and the crusade to convert China also captured the imagination of the Protestants. The number of Protestant missionaries in China grew rapidly through the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century. Christianity was experiencing a revival in China. However, backed by the unequal treaties and gunboats, the evangelism of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries was tainted with imperialism. Inevitably, the missionary ventures increasingly encountered considerable hostilities. Especially after the 1860s, China saw a series of anti-Christianity movements, which reached a climax in the court sponsored Boxer Uprising of 1900. Consequently, when western scholars deal with the history of Christianity in China after 1842, they are inclined to examine either the local conflicts between Chinese Christians and non-Christians or the interactions between foreign missionaries and local officials and members of the gentry.

Some scholars believe that local suspicions of foreign imperialist power resulted in a pattern of Chinese anti-Christian movements and that such movements were often actively promoted during the last four decades of the nineteenth century by gentry, with the collusion of officials. This point of view is supported by Paul A. Cohen in his book *China and*

Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism 1860-1870. Cohen examines anti-Christian movements and lawsuits in Nanjing, Kuizhou, Tianjin and other cities, asserting that the presence and activities of Christian missionaries not only stirred up old xenophobic sentiment, but also directly challenged the status and roles of the local Confucian elite. Cohen sympathises with officials who were sandwiched between missionaries and this local gentry elite. If officials protected missionaries, they ran the risk of offending the gentry who could easily disrupt and cripple local government. Furthermore, he argues that the anti-Christian tradition in Chinese thought was long-standing and specifically "rooted in the antipathy of the Confucian system to heterodox ideas and practices as irrational and as threatening the moral order of society and state."²⁷ Such a view of Confucianism is oversimplified and monolithic. Cohen's focus on the missionary-gentry tensions results in the neglect of other possible elements that may have caused anti-Christian sentiments among the masses. In addition, he suggests that Christianity often attracted followers from groups that were in some way marginal to the dominant Chinese power structure. He feels that Chinese Catholics were "drawn almost entirely from the most disadvantaged classes – poor peasants, shop-keepers, merchants, vagabonds," and were "isolated and often estranged from their fellow Chinese."²⁸

Alan Richard Sweeten's case study in *Christianity in Rural China – Conflict and Accommodation in Jiangxi Province, 1860 - 1900* reveals the local elite's peripheral role in local Christian conflicts.²⁹ Although missionaries during the seventeenth century tended to be sympathetic to Confucianism and sought to accommodate to Chinese culture, missionaries in the nineteenth century found "Confucian China grossly deficient and morally inferior to the Christian world. ... Their criticisms of Confucianism necessarily

²⁶ Bays, 'Christianity and the Dynamics of Qing Society', Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, p. 3.

²⁷ Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 5.

²⁸ Paul A. Cohen, 'Christian Missions and Their Impact to 1900', John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 557.

²⁹ Sweeten's study is exclusively confined to rural Jiangxi; the complete picture of Christianity in rural China remains obscure.

included the gentry because the gentry enjoyed the greatest benefits of the Confucian-based system.”³⁰ The gentry were not usually involved or implicated in Christian lawsuits. Moreover, these lawsuits between Christians and non-Christians were not very often centered on religion, but rather on secular and personal matters. Sweeten maintains, against the characterisation of Cohen, that Chinese Christians came from all walks of life, including the lower gentry, living side by side with the non-Christians and keeping “daily and regular contact with non-Christian kin and neighbors.”³¹ He puts more emphasis on the mutual accommodation between Christians and non-Christians within rural society than on their conflicts and repeatedly stresses that rural people accepted, or at least tolerated, Christians as members of the local community.³² Such an evaluation offers support for the theory of the inculturation of Christianity into Chinese society.

Christianity in China – From the Eighteenth Century to the Present, edited by Daniel H. Bays, is another influential book that deals with Chinese Christianity in the Qing Era. Here, Christianity is seen as a religion that eventually implanted itself in the Chinese social structure and as a practice that the elite and common people alike viewed as part of a “Chinese pattern of sectarian conflict.”³³ In one chapter, Richard Madsen points out that Christianity helped ethnic groups confirm their unique identities and separate themselves from the dominant Han culture in China. He also views the role of Christianity in China from another perspective, asserting that “if one accepts Chinese culture as a frame of meanings uniting a variety of ethnic groups within a single social system, then Christianity can be seen as very much part of Chinese culture.”³⁴

It appears that, in comparison with earlier historical periods, there was a greater show of hostility towards Christianity and western missionaries after 1842, but the general tendency towards inculturation proceeded and even moved a further step towards indigenisation. The argument for indigenisation is strengthened by Sweeten’s

case study in Jiangxi on the mutual accommodation between rural Christians and non-Christians, and by discussions in Bays’ edited volume of the reciprocally beneficial relationship between Christians and ethnic identities in China. The further indigenisation of Chinese Christianity, however, was complicated by a dizzying series of political and social upheavals and external assaults. To mention only a very few of these significant events, one must include the 1911 Revolution, the overthrow of the Qing Imperial Government for a Chinese republic, the Japanese occupation and the Anti-Japanese war, and the civil war that established Communist China. Nevertheless, these turbulent situations actually helped break Christian churches free from western control and urged Chinese Christianity to become independent and indigenous. Daniel Bays characterises this shift as part of a worldwide trend in Christianity, saying:

The nineteenth century was the great age of building foreign-missions-dominated programs and institutions, not only in China but around the world. The twentieth century has seen a reversal, with national Christian movements succeeding to power and control over their own churches as foreign missions have been expelled, have withered, or have entered into partnerships with the “native” Christians over whom they formerly presided.³⁵

