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ABSTRACT

This study engages Chinese Christianity from a literary perspective and analyzes texts that have largely been ignored. The twenty-first century promises to be a time of great change for the Christian Church in the People’s Republic of China. The relationship between Chinese Christians and their government is complex and controversial. This situation has elicited a great deal of scholarly interest in recent years, but studies of the literature of Chinese Christianity are practically nonexistent. Our focus here is limited to the present-day situation in China, specifically to the literature of the last quarter-century.

The U.S. and China continue to have strongly contrasting meta-narrative national visions. This difference in how the two nations “tell” themselves seems an insuperable barrier to effective international communication and compromise on human rights. At the same time, the Christian and Marxist underpinnings to their respective nationalisms give these nations a common ground that makes their competition even more fierce and more closely tied to religion: the U.S. and the PRC both have missionary ideologies inextricably linked to their nationalisms. Religious narratives, therefore, will continue to be fundamental to matters of grave international concern.

Many recent fictional narratives by U.S. and Chinese writers—this study covers Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Mo Yan, and Bei Cun among others—provide, at the most basic level, mimetic accounts of Chinese Christianity, but these texts also reveal meta-narrative levels of meaning. Like political and missionary narratives, these works of fiction partake in and are shaped by national, racial, and religious meta-narratives. Western readers have often been given incomplete and distorted narratives about religion in China and are only beginning to adjust their notions of authentic Chineseness to include the reality of indigenous Chinese Christianity.

How this Chinese Christianity looks, of course, is sometimes different from American Christianity and different from what many Americans would expect or prefer. Chinese Christian identity in the mainland today, even more uniformly than American Christian identity, is bound up with national pride and normally too (admitting a strongly dissenting minority voice) with at least a modicum of support for China’s ruling authorities.
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Chapter One

Introduction: Approaching Reality by Way of Narrative

The beginning of the twenty-first century promises to be a time of great change for the Christian Church in the People’s Republic of China. Jason Kindopp in God and Caesar in China (2004) cites a host of social and economic forces—increasing liberties in the marketplace, the gradual loosening of the state apron strings—that are likely to make China’s next few years a “critical juncture in church-state relations.” David Aikman, the former Time Bureau Chief in Beijing, recently predicted a fully Christianized China emerging over the next thirty years. After years of reporting on the Chinese Church, Aikman envisions the real possibility of a more tolerant, even churchgoing, leadership arising in the coming days to rule a Chinese Christian population that could number in the hundreds of millions. There are already more Catholics in China than in Ireland; Aikman and others imagine a China in which there are more Christians than there are people in the United States; this could be a reality, they say, before we are even halfway through this century. “The moment may occur,” Aikman concludes, “when the Chinese dragon is tamed by the power of the Christian Lamb.”

The current relationship between Chinese Christians and their government is complex and controversial. The state, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), sponsors official church bureaucracies for both Catholics and Protestants (as well as for Muslims, Taoists, and Buddhists). These government offices give aid to legal church bodies and also demarcate the boundaries within which religious groups may practice their faith. The control of the state over the so-called “registered” churches is potentially limitless, but in practice the CCP allows these law-abiding Christians a great deal of
freedom. The official churches are always full on Sundays and often for mid-week services as well, but even the healthy growth seen there supposedly pales by comparison to the explosive expansion among the unregistered Christian groups that are springing up across China. In some places risking persecution, elsewhere ignored by the powers that be, in still other areas even receiving encouragement from local authorities, the “underground” or “house-church” movement is a wildcard in China’s risky game of slow reform and opening up to outside influences. The government fears groups that it cannot accurately count or effectively control, but it has also sometimes admitted that faithful Christians, even “illegal” ones, make good citizens.\(^5\) Among the underground Christians there are groups that pray for the overthrow of the CCP, but there are many more that do not register with the government for simple reasons of practicality or for reasons of religious conscience that yet do not lead them to endorse any other more-direct political action. Adding to this confusing state of affairs is the fact that in some areas, particularly in the Catholic community, the line between legal and underground clergy is much contested and often crossed.\(^6\) Jealous of the loyalty of its citizenry, the CCP refuses to recognize the authority of the Vatican over Chinese Catholics; lists of clergy approved by the Chinese government and those approved by the Holy See do not always tally.\(^7\) House-church distrust of official churches, a longstanding perception of Christianity as a religion foreign to China, and government distrust of relationships between Chinese Christians and foreign Christians all contribute further levels of complexity.

This singular situation has elicited a great deal of scholarly interest in recent years. Especially in the fields of history, religion, and political science, several writers have dedicated years of their lives and many books and articles to the study of
Christianity in China. Studies of the literature of Chinese Christianity, however, are practically nonexistent. This despite the fact that a vast array of literature by Christians and about Chinese Christianity, both fiction and nonfiction, in Chinese and in English, has been produced since the Chinese revival of religious freedom in 1979. The only English-language book-length treatment of Christianity in Chinese literature was published in the 1980s and could cover mainland literature only up to 1949, the year that inaugurated the ban on religion from Chinese life and art that would last nearly three decades. Considering the significance that the burgeoning growth of Chinese Christianity bears for the future of China and the U.S., it is imperative that more recent literature not be ignored. Literary research can, at the very least, serve as a barometer of social and political climates; it can act as a particular subfield of cultural history. If this present work were to do nothing but bring a new set of relevant documents to the attention of current scholars in the field, this should be excuse enough for its existence. The fact is, however, that narrative has a peculiar power that both history and politics themselves draw influence from. Narrative should arguably be the starting point for research of this sort, not subordinate or secondary to more “scientific” disciplines. The purpose of this present work is to begin to remedy this imbalance by analyzing some of the narratives, both East and West from the late twentieth century, that speak to the state of the Christian faith in mainland China today.

Since many of these narratives are not widely known, and some will be difficult for an interested reader to find, some brief stories and long excerpts will be included in the text below. Furthermore, some chapters will open with narratives of the “first-person genre.” Elizabeth Abel in a recent number of Critical Inquiry uses that latter phrase as she
describes the “resurgence in recent years of the autobiographical critical voice that talks back to the abstract voice of theory.” This present work participates in this trend and seconds Abel’s contention that “[t]hese narrative circuits [. . .] do not constitute [. . .] a retreat from ‘sociopolitical engagements (which are not infrequently their topic).’”9 What follows immediately here is a personal narrative of a minor sort of sociopolitical engagement. This story will further describe some of the peculiarities of the Chinese case, will clarify my own interest in the topic, and introduce some of the themes that will recur in the chapters to come, particularly the contentiousness of East/West interaction that is fundamental to this comparative literary study.

A Foreign Christian in the Chinese Church

Sunday mornings during the fall of 1998 and spring of 1999 I volunteered as an usher and greeter of foreign visitors at the Haidian Christian Church in the northwest corner of Beijing. That was my second academic year in the Chinese mainland. I was teaching English at Peking University, within walking distance of the grey-brick Christian chapel that overflowed with congregants twice each Sunday.

I was raised in an Assemblies of God church in the U.S.; this meant emotional worship services and convicting sermons that were not considered complete without a call for “all those who wish to rededicate their lives to Christ to come forward.” Like many Protestants growing up in the late twentieth century I have hopped my way through a small phone book of vaguely held denominational loyalties, but whatever the house of worship, I have continued to be a habitual churchgoer, and I sought out a congregation as soon as I arrived in the Chinese mainland. In my first year in China I enjoyed the weekly
oasis of one of the city’s several “foreign fellowships.” These are non-Chinese-language churches that meet in embassy compounds or rented hotel banquet halls, and whose foreign-language Christian instruction is tolerated by a nervous government on the condition that they not be called “churches” and as long as hopeful visitors holding Chinese passports are not allowed through the gates. At the beginning of my second school year, I began attending services at the local “official” Chinese church.

