While I was at Cambridge, England in 2005, I was able to go through some of the documents of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, and was amazed to read about C.Y. Cheng (Jingyi Cheng 謹靜怡, 1881–1939), one of the three Chinese delegates who attended this World Missionary Conference. Cheng was, at the age of twenty-eight, probably amongst the youngest conference participants, yet he distinguished himself by giving a seven-minute speech at the 1910 conference. Speaking on behalf of Chinese Christians, Cheng made a strong appeal for the development of indigenous Churches in China. He believed that ‘the China Mission’ should very soon become ‘the Chinese Church’ and that ‘the Church in China’ should eventually become ‘the Church of China’, saying that: “The time has passed from the period of the China Mission into the period of the China Church, and it will slowly but surely pass from the period of the Church in China to that of the Church of China.”

He also added: “In the nature of things China is by no means interested in such (denominational) divisions, and in fact, the very opposite is the general opinion of the Chinese Christians today.” Again, Cheng could feel the deepest desires of the Chinese Christians in his days, and he voiced out loudly the urgent need of the Chinese churches, not just for a unified church in China, but a truly Chinese church which was free from Western denominationalism. While his contemporaries were concerned with ‘unity and cooperation among the denominations and various mission boards’, Cheng was more concerned with the development of indigenous Christianity in China.

2 Ibid. 389.
I shall, in this chapter, attempt to review the situations regarding the development of indigenous Christianity in China before and after the 1910 Edinburgh conference, and review Cheng’s speeches and subsequent work for the Christian Church of China. It was found that there was indeed a strong desire among Chinese Christians for the development of independent, indigenous Christianity in China especially in the early years of the twentieth century which laid a solid background and justification for Cheng’s speech at the 1910 conference. As we are celebrating the Centenary Anniversary of the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910, the development of indigenous Christianity in China needs to be given greater attention and its implications further explored.

The Indigenous Movements before 1910

The idea of developing local evangelists in China, or training Chinese people for localized ministry, could be traced back to the days of Karl Gutzlaff (1803–1851) when he started the Chinese Union (福漢會 Fu Han Hui) in 1844, which aimed at ‘evangelization of China by the Chinese’. However, the principle of ‘Three-Self’—namely ‘self-governing’, ‘self-supporting’ and ‘self-propagating’ was also commonly associated with Henry Venn (1796–1873), the Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, England (1841–1872) and Rufus Anderson (1796–1880), Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions since 1826 and corresponding secretary from 1832 to 1866. For both of them, the grand aim of missionary work was the building of a genuinely native church in the mission fields. “The native church was…that it should potentially be a church of the country, a church that could become self-governing, self-supporting, self-extending.” Though both were speaking of the ‘Three-Self principles’, they were, so to say, ‘mission administrators’ only and the realization of “Three-Self” (the indigenized Christianity) had yet to be seen in the specific mission fields.
