

Editorial of the Special Issue



**The Cross of Chinese Christians and Their
Resistance to Suppression**



The Christian cross has appeared in many shapes and colors as Christianity has spread across nations during the last two millennia, from crude wooden sticks bound together to carefully crafted intersecting golden bars decorated with precious stones. In contemporary China, the typical Christian cross is a short horizontal beam on a longer upright post with clean lines and a bright red color. In traditional Chinese culture, red represents joy and celebration; in modern times, it has acquired a new layer of meaning: revolution. For Chinese Christians, however, the bright red color of the cross also symbolizes Jesus Christ's blood, sacrificed for human salvation, and the blood shed by martyrs persecuted for their faith, reminding believers to follow Jesus and to imitate the piety of martyrs, even if it means bloody sacrifice. There are crosses in other shapes and colors in China, but the simple red cross has become the most common form and may be seen inside and outside churches and homes.

Christians remain a small minority in China today, comprising at most 5 percent of the population, but the number of Christians has been increasing rapidly. Therefore, in spite of governmental restrictions on church construction, bright red crosses have kept popping up on church buildings in rural villages and on the changing skylines of urban areas. The large, elevated red crosses are often conspicuous, especially in the midst of overcrowded high-rise apartments and commercial buildings. In the night, many of these crosses are lit by neon, penetrating a darkness that is often filled with smog. The conspicuity of the red cross on church spires has become so upsetting to some Communist officials that from 2013 to 2016, authorities in Zhejiang carried out a province-wide campaign to demolish all crosses on church rooftops. Indeed, the conspicuity of the Chinese cross is a social and political phenomenon in China today, and the political campaign in Zhejiang has only made it more prominent. Unsurprisingly, many scholars have watched the campaign closely and conducted systematic research. Consequently, the *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* has received a number of manuscripts on this topic. This special issue of the journal is thus devoted to scholarly analysis of Chinese Christianity and the campaign to demolish church crosses.

The first article, by Fenggang Yang and his research team, provides a temporal and spatial analysis of the campaign. It argues that even though the campaign to demolish church crosses was carried out under the guise of a larger operation of landscape improvement, the campaign's political intention to suppress Christianity, which is evident in secret and published documents of the party-state, was likewise recognized by many Christians in Zhejiang and beyond. More importantly, the article demonstrates that the campaign failed on multiple fronts. The provincial government failed to remove most of the crosses on top of church buildings (no more than one-third were taken down),