Though there are many more legal Chinese Christian “meeting points,” the Haidian Christian Church near the nation’s most prestigious university is one of only a handful of good-sized Protestant church buildings in the city, an enormous metropolitan area that is home to 13 million or more. Despite reports of rapid growth, the Christian minority in China is yet a small one—the government claims something under two percent, though five percent or higher might be closer to reality—but church space in the cities is still inadequate. All the major churches have multiple services and spillover rooms with closed-circuit TVs for those who do not arrive an hour or more in advance to reserve a place in the main chapel. At that time, in 1998, the Haidian church had recently sprouted a second Sunday-morning sermon; as of summer 2004 it hosted three services on Sunday mornings and one more in the early afternoon.

I appreciated the community I had found in the foreign fellowships, but I had also tired of my weekly vacations from China, the repeated double culture shock as I entered and left the wealthy English-speaking conclaves of expatriate Christianity. My Chinese was improving, and my curiosity about indigenous Chinese Christianity was growing, so one Sunday in the fall of 1998 I set off through the labyrinth of high-walled narrow lanes
south of campus and soon arrived at the whitewashed cross-topped arch gate of the
Haidian Christian Church, which I had visited only once before, at Christmas.

I was greeted at the church door, handed a program, and shepherded into the
foreigners’ section, a concession of about 10 rows in the middle of the church just behind
the side door where I had entered. These rows were cordoned off with bungee ropes that I
climbed ungracefully over before the elderly female usher was able to unhook them to
admit me. These several seats were always reserved for “foreign guests” (waibin, 外宾).

Once the service began, if there were any unclaimed seats in the section, a few Chinese
attendees, people who had earlier been turned away from the main sanctuary and who
pressed optimistically in at the rear door, could tumble in to take one of the empty
foreign-guest seats. The arrangement was ostensibly pragmatic rather than racist or
simply hospitable; only these few foreign rows of the hard wooden fold-down seats were
fitted with silver metal boxes. Into these boxes could be plugged earphones that received
a simultaneous English translation of the sermon, transmitted from a small room behind
the stage. Foreign visitors had to sit in the reserved rows and remain separate from the
Chinese believers if they wanted to hear the sermon in English. The setup was awkward
for everyone, but particularly for those foreign visitors who did not want to use the
translation service.

Probably this segregation of the foreign guests originally had at least some
political impetus behind it. Ever since China’s opening up to large numbers of foreign
travelers during Deng Xiaoping’s Reform Era (1979-), there have been formal and
informal double standards in place: foreign prices, foreign exchange currency, foreign
tours, foreign hotels, and “Friendship Stores” for foreigners only. Foreign students at
Peking University are still segregated into foreigners-only dormitories. Foreign guests in China are still in various ways encouraged to live within the boundaries proscribed for them, and, as used to be the case with foreign restaurants and hotels and as is still the case with “foreign fellowships,” Chinese citizens are sometimes even more forcefully protected from fraternization by being held on the Chinese side of the line.

As foreign numbers grow and boundaries become ragged and more difficult to maintain, much of the government’s will and ability to maintain these barriers is ebbing, but segregation in China was never a mere imposition of will from the top down. As with segregation anywhere, the cooperation of great masses of the population is necessary and readily available. Communist systems of racial segregation in China would probably never have worked at all if, first, the tiny numbers of the racial heterodox did not make such controls relatively simple and, more significantly, if these controls had not been based on a widespread orthodox conception of Chineseness that goes much deeper and further back in time than Mao Zedong or the Chinese Communist Party. This conception held by the broad masses of the Chinese populace confuses nation and race, to paraphrase Ian Buruma, and sees China as being “for the Chinese.”

Who are “the Chinese”? Though they constantly acknowledge and praise their “55 national minorities,” to the vast majority of Chinese people the word “Chinese” refers to the single majority ethnicity of China, the Han Chinese. Similarly, though Chinese people understand that the U.S. has many minorities of its own, the Chinese word for “American” (meiguoren, 美国人) implies Caucasian. China’s ethnic minorities, like the foreign minorities on Chinese soil and in Chinese churches, are the victims or beneficiaries of various double standards and cultural markings. They are given some
preference—sometimes arbitrary or rather obviously for show—in university admissions; they are exempt from the national one-child policy; but they also appear in the media almost exclusively in faux-native garb performing native dances or songs. One English-language radio program broadcast in Beijing in 1998 stated flatly, “China’s national minorities excel at singing and dancing.” This sort of un-ironic essentializing statement will make most Americans cringe, but Chinese students found this American reaction sincerely baffling when I raised the point in an American Culture discussion on race and political correctness. They asserted almost unanimously that there cannot be anything wrong with making a statement like this one, or with saying that “Black people excel at basketball,” for two simple reasons: 1) the truth of the statements is so patently obvious; and 2) the statements are complimentary.

The reserved foreigner seats in the local church were likely in part a measure taken from political motives to maintain the illusion of free association, while limiting the potential for foreign interference in China’s internal affairs, but the segregation does not feel political anymore. In the Haidian Church it had come to feel merely practical. In fact, the CCP’s famed authoritarianism is rarely in evidence in China’s everyday affairs. Americans may sense timidity or defiance or curiosity when striking up conversations with strangers in China; these days they almost never feel the paranoid fear of Big Brother watching or trying to keep his people away from heterodox influences.

At the worst, the situation in this particular church felt embarrassingly obsequious, to be taken off one’s bench in the overflow area and to watch an uncomplaining fellow Christian be removed from his hard-earned chair in the foreigners’ section to make room for the lately come Caucasian. At its best this sort of treatment can
feel like respect and hospitality, like the measure due to a guest in a foreign land, the way we ideally believe strangers should always be treated. If anyone were to hint that the segregation in the church were a subtle form of political repression, any Chinese we can imagine would protest that it is “the Chinese way” to so treat foreigners, not “the Communist way.” Besides, don’t foreigners want to sit with other foreigners? Don’t foreigners want to hear the sermon in their own language? It is only natural, the Chinese imply, like Black people playing basketball and China’s national minorities singing and dancing. These “Chinese ways,” these hospitalities that can make foreign guests uncomfortable, die hard, even in the leveling confines of the Christian Church. Three years ago there was actually talk among the church leadership of building a separate bathroom for foreigners as part of the upcoming renovations. I was soon to learn, much to my discomfort, that not all Chinese believed in these “Chinese ways” of hospitality. I would soon meet one young Chinese woman who was unhappy with the special treatment foreigners received in the church and who earnestly hoped for more of the old-style East/West segregation.

I consistently sat in the foreign section during my first weeks at the church in 1998, but the situation was a thorn in my flesh, a constant pricking of my conscience for which I did not see any solution. The special treatment seemed undemocratic, un-American, un-Christian. I did not want to hear the English translation, so there was no practical reason I should have a seat in the foreign section, but in the annex I could not understand the Chinese as it was filtered through the single squawking TV speaker. I tried arriving early to earn my place honestly in the main sanctuary’s Chinese areas, but I quickly realized that sitting in the church in any seat but a foreign-section seat was to
deprive a Chinese person of that Chinese seat for no reason that was comprehensible to
them. At times I cowered in the overflow annex politely rebuffing the ushers’ pleas to let
them guide me into the main chapel, but normally I surrendered and walked straight to
the foreigner section, picked up earphones that I had no intention of using, and sat down.
It was the one black spot on an otherwise pleasant and rewarding month of Sundays. This
seemingly hopeless, if petty, struggle with my conscience would only grow more intense
when I was asked by the pastors to take charge of the foreign section.

