Protestantism and Modern China: Rejection, Success, Disaster, Survival, and Rebirth

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This chapter offers a concise overview of the historical experience of Protestantism in modern China. The course of this history over the last century and a half has resembled a rollercoaster ride, veering from the heights of achievement to the depths of disaster. How historians determine which events constituted achievements and which disasters, of course, partly depends on the period they are considering. When I was writing my most recent book on the history of the Christian church in China, I had to choose among a range of possible time periods and their salient features.¹ The identification of each period was not difficult. For the modern period, I used the dates 1800–60, the era of the formation of a new trade relationship with imperialist Western powers, the treaty port system, and permission for Christian missionaries to enter the Qing empire; 1860–1902, the period of increasing European and North American Christian missionary presence supported by imperialism and Chinese elite resistance to Christianity resulting in large numbers of conflicts over religious matters (*jiaogan 教案*); 1902–27, the era of success and growth for both the missions and independent Chinese churches; 1927–50, a time when Chinese nationalism spelled disaster for the missions, but indigenous Protestantism continued to rise; 1950-present, an era of tribulations, survival, and post-reform era flourishing.

The more important and challenging task was to identify the shifting dynamics and forces of change from period to period. It became evident to me that the core dynamics of the pattern were centered on three forces and their respective priorities: (1) foreign missionaries, (2) Chinese Christians, and (3) the Chinese state. Each of these was the dominant force, or the independent variable, at different times. Until the end of the 19th century the Qing state along with the traditional elites rejected Protestantism, contributing to a state of tension with, and even hostility and violence against, foreign missionaries. When soon after 1900 the Chinese state and elites turned towards a national reform program with its roots in modern nationalism, Chinese Protestants

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assisted in important ways, and the church enjoyed striking success. Yet, by the mid-1920s, nationalism, which had earlier fueled the late Qing dynasty reforms before 1912, was turned against the missionaries as part of a general anti-foreign and anti-Western movement. In the meantime, the Chinese-led branch of the Protestant church was growing and maturing, as urban congregations drew on a growing middle class, itself substantially the product of the Protestant school system. However, the foreign missionary establishment did not recognize the urgent need to relinquish decision-making power and control over resources to the new generation of Chinese church leaders. As this became apparent, some Chinese Christians formed their own movements entirely independent of the foreign missions, with whom they had frosty relations thereafter. It is these groups, many of them Pentecostal, that Xi Lian has described so convincingly in his much-acclaimed work on the Protestant enthusiasts.²

From around 1930 onwards, the foreign missionary movement in China steadily lost its vigor until its final demise in the early 1950s when all missionaries were expelled from the People's Republic (PRC). Several of the indigenous Protestant movements continued into the Communist period, but the new government was extremely hard on all religious believers and took special care to eliminate or co-opt effective Chinese leadership of the Protestant groups. The People's Republic early on in the 1950s successfully implemented a system of control for all religions, one which the Kuomintang had aspired to implement but did not have the political power to carry out. The party offices and state bureaucracies set up to monitor religious groups were especially vigilant and harsh towards Christians. During the Korean War years (1950–53), those Chinese Christians who had previously had close contact with foreigners, particularly with Americans and those foreigners from countries whose military was in armed conflict with Chinese military forces on the Korean peninsula, had a very hard time. The mass campaigns of the late 1950s and until the end of the Cultural Revolution seemed to put the final nails into the coffin of Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. All Christian church buildings were locked and shuttered. Yet, of course, this was not the end of the story. When the “reform and opening” policy took effect after 1978, Catholic and Protestant churches, along with temples and mosques, reopened and were soon packed with believers. Leading the religious resurgence of the past thirty-five years has been Protestant Christianity, which has made astounding gains in number of adherents. Today there are at least several tens of millions of Protestant believers of all kinds and types, which are a historical product of both the original

² Lian Xi, Redeemed by fire: the rise of popular Christianity in modern China (New Haven, 2010).
See also the chapter by Melissa Inouye in this volume.