Chinese Christianity under the Communist Party, 1949-Present

Since 1949, the practice of religion in China has dramatically changed under communist rule. The nascent Chinese Communist Party believed that socialism was the only way to save China from the evils of capitalism. Religion, especially Christianity, was strongly condemned because of its perceived foreign origin and European imperialist associations in the late Qing and Republican eras. The lack of Christian missionary accommodation to Chinese culture during these same times is partly to blame. But while many foreign missionaries withdrew from Mainland China under CCP rule, Chinese Christians often moved their religious activities “underground,” most often to believers’ homes, with ceremonies

³⁰ Alan Richard Sweeten, *Christianity in Rural China: Conflict and Accommodation in Jiangxi Province, 1860-1900* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2001), p.3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³ Richard Madsen, ‘Book Review on Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 2 (1998), p. 482.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

³⁵ Bays, ‘The Rise of an Indigenous Chinese Christianity’, Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, p. 265.

performed by local Chinese priests or pastors.³⁶ Some Chinese Christian churches survived by compromising with the CCP, acquiring Socialist standing by joining the official Three-Self Movement, the bridge between the Chinese government and Chinese Protestants. In spite of this radical indigenisation, hostility existed between “evangelical leaders on the one hand and the new regime and the Three-Self on the other.”³⁷ Both forms of Protestant Christianity in Mainland China, not to mention the unprotected Catholic Church, were beaten almost to death by the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution.

Yet, the radical political movements that culminated in the Cultural Revolution mostly destroyed Chinese confidence in Marxist socialism, and many people eventually returned to religion for spiritual sustenance. After 1976, the CCP itself became more tolerant of religion, and in 1979, after thirty years of repression by a hostile, atheistic government, both Protestant and Catholic churches in China experienced revival. David Mungello sees this revival of the indigenous Chinese church as a resumption of the inculturation of Christianity, stating that “the Communist government, by forcing Chinese Christians to terminate all ties with foreign Christians and foreign support, unwittingly aided the inculturation process.”³⁸ Even oppression and persecution, it seems, contributed to the inculturation, and ultimately the indigenisation, of Christianity in China as it became Chinese Christianity.

Conclusion

Although western scholars offer a veritable feast of books with deep insights and provocative hypotheses on the experience of Christianity in China, their main focus is generally on the first period of growth and the third period of revival, while the second period of decline and the fourth Communist period remain obscure. Studies on Chinese Christianity from 1949 to present are still scant, and certain aspects of Chinese Christian history remain almost untouched. There is also room, and need, for further biographical,

institutional, and comparative studies between different historical periods, including a comparative examination of missionaries operating in China during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, while these two centuries were vigorous times for missionary activity, the earlier era is distinguished by the respect Jesuit Catholic missionaries held for Chinese culture as they worked with scholar-officials, while later post-Industrial Revolution European missionaries, often Protestants concentrating their efforts on the grass-roots population, saw only a “backwards” China. The period from 1898 to the present especially deserves consideration, and though there are scattered papers and articles, many voids still exist. This was one of the most turmoil-ridden times in Chinese history, and the way in which the evangelical activities interacted with contemporary social and political movements should be studied. In spite of the mandates and prohibitions that sought to limit and even eliminate Christianity as a faith within China, further examination of historic periods, such as the height of the communist leadership, will reveal how these challenges actually cemented Christianity as a local and indigenous religion. Additionally, because Christianity was further inculturated into Chinese society at this time, there is sufficient need for further studies of “Chinese church leaders and all-Chinese Christian movements, as well as for investigations of the dynamics of cooperation, competition, and sometimes confrontation between the Chinese and foreign members of the Christian communities.”³⁹

Though cultural conflict theories try to convince readers of the incompatibility and irreconcilability of Christianity with Chinese culture,⁴⁰ the dynamism and persistent existence of Chinese Christianity invalidates such arguments. Historical evidence shows that, as Christianity becomes accommodated and inculturated in Chinese society, it survives and develops.

In the first historical period from 1583 to 1724, with the help of the accommodation policy, Ricci successfully introduced Christianity to China and won not only the Chinese converts but also the respect of the Chinese court and literati. During the period of imperial prohibition from 1724 to 1842,

³⁶ This is called “family church.” It continues to have popularity today.

³⁷ Wangzhi Gao, ‘Y.T. Wu: A Christian Leader Under Communism’, Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, p. 350.

³⁸ Mungello, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou*, p. 176.

³⁹ Bays, ‘The Rise of an Indigenous Chinese Christianity’, Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, p. 266..

⁴⁰ The work of Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, has been used to represent the culture-conflict perspective for this article.

due to inculturation, Christian missions persevered and made gradual progress outside the court. From the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century, though the imperial ban on evangelical activities was lifted, Christianity did not flourish in China as expected because missionaries departed from the accommodation policy. It is also notable that in some rural and border areas, because of missionary efforts towards inculturation, a harmonious relationship was established between Christians and non-Christians, and between missionaries and ethnic groups. With the retreat of western missionaries from socialist China under harsh political conditions after 1949, imported Christianity was inevitably indigenised and transformed into Chinese Christianity. Though Christianity still remains a marginal religion in China, its revival in the most recent twenty-five years in Mainland China may indicate a future as one of the major beliefs in Chinese society. The history of Christianity in China from 1583 to the present is a continual ebb and flow of conversion movements that have at times slowed, but never completely ceased. A process of growth, decline, and revival of proselytising activities, and the development of evangelisation policies, has facilitated the evolution of an introduced Christianity, practiced in China, to a domestic Chinese Christianity. Much work remains to be done in specific historical studies. However, Christianity in China can be characterised as proceeding from accommodation to inculturation to indigenisation. Only by taking a wide view of history can such patterns be ascertained.