I had wanted to get to know the pastors better and to serve in the church. After
applying to the head pastor, I was told what my two new jobs were to be: 1) to tutor the
pastoral staff in English once a week, and 2) to take charge of greeting and seating
foreign visitors on Sunday morning. I was instantly disappointed and apprehensive. I had
hoped to be assigned jobs that would challenge my Chinese-language abilities and not
emphasize my foreignness. If my job were to sweep floors, at least I would have to learn
practical words like “broom” and “sweep” and I would be treated like all the normal
Chinese people who also sometimes swept floors. But Chinese floors were for Chinese
sweepers, and naturally a foreign guest’s talents would not be so ill-used. I enjoyed
teaching, but I was not excited about, nor skilled at, teaching basic conversational
English. My students at the university were English majors whose language skills were
already quite advanced. The pastors were beginners, and beginners with little time for
independent study and few opportunities to make use of a second language. And as for
ushering the foreigners’ section, I already well understood the ethical morass of that no
man’s land. But I naturally could not refuse these vocations. I wanted to be useful in the
church, and the pastors had told me how I could be useful.
The tutoring, while not successful, was not a bad experience. I was able to spend time with the pastors talking about religious matters in Chinese and English. Ushering on Sundays had some rewards as well, but service in the church suddenly felt to me like a cross to bear. I felt the task was in some way important, if only because the head pastor believed it was important and appreciated my willingness. I could not see any solution to the problems inherent in the system, but the problems seemed to be of my own imagining. I considered it horribly awkward for me, a foreign Christian in China, to ask a Chinese person to vacate a seat in a Chinese church on the off chance that another foreigner might arrive just before the service started, but I almost never saw any of the Chinese Christians rebel or complain. Instead, accustomed to situations of special treatment for foreigners, they usually moved away as sheepishly as I had asked them to move.

The earphones explanation was my greatest friend and ally, but defining the foreign concession solely in terms of foreigners requiring English translation was not entirely truthful. The area did not only exist for the sake of linguistic necessity, but also as a place of hospitality, a privilege of the “waibin,” the guest from outside. And while “outside” or foreign was usually easily definable in terms of skin color, it was not always. Visiting overseas Chinese were a conundrum to me. They obviously looked Chinese, and often they had no need for the English translation; how could I use the earphone argument to banish a mainland Chinese visitor and then seat an overseas native Chinese speaker in the same seat? But the other ushers directed these “foreign guests” to the foreigners’ area, and they normally accepted the privilege as a matter of course. They understood Chinese ways. There were many other fine lines to be drawn: what to do with
foreigners who bring several Chinese friends? Is this or that person really an overseas Chinese or is she an unscrupulous mainland visitor working the system? What about visitors from Hong Kong, the land of the “one country, two systems” policy? Perfect justice was impossible, so I was not overzealous in my efforts to balance the scales. And after all, this was a Christian church, and the business of seating was a minor business, so the potential for hurt feelings or serious confrontation was minute.

So I carried on, reconciling myself weekly to my small but nagging concerns, until one morning I encountered a Chinese woman who apparently felt the inequities of the seating as strongly as I did and who was not afraid to tell me about it. She was a young woman accompanied by a girlfriend, both of them probably university students from one of several nearby schools. I had never seen them before, and they sat down near the front of the foreign section while I was talking with someone else. Particularly when I suspected a person to be a first-time visitor to the church I was loath to send them away. That day the fact that there still were a couple of seats open near the choir made me feel better about asking them to move. I walked up to them with earphones in hand and launched into my oft-rehearsed Chinese pitch: “I’m sorry, these seats are for foreign visitors who need to use these headphones for translation.” The young woman was instantly defensive, refusing to speak Chinese with me and asking me to explain myself in English. They had both understood me, though, and her friend coaxed her up, and they went to look at the other seats. The woman was clearly stewing, and a minute later she walked back over to where I was standing in the aisle and said in English, at a normal pitch but clearly furious, “This is a Chinese church, you know, and I am Chinese. Foreigners have their own churches. Why don’t you go there?” I do not remember what I
said in reply. I probably only managed, “I’m sorry.” I was grateful only much later that I was incapable of anything sharper; a soft word was what was required, no doubt. The incident made me bitter and angry for days; in a few words that girl had confirmed all the negative emotions I had felt about the foreign legation in the Chinese church and about my role there. The confrontation suggested to me that many more Chinese must feel the same way, but were, like me, too powerless or too passive to do anything about it.

I had no particular desire to return to the foreign “church” as the angry woman had suggested. I had come to resent the foreign fellowships for their complicity with the government in keeping Chinese out by checking passports at the doors. That expatriate compromise seemed, and still seems, like a bizarre Jim Crow holdover that these foreign believers would be embarrassed to have Christians in their home countries learn about. The enforced segregation continues there, but I believe the foreign fellowships honestly want Chinese believers to join them; they simply feel they lack the power to “fight City Hall.” In the official Chinese church, by contrast, all were welcome, but there was always a curtain, permeable and sometimes invisible, but still always a segregation. We had our foreigners’ section where we were to sit and govern ourselves. To some we were no more welcome than were the foreign invaders of 150 years ago. Chinese churches for the Chinese people; foreign fellowships for the foreigners.

One woman’s voice should not be allowed to speak louder than all the kindnesses, Christian and otherwise, that have been shown to me in China, but it should be clear from this and other stories below that even in the Christian Church, not only sincere faith and good will, but also difference and divide still characterize U.S./China relations. This divorce and the other themes of this story—foreign arrogance, Chinese nationalism,
racial and cultural segregation—these will be themes that recur in the pages that follow. I have narrated my own story at some length both as a way of revealing my ambivalent positionality in this scholarly work I am presenting and as my own narrative contribution to the florilegium you will be encountering below. This small library of works described and analyzed in the following pages ranges in literary sophistication from Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, through the dry but significant pronouncements of governments, down to the plain prose of ordinary Chinese converts, and of myself. The complexities, paradoxes, and twists and turns of the ordinary story I have just told reflect those of most narratives concerning Chinese Christianity.

Goals and Scope of Research

In the next several chapters we will analyze stories like the one above, that is, stories about Christianity in China. Much has already been written about this subject from the vantage point of history and political science that will not be repeated here if it is not necessary for clarity’s sake. The most recent and thorough journalistic treatment of the subject is David Aikman’s 2003 Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power, to which I have already made reference. Aikman ranges far beyond Beijing, and his descriptions are almost all strong source-based reporting and not as exaggerated in their polemics as the subtitle and the book jacket summaries suggest. In chapter three we will look at the missionary narratives that lie in the background of Aikman’s very optimistic appraisal of the future possibilities of the Church in China. Tony Lambert’s The Resurrection of the Chinese Church (1994) is more academic in its approach and, though more dated than Aikman’s book, it remains
very useful. Lamberton includes an extensive bibliography of print sources on Christianity in China, including the most complete section on internal CCP and Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM, one of the official-church bureaucratic offices) documents. Lambert’s work also dovetails nicely with Aikman’s as it is more complete in its descriptions of the optimism and liberalization of the 1980s and the crashing down of those expectations after 1989. The cautious hopefulness of his mid-‘90s ending, the sense of slow relaxation and increasing freedoms leads a reader helpfully into Aikman’s late-‘90s travels through a China uncertain of what is coming next: massive repression, widespread revival, or just a continuation of this middling condition of strictly proscribed freedom.

The two essential recent collections of scholarly essays that include work on contemporary China are Daniel H. Bays’s *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (1996) and the Ricci Institute’s *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (2001). Both are filled with historical perspectives, some of which will be used below, and both cover hundreds of years of Church history rather than the present day only. The latest entry among the non-literary studies of contemporary Christianity in China is The Brookings Institution’s *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (2004). This is an excellent collection of ten conference essays presented by expert scholars in the field, scholars from university settings as well as from NGOs concerned with international human rights abuses and writers from government policy think-tanks here and in mainland China.

As we can see from this brief list, the market for historical coverage of this topic continues to be strong, with ongoing work by scholars of high caliber coming out almost every year, but even so, there is no glut of studies. Literary studies are rare, almost
nonexistent in English. Several smaller-scale studies of Christianity in Chinese literature will be summarized and referred to in the chapters that follow. As I indicated earlier, however, only one major book on the subject has been written: the work of Lewis Stewart Robinson that served as the original model for this present research. In 1986 Robinson published *Double-Edged Sword: Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction* through the famous Tao Fong Shan Christianity in China research center in Hong Kong. Robinson covers mainland literature from the May Fourth Movement through the end of World War II and shifts his focus to literature from Taiwan for the post-Liberation era (1949 to the 1970s). This makes perfect sense since public expressions of religion were effectively quashed in the mainland for those first 30 years of Communist rule. In a related essay published in *Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact* (1999), Robinson still had only taken some small steps into mainland Reform Era literature.\(^{16}\) He mentions a couple of possible starting-point novels from among the literature of the early 1980s and then calls for other scholars to take up the task and continue his work into the ‘80s and ‘90s.

This study attempts to carry that work forward. What is original in my study, in comparison to the other works mentioned above and even in distinction to Robinson’s work, is the engagement with Chinese Christianity from a comparative literary perspective; I will analyze texts that have in the main been ignored, the myriad narratives from East and West that surround and partially constitute Chinese Christianity. My focus will be limited to the present-day situation in China, more specifically, to the literature of the last quarter-century. This has been a sea-change era in Chinese history: the post-Cultural Revolution, post-Mao, post-Gang of Four years often called the Reform Era. As
for Western literature, the limitations of time and place will be equally strict. While leaving room for historical contextualization and limited comparisons with European and South American examples, my emphasis will be squarely on U.S. narratives written toward the end of the twentieth century.

This U.S./China comparative emphasis is not an accidental or concocted pairing. It is true that the myth of Christianity as a Western religion which the East is now borrowing is only a myth; Christianity was neither very Western to begin with, nor is it very strictly “borrowed” in China today.\(^\text{17}\) This present work, therefore, should not be used to propagate a myth of the dependence of (Eastern) Chinese Christianity on the (Western) American brands of the same faith. Indigenous characteristics are clearly visible in Chinese Christianity, and direct Chinese connections to Christianity’s Eastern origins have been made. However, although Chinese Christianity is now highly independent of its British and U.S. sources, still, particularly when we speak of Chinese Protestantism (as opposed to Chinese Catholic Christianity), the roots in nineteenth-century Anglo-American missions are undeniable, and the present-day connections are still powerful. Even today, when the official church is required by law to be “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating” (hence the “Three Self” Patriotic Movement (TSPM) at the head of official-church bureaucracy), read “untainted by foreign influence,” the hundreds of foreign missionaries who land on China’s shores each year in the guise of English teachers and businessmen are overwhelmingly arriving from U.S. territories, often under the auspices of U.S.-based Christian “sending agencies.” These foreign missionaries, though their numbers are small when compared to the missionary movements of the century before the Liberation of 1949, have a relatively
modest, but potentially significant, impact on Christianity in China today. The U.S./China Christian connection is certainly altered and fallen from an earlier “glory”—that age before the triumph of the CCP put an end to missionary dreams of the twentieth century as the “Christian century” in China—while indigenous thinking about Christianity is in the ascension, but particularly now that China is open to the West again, a strictly Chinese Christianity fully separated from American influences would be as difficult a myth to maintain as that of a “borrowed” Western one.

In at least one case, this in the house-church movement, the American missionary influence in China is potentially as powerful as it ever was. As recently as the early 1990s an American missionary changed the face of underground Chinese Christianity. Dennis Balcombe, a missionary from Los Angeles, is called the “second Hudson Taylor” by many Chinese Christians, comparing him to the nineteenth-century founder of the China Inland Mission. Almost single-handedly, it seems, Balcombe brought “spirit-filled” Charismatic Christianity to a majority of the underground churches, that is, to tens of millions of Chinese Christians, possibly representing the greater part of all Chinese Christians.

The China/U.S. connections are very real and apparent also, as we shall see, in that the U.S. is a great producer and consumer of stories about China, both among the general American population and within the recently arrived Chinese expatriate communities. China has a central role in the American religious and literary imagination. In the nineteenth century it attracted thousands of missionaries with dreams of millions of converts, while today it attracts millions of readers to Western retellings of Eastern thought, like the Tao of Pooh series and all the various I-Ching and fengshui self-help
guides, as well as to stories of China’s often persecuted Christian faithful. Philip Jenkins tells us that both the U.S. and China will continue to be on the short list of nations with the largest Christian populations (in absolute terms) for at least the next half-century. The religious, and political, ties between the U.S. and China are likely to remain tightly relevant for the foreseeable future. As long as this is true, comparative analysis of any sort that juxtaposes these two nations should be salient.

Reading the journals of French visitors like de Tocqueville making their tours of the young United States, we are liable to experience a sense of condescending chauvinistic amusement as they compare the “Old World” advantages with the “New World” curiosities; we are tempted to chuckle at de Tocqueville’s description of the Americans’ restless and shortsighted grasping as we consider the relative change in status of the two nations since those early days of the American republican experiment and consider proudly what that restlessness has achieved. A century or two from now, an English-language U.S.-based study such as this might very well carry with it a similar parochial tone to the ears of the Sino-centric readers of that future day and carry perhaps somewhat less of the prophetic accuracy and continuing relevance of the work of that famed French traveler. With this reality in mind, I am not eager to claim any sort of privilege for my American voice any more than I was comfortable putting Chinese Christians out of their pews at the Haidian Christian Church. The Chinese Church continues to tell its own story, but just as the Chinese pastors believed my service to be useful in their church, I hope that this study, in spite of its inevitable commencement from my desk in Western academia, will be of service in aiding those who wish to understand the field of Christianity in China.
A Traditional Approach to Narrative

If my subject matter is circumscribed rather strictly in time (mainly the last 25 years of the twentieth century) and space (mainly Protestant Christianity within the U.S. and The People’s Republic of China), I will at least be catholic in the variety of texts I lay on the table and in my approaches to narrative. The perspective I assume in this book will be literary and comparative. I am interested in the apparently non-literary project of describing the state of Christianity in China today, but this has been done in non-literary fashion successfully and recently by others. Here I will attempt, rather, to tell the stories of Chinese Christianity, describing the state of the Chinese Church by means of the many narratives that orbit about an invisible and possibly unreachable center of truth. The range of narratives will include versions of events as told by the governments of the two nations (chapter two); thrilling adventure stories of illegal and semi-legal missionary work (chapter three); and novels, short stories, and some poems from the U.S. and China that deal with China’s Christians either tangentially or more incisively (chapters four and five).

The two longest chapters are those concerning the more traditional categories of literature. These texts, particularly those from contemporary Chinese literature, remain almost untouched by scholarship that is concerned with the works’ religious ideas and images. These chapters constitute the most obvious original contribution to literary scholarship and were this project’s original *raison d’être*. The chapters that surround that gravitational center will be looking at some never-before-seen materials that are fascinating, though not usually of high literary quality and not always highly distinct in
content from the primary sources used by the writers of non-literary studies of Chinese Christianity. The central texts are supported from below by these chapters on less literary works, first, because they are interesting texts in themselves that provide helpful context for the fiction, and, second, because they serve to bring a rather expansive interpretation of narrative to bear in hopes of illuminating both Chinese Christianity and narrative studies. This approach to narrative, introduced in depth in the following paragraphs, opens up these other texts to a kind of narrative treatment because the approach is less closely tied to traditional generic definitions of literature and more closely tied to religious principles; this approach should thus prove peculiarly suited to this subject matter.

To put the matter simply, I will treat narrative as a fifth dimension of our lived experience, as limiting as these dimensions of space in which we move about, as inexorable as the flow of time. We make sense of days, our lives, our generations with reference to narrative structures. We create or discover grand meta-narratives which we believe can give meaning to great swaths of human history—Christianity, Marxism—and we write our personal narratives in accordance with or in revolt against these great stories. From this sort of narrative perspective we can give special attention to the conscious story-wrighting of the literature chapters, but we will also see how narrative and life interact in significant ways even, or maybe especially, when we are less conscious of the fictions we are forming and by which we are formed.

Art will imitate life according to this appraisal, and life art. We will learn about the realities of Chinese Christian experience through reference to narrative art, fictional and otherwise; and we will make discoveries about the narrative arts through reference to
the lives of Chinese and American Christians. We will discover that art and life are
intimately intertwined in the formation of a religious identity. There are tensions inherent
in any religious faith: between doubt and belief, and between identification with the
religious community and with other community loyalties, be they familial, cultural, or
national. We will discover that stories can provide grease for those uncomfortable
frictions and can find room for compromise even in contradiction; stories tell us who we
are and, for better or worse, define who we will become.

The theoretical justification for this brand of narrative research is both highly
traditional and contemporary, both deeply rooted in religious faiths and supported by
secular scholarship. This narratology claims nothing more for narrative than two ideas
that we have all known forever and one more notion that is more controversial but that
others have suspected and described before me: 1) art imitates life, and we can therefore
discern “facts” about Chinese Christianity by abstracting them out of imitative narrative
(fiction or nonfiction); 2) life imitates art, and we can therefore understand human actions
better if we understand the narrative roots of those actions, and we can possibly even
make some predictions about future actions based on narrative logic; and 3) finally, and
this—because of its tendency toward a kind of murky and indefinable mysticism—is the
more controversial notion, that these previous two ideas are explained by a hypothesis
which is appealing in its simplicity but daunting in its mysteries, the hypothesis that the
relationship between life and art is not simile but metaphor, that our lives, our identities,
are not like narratives, they are narratives. Though mysterious, this idea has clearly
meant something to many people throughout history. It is by no means new, and it will
prove salient to the task before us.
Life Imitates Art and Art Imitates Life

Mimetic theories of narrative go back “all the way” and are by no means on the way out even after nearly a century of non-representational visual arts. Since narrative rather than painting or sculpture is our concern here, it is worthwhile noting that “abstract literature” has never managed to unseat traditional narrative in the same way that modern non-mimetic art seems to have made traditional portraiture and landscape obsolete. “Non-representational narrative” is probably an oxymoron, certainly is if we accept a somewhat conservative, but not out-of-date, definition of the basic narrative elements as being events, time, and narration.  

This definition is taken from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s 1996 *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, which says that narrative must contain these elements: actions occur within chronological history, and are related by someone to someone else. These are the bare bones of any narrative. That stories are imitations of life and that humans are affected by stories and sometimes shape their actions in imitation of these stories are convictions that we hold almost by instinct. They feel like reflex, tautology, definition, rather than a conclusion carefully arrived at.

Plato preaches both the mimetic and the influential properties of narrative; in fact these twin properties are precisely the two biggest problems with literature, by his account. Images of reality in visual terms or in literature are for Plato’s Socrates *mere* imitations, as far removed from the daily world of appearances as everyday reality is distant from the unseen realm of Reality in which he believes. “The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing, we have said, of true existence.” Stories are imitations of reality—the idea is taken for granted from the beginnings of Western thought—but for
Plato any imitation, even those that make an attempt at accuracy (and not all stories try), is flawed and deceitful. Stories are tricks and lies that may very well have a negative effect on humanity if we take these lies to be truth, if we allow our lives to imitate, to take on the shape of, to reflect the forms written of in these stories. This is the second part of the argument, the perilous (says Plato) influential power of art. On the subject of stories of the afterlife, of ghosts and the underworld (stories that seem fantastic, but to which he does not deny the title of mimetic truth), Socrates says, “I do not say that these horrible stories may not have a use of some kind; but there is a danger that our guardians may be rendered too excitable and effeminate by them.”24 Art must be censored by the leaders of the Republic or expelled from society; reality is deceptive enough already.

We often place the two above ideas in opposition to each other and ask, “Does art imitate life or does life imitate art?” This chicken/egg-style dilemma is clearly a later interpolation. For Plato there is no need to choose; both are clearly truisms. The human faith that art imitates life and life imitates art—or the definitions of art that make this a tautology—no doubt predate Socrates and will outlive our grandchildren. Granted, questions about what “life” is being imitated and how the imitations are carried out are not trivial. Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis (1953) is the exhaustive study of all the twists and turns of meaning in the words “representation” and “reality” over the centuries from the Greeks to the present.25 But the mimetic aspect of literature is itself a constant, and when a literature teacher argues that finding “recognizable human experience” is one of the pleasures of reading, she is speaking out of a long tradition that teaches that part of the nature of art is to imitate life.26
As for a continuing belief in the complementary influence that art has on life, we can find evidence of this in the contemporary words of one of my undergraduate professors: “The purpose of art is to change your life.” More famously we have John Gardner’s word that “Art instructs. Why, one may wonder, would anyone wish to deny a thing so obvious?” Gardner’s On Moral Fiction (1978) was not received warmly by all, but he claims writers like Faulkner, Tolstoy, and T. S. Eliot and critics like Bruno Bettelheim and Tolkien as his allies; similar studies, like Christopher Clausen’s The Moral Imagination (1986), have followed Gardner and taken up his standard. Whether or not one is fond of a “moral” approach to reading, we cannot easily dismiss the powerful notion of reverse mimesis, life imitating art.

In spite of Aristotle’s sharp correctives to Plato’s often blunt logic, the general human conviction that life imitates art, and that this can be a nasty business, is perennially acted out in public-square debates in terms that sound more Platonic than Aristotelian. Angry and even murderous or suicidal children are said to be imitating what they see on television or in videogames, or what they hear in rap lyrics. Even if we cannot accept such simplistic cause/effect relationships and cannot, therefore, bring ourselves to condone harsh censorship laws, still most of us find ourselves uneasy about many of the narratives available to our children or our friends and wonder secretly or out loud if such stories are “good for us.” We feel there must be some connection between the violence in our world and the violence in our pop culture, but we cannot decide between the strident pleas of the conservative parent who claims rap culture is killing our kids and the charismatic mumbling of the rags-to-riches hip-hop singer who claims his art
is simply mimetic reporting: “Keepin’ it real.” We can’t decide which came first, chicken or egg, art or reality.

Life as Narrative

This mysterious, even mystical, link between life and art has led many to confuse or conflate life and art, or to say that there is a supernatural, or purely natural, connection between life and art. In terms of the narrative arts, our lives and identities are created out of the dust of narrative elements. Just as the chicken/egg paradox is solved by going back to a moment of divine or evolutionary creation in which the chicken and the means for that animal to begin its life coexist or simultaneously come into being, so human life, and the capacity to make sense of our reality using what we now call narrative structures, come into being at once and are unable to exist one apart from the other. This is very similar to the body-soul dichotomy being “solved” by a theory of codependence, or the Christian doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation of Christ “solving” the apparent contradictions in Biblical texts. Even people of faith must admit in these circumstances that such theories are not solutions in any mathematical sense, but are maybe no more than simple assertions of mystery that allow for apparent contradictions to coexist. A similar propagation of doctrine for the relationship between narrative and art, therefore, might be sufficient for readers who accept these other mysteries, but more is required to satisfy the skeptical.

A conflation of life and art is not merely a “mystery” in the sense of being a difficult truth whose depths can never be fully plumbed; the word “theory” is not inappropriate in this case. The claim that there is an early and inextricable link between
human life and human art is an assertion of a plausible truth that is supported by some evidence and by the testimonies of religious and secular thinkers over many centuries. This conflation of life and art has strong ties to metaphysical and religious theories, as we shall see (and as seems appropriate to our present subject matter, Chinese Christianity), but this tendency also goes all the way back in the secular tradition as well, from Plato to the twentieth century and beyond.

**The Western Case for Life/Narrative Conflation**

Plato is not part of the purely secular world and can represent the beginning of both the religious and the secular traditions in the West. In one of his more religious passages Plato claims, or asserts for the sake of argument, that the epic poems themselves are divine in origin. After describing the occult work of the Muse which possesses the poet and through the poet the rhapsodist, Socrates tells Ion that his “skill in the praise of Homer comes not from art but from divine inspiration.” In other words, there is no separate human entity called art by which we create things that have a life apart from us; rather, what we call art is no different from our lives and our fates. All have their origin in the divine creation. The gods create their art in us and through us. We, in effect, create nothing, but merely exist as art and channels for art.

In a less theological vein, this passage below from *The Republic* allows people more agency than in the *Ion* passage. The danger of art here is not that of being possessed by gods and made insensible, but rather being possessed by the evil examples of “immoral” art.

If then we adhere to our original notion and bear in mind that our guardians, released from every other business, are to dedicate themselves
whole to the maintenance of the freedom of the state, making this their craft and engaging in no work which does not bear on this end, then they ought not to practice or even imitate anything else; if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession—the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like; but they should not depict or be skillful at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness, lest the fruit of imitation should be reality.$^{31}$

This paragraph is based on secular logic rather than supernatural beliefs, but the end result, religious or secular, is much the same: art and reality come together. Life imitates art here to the extent that we become the narratives we tell and imbibe. The imitation becomes the reality.

Aristotle is not so concerned as his teacher with the possessive and hegemonic forces in art, but his early psychological theories also move us in the direction of a deep interaction between art and life, instead of a more superficial give and take. Like Plato in the latter quote, Aristotle in the Poetics is talking about a profound identification between audience and characters, rather than mere imitation. The viewer of the successful tragedy is aroused to pity and fear by the “unmerited misfortune” of a “man like ourselves” (emphasis mine).$^{32}$ The action on stage is a superficial imitation of life, but the psychological effect is a kind of substitute living. Art and life are difficult, maybe impossible, to separate.

Almost two-and-a-half millennia later we see in the twentieth century very similar assumptions and assertions about art and life being used and made by writers on culture, literature, religion, and by our latter-day psychologists. Less and less, it seems, can we agree about the relationship of narrative to any particular proposed brand of transcendent Reality, but a very intimate relationship—more than mimetic, at least influential if not
identificatory—between art and reality (small “r”) is frequently described by scholars as well as by postmodern fantasists like Borges, Murakami, and Calvino.  

**The Challenge and Waning of Post-Structuralism**

The persistence of any such belief in even loose, definable ties between art and life might be surprising, seeing as much of twentieth-century literary theory has worked to untie those knots completely. Abstract expressionist novels never found a readership, but the growing skepticism and irony of the past 300 years culminated in the twentieth century in a movement by the critical establishment to effect a similar detachment between art and reality. In the past century “we”—not nearly the entire world nor even an entire country, but at least a good portion of the academic elite and many of the rest of us—largely lost faith, or owned up to a long-festering disbelief, in any grounds for universalized Truth, in Faulkner’s “eternal verities.” God was abandoned by many, even as a vague universalizing concept. Reality was set adrift from its old Socratic and religious moorings. Language too was set free into a foundationless centerless chaos of play. Working from Derrida’s essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” a seminal text of the deconstructionist movement, we see that language by itself, as detached from our dying or radically changing “history of metaphysics or of ontotheology,” is powerless to bring us together or provide “common ground.”

This radical detachment of art from life and of life from reality was both exhilarating in its humanistic possibilities and horrifying in its utter loneliness and in the burdens of responsibility it places on human shoulders. In the years leading up to the
formal detachment of the deconstructionist movement, writers like Nietzsche and Sartre were already describing both the terror of this utter darkness and a powerful hope regarding the new and better human being who might emerge after this battle with the demons of painful “reality” that is not Reality. Derrida too ends his famous essay with the haunting image of a “formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.” Besides being terrible, this metaphysical and literary unraveling is also hugely impractical, and Derrida, like his existentialist predecessors, constantly and bravely wrestles with its internal contradictions and final paradoxical implications. Even in his first major essay of the anti-structuralist debate he is already pointing toward the exit—even as he seems to claim there is no exit—by telling us “we must first try to conceive of the common ground,” we must try to imagine some way to communicate and find community in an age where there is no hope of “correct” interpretation. Alongside and within the deconstructionist movement, then, grew up a generation of critics trying to conceive of that common ground. If stories have no link to Reality, then what political or social realities, at least, does narrative speak to? If literature cannot be used to discover Truth, or Truth used to justify the study of literature, then what useful truths can be propped up and disseminated through narrative, and what evil “truths” have been propped up by literature in the past and need to have their crutches kicked out from under them? The natural jungle of narrative apparently could not abide the vacuum of the early post-structuralist days and quickly moved in to reclaim the discursive territories razed by deconstruction.

We are still in an awkward spot these days when it comes to larger justifications for the study of literature, much less to justification for the study of a political and social
reality like Christianity in China through the study of literature. We have all been powerfully shaken by the tenor of our age. The emergence of a reality-based political criticism was by no means the death knell for deconstructionism. Rather, political criticism grew like grass in the cracks of the deconstructed foundations of literature, like imaginary cities erected on deconstructed pilings. Everything that is written about literature now is prefaced with an implied “Here’s an idea” or “What if we play with this notion?” far from the confident pronouncements of “The Meaning” and “Authorial Intent” of the past. The famous cultural critic Edward Said has argued that racist views of the East are endemic to Western literature over the past several centuries. His claims are strongly reliant on an identification between literature and culture, between art and life. He would thus appear to be a descendent of Plato and an excellent model for this current research. However, in our current twenty-first-century and past twentieth-century climate, claims like Said’s can feel like a pragmatic, even cynical, “making use” of literature. Further, the effect on the reader who takes him seriously, like the effect on the reader of Derrida, is likely not one of clarification, but of profound discomfort: self-doubt, fear, and a defensive reflex. As Edward D. Graham puts it,

Said makes such a strong case for “orientalism” as a prejudicial mode of knowing, that we can never again be quite sure that our understanding of China (or whatever) is not tainted. The massive, unrelenting reductionism of his attack on what we think we know, and on why we want to know it, is upsetting and infuriating. It is also, I suspect, a source of some healthy skepticism about our status as pundits.39

The self-criticism that Said imposes upon us is not necessarily a bad thing, as Graham’s final sentence makes clear. This present study, Graham, and Said himself should all be read with “some healthy skepticism.” But where is that mystical connection between art and life that I contend still survives to the present day? The pragmatic, political
propagandistic use of literature to imitate life and make life imitate it is a notch above
deconstruction and literary Dada-ism, but it is hardly a return to that ancient faith in a
supernatural blood kinship between story and human existence.

Some scholars now write of our being in a “post-theoretical” era, and there is
evidence at least of deconstruction having finally run its course, leaving the field open for
new approaches such as this one. In a recent essay on the future of criticism, Bruno
Latour, an infamous (misunderstood, he claims) skeptic and deconstructor of “Realities,”
upends his reputation by debunking the selfcontradictions of the debunkers. He argues
that the purpose of deconstructive theory, his own purpose, was never primarily to deny
and negate, but has always been to “protect and care”; after decades of theoretical
wandering and leaving his actions open to “misinterpretation,” it is time, Latour says, to
reclaim the critic’s original high calling.40 “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the
one who assembles.”41 He calls for the invention of new critical tools for the new century
in order to “retrieve a realist attitude” and make criticism relevant and useful once
again.42 What might these new tools consist of? Politics, culture, and aesthetics are the
usual suspects we find in the several essays written for the recent Critical Inquiry
symposium on the future of criticism, but narrative lurks in the background as these
theorists work to formulate a coherent history of their field. W. J. T. Mitchell says he
“can only think of the now [of Theory] in relation to a narrative, or at least a sequence
that places the present in the middle between a past and future.”43 Elizabeth Abel also
cannot avoid the language of narrative as she describes one approach to the history of
theory as “an implicit narrative of progress.”44 We are compelled, it seems, toward
narrative.
Art/Life Conflation within Post-Structuralism

One could argue that post-structuralism, because of its purposeful failure to build any kind of tenable structure of its own, has left itself vulnerable to attack by a reconstituted army of traditionalists. Deconstructionist theories also leave themselves open, as Derrida and others clearly recognize, to deconstruction or reconstruction by those dissatisfied with the results of the movement. It is not difficult to argue that Derrida and his kind themselves exemplify the link between art and life even as they seem to be powerful factors in the breakdown of the traditional links. Derrida describes in the passages quoted above the ties that have bound our metaphysics and our approaches to cultural discourse. He admits that “throughout his entire history” man “has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of play,” until, Derrida believes, our present era.45 Derrida powerfully describes the collapse of the old edifice and in his description reveals that the collapse of mimesis and Meaning in literature is part and parcel of this larger breakdown in the old philosophies and faiths. Art, that is—all human discourse—and life are nearly or fully indistinguishable in their ruin. Life and art are alike both a free play of meanings. In the absence of Reality, invention is all we have, and small narratives can, at least contingently and temporarily, hold nations, towns, and families together.

In a story like Borges’s “The Circular Ruins” or Murakami’s novel Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World, narrative invention is what constitutes or at least provides the glue for a fragile human identity and psychology.46 As when we read the philosophy of Derrida or of Richard Rorty,47 we are apt to feel a thrilling sense of
liberation behind these narratives, but also a sense of terror. The golem in Borges’s story constantly recreates himself out of his nightly imaginings. He faces a crisis of identity when he realizes that he is made of “mere” dream stuff, similar to the anxiety we feel when we read the early Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (an anxiety that it is clear Zhuangzi himself did not feel, or at least managed to keep out of his text) who found himself suddenly unsure whether he was a man dreaming of a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of a man. Murakami’s hero finds comfort from a nightmarish life only because he finally succumbs to a dream and ever after remains blissfully unaware of the mortal coil he has left behind. God is dead and existential angst ensues, but despite the apparent destructive work of deconstruction, the fundamental confluence of narrative and life seems almost untouched.

**The Persistence of Traditional Narratology**

Simply put, where a human religious sensibility has not been entirely superseded by a secular humanist sensibility, there the old religious awe of story has also survived or been resurrected like a phoenix out of the modern holocaust of meaning. Because of this, the study of religion and literature together is relevant today and will yet be for a time; it might even have more to offer both the field of literature and the study of culture than do wholly secular approaches. The Enlightenment tradition of secular thinking about literature and the world is a powerful force in our world today, but its tendency to dismiss religion and the Truth interpretations of literature that are based on religious or utopic faiths seems short-sighted. Philip Jenkins’s recently published *The Next Christendom* (2002) argues for the current strength and near-certain future persistence of world
religion, and not just Christianity, though Christianity “is, and will continue to be, by far the largest [religion] in existence.”

He argues that to ignore religious realities, as he says the academy is wont to do, is foolish. Speaking about the apparent strength of secular liberalism in the eighteenth century and the changes in that status wrought by the nineteenth-century revivals of religious interest, Jenkins compares that situation to our twentieth-century condition of doubtful religiosity and writes, “Then as now, the triumph of secular liberalism proved to be anything but inevitable.”

Jenkins’s estimation of what the new global Christian age might look like is not always an attractive picture, but it is, he says, a reality to which we should not be blind.

The focus of this study is on Christianity, and these art/life connections often rely on a kind of mystical religious sensibility that flows counter to mainstream post-Enlightenment thought, but the trend toward more traditional thinking about narrative is not strictly a religious one. Many of the thinkers who are bucking the trends of late-twentieth-century theory and are reforging that broken connection between story and life, art and reality, are not Christians, nor are they even all religious in their apologetics for the importance of narrative.

The open acknowledgment of the life/art unity is proclaimed most boldly by those who believe in, or at least reserve judgment on, the existence of unseen spiritual realms, regions where the twin rivers of story and life might find their common spring, or where the connection might at least make more sense than it does under the glaring light of secular reason. N. Scott Momaday’s musings on narrative are bound up with his family’s Native American religious faith and reflect, if not the full and simple faith of his forebears, at least a lack of modern skepticism concerning the sacred. To him, as to his
ancestors, story and life and religion are not subject to tripartite division, but rather are mystically woven together into one cloth. We hear in this passage the mimetic case for art, the rehearsal of a classical definition of the purpose of art—to delight and instruct—and hints of the mystical as well:

Stories are true to our common experience; they are statements which concern the human condition. To the extent that the human condition involves moral considerations, stories have moral implications. Beyond that, stories are true in that they are established squarely upon belief. In the oral tradition stories are not merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed. Stories are not subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed. They are true.51

What we do not hear in Momaday, as we feel so strongly in the cases of Derrida, Borges, and Murakami, is any hint of metaphysical angst. Traditional spiritual meta-narrative provides him with the comfort that contingent narrative cannot.

Paul Ricoeur’s thinking is similarly rooted in a kind of religious faith—not exclusively Christian—that staves off despair and is either based on or closely involves finding one’s place in history, unfolding one’s identity, through narrative. Ricoeur scholar Mark I. Wallace, in his introduction to Ricoeur’s work, summarizes part of the philosopher’s argument from *Oneself as Another* and *Time and Narrative*:

The self, as neither a fixed entity, cultural cipher, nor biochemical remainder cobbles together its identity by constructing a life-story that uses the resources of various narrative fragments. In the narrative interpretation of life, both history and fiction are borrowed from; and since the references of both genres crisscross the plane of human historicity, a life mediated by stories is a “fictive history, or if one prefers, an historic fiction.”52

Ricouer expends much effort in carefully distinguishing the types and elements of narrative, defining the differences between what he terms “historical narrative” and “fictional narrative.” But, in the simplest of terms, he is arguing for narrative structures as
being at the root of how we take in and know the world around us. In his own words, he “[defends] the precedence of our narrative understanding in the epistemological order.”

History and fiction, life and art, are the warp and weft on the loom of our identity.

Jerome Bruner is the final twentieth-century Western scholar I will cite to support the continuing and semi-religious human instinct to narrativize life and to live out a narrative. Bruner’s invisible landscape in which narrative and life are wed is not a hypothesized human soul, but lies in the more scientific and experimentally plumb-able depths of human psychology. Drawing on years of research, his own and the work of other psychologists, regarding the relationship of narrative to childrearing and to a child’s growing sense of self and location in relation to others, Bruner concludes that narrative structures have existed throughout human history, because they first existed in human consciousness. Humans have, according to Bruner, “a ‘protolinguistic’ readiness for narrative organization and discourse”; “we have an ‘innate’ and primitive predisposition to narrative organization.” Following Kant’s theories of the categories into which we organize our sensible experience, much like Ricouer though in different terms, Bruner is saying that human consciousness cannot be divorced from narrative; narrative provides the deep structures with which we experience the world.

The Chinese Case for Art/Life Conflation

All of these Western writers, whatever they know and believe about the risks of doing so, are clearly making universalizing claims about the realities of human experience. Though Bruner deals with different racial groups within the U.S., he does not make his studies international; and yet he is still, by his silence on the issue of
universality, including all humans in the “we” of the quotes above. Even Derrida, who is ever aware and concerned with the contradictions in his “logic” or “anti-logic,” when he speaks of things falling apart and the centers of our existence needing to be rebuilt, even he is speaking too for those who do not know or would not agree that their chosen center cannot hold.

To say that all this narrative theory applies equally to Chinese literature might be justifiable, considering that Chinese literary (not to mention political) theory in the twentieth century is to a large extent borrowed from the West. The peculiarities of Chinese literary discourse and its many similarities with Western discourse, especially in modern and contemporary literature, will be explained gradually in the chapters that follow, but to ask whether evidence of a life/narrative unity can be detected in the pre-twentieth-century traditional literary thought of China is relevant at this juncture.

China’s traditional views of the relationship between life, art, and spirituality are not unlike those Momaday describes in his *Man Made of Words*. Like Momaday, Chinese writers before the twentieth century were not interested in writing a systematic poetics. The Western analysis of literature as an object itself goes back at least to Aristotle and tends to create or at least temporarily posit a distance between literature and writer and reader. Chinese art criticism and commentary on literature has almost always been more humanly and organically oriented than scientific and analytical. To Western readers Chinese criticism can often seem repetitive or unfocused, mystical or religious rather than clear and educative. The term “gestalt” is often brought in to describe the Chinese worldview. Laurence Thompson, for example, describes a Chinese “gestalt cosmology” according to which “man” and “nature” are not clearly distinguishable.55 As
in Momaday, the line between human being and literature, and between one human being and another via literature, is blurry. Kirk Denton says in his anthology of modern Chinese literary theory, “Broadly speaking, what interested traditional Chinese critics was literature as a human communicative act that brought men together into a kind of spiritual unity with each other and with the cosmos.” Richard Lynn also describes this complex relationship between art and life in Chinese tradition when he writes this of the Ming and Qing poets:

The act of writing poetry itself was an act of self-cultivation. Poetry provided the framework or context within which the individual came to grips with himself and his environment. It not only gave him knowledge of self; it also provided him with a means to know the world outside himself—and, perhaps most important, it supplied the link between the two. [emphasis in original]

This is an argument from poetry, not narrative, but we at least see evidence of a tradition of art/life conflation alive and well in the literary circles of dynastic China.

Further back in Chinese literary history, Confucius, the Socrates of China, provides a similar example. The Classic of Odes or Book of Songs is the earliest anthology of poetry in China. The 305 poems—most of them folk songs originally set to music—were supposedly collected by the Great Sage Confucius himself during his travels and edited into book form by him as well. Most of these poems, especially those in the first section, feng (风), at first glance appear to be simple ditties about farm life and local customs and hardly seem worthy of the attention of Confucius, or, through Confucius, the attention and respect of generations of Chinese literary scholars and political theorists. Confucius took this “simple” folk literature very seriously indeed. He saw these songs as having significance far beyond the temporary and localized lives of a few peasants here and there. He rather envisioned the simple folk art as the voice of all
people everywhere and the collection and study of these words as having deep import for
the governance of China. These poems were “read as scripture” until the twentieth
century, and were considered by Confucian scholars to be models of linguistic
propriety. Confucius summed up the collection with the phrase “思无邪也” (siwuxiye,
“having no depraved thoughts”), and he apparently believed that the study of these
poems, just like the study of the famous divination manual the Book of Changes (Yi Jing
or I Ching, 易经), could reveal threads or patterns in the fabric of the nation that could
make clear and put into effect the will of Heaven. Confucius describes the exalted place
of this kind of literature in his preface to the Book of Changes:

《易》与天地准, 故能弥纶天地之道. 仰以观於天文, 俯以察於地理, 是
故知幽明之故.

[The Book of Changes synchronizes with heaven and earth. That is why it
can weave out the tao (way, truth) of the heaven and earth. Looking up, it
observes the pattern (wen) of heaven; looking down, it scrutinizes the
grain of the earth. Therefore it knows the light and darkness.]̊

The ancient character for those “threads” or “patterns” that make up the fabric of the
nation and of existence itself, 文 (wen), is still used in the Chinese word for “literature,”
文学 (wenxue).

What is described in these few examples is much more complex than art imitating
life or the converse; just as in the Western texts, it sounds like evidence of a conception
of the art/life identity that is almost religious.

However, any exploration of traditional Chinese literary thought in order to
understand contemporary Chinese literature is immediately called into question—just as
it was in the Western case—when we consider the sweeping philosophical
transformations that took place in twentieth-century China. Just as in the Modernist West, twentieth-century literature in China has to a very great extent based itself upon the rejection of old forms, including Confucianism and, presumably, its gestalt cosmology. Modern Era China, in fact, embraced Modern Western literary models: social realism and Modernist poetry before 1949, socialist realism until 1979 (based on Marxist theories of art and Soviet models), and now the postmodern irony and play of contemporary fiction. As we have seen, the major trends of Modern and twentieth-century Western literary criticism are of limited utility in our present project, as these theories often strive to subvert the traditional conceptions of literature and the meta-narratives that provide the foundations for those older assumptions. If there is a universal and continuing human instinct to shape our lives using narrative structures, this seems to carry on in the West and in China in spite of the twentieth century’s self-conscious attempts to escape the past and to make literature into something more pliable and less threatening.

The Survival of Meta-narrative

Despite Lyotard’s famous definition of the postmodern condition as one of “incredulity toward meta-narratives,” such incredulity is rarely in evidence among the writers discussed in the following chapters. Doing research into the narratives of Christianity in China is more likely to lead one to incredulity toward Lyotard’s definition, since meta-narratives seem to be alive and well and fully believed in by the millions of people most directly related to the present topic. Those grand narratives that many believe give structure and meaning to life—like Christianity and Marxism, to name the two most pertinent to our present discussion—still have enormous power in our lives.
The smaller narratives of the journey toward the subjectification of the self that Ricoeur and Bruner speak of are still very much shaped by these meta-narratives, and not only sometimes (because of one group’s desire to impose mechanisms of social control on another group, as postmodern skeptics explain the situation), but always and simply because we are made to respond to, to grow in, to think with, to live in the midst of narrative. Stories have enormous power in our lives for the same reason that a Phillip’s-head screwdriver works with a Phillip’s-head screw, or to put it less mechanistically, the same reason that strings in a piano vibrate, though untouched, when a tone is sung in their vicinity. The tool fits the job; the string resonates in sympathy with a familiar sound wave; we are made for stories and made of stories.

Most of the writers discussed in this book are true believers in one meta-narrative or another, Christianity or Marxism. Some will claim both at once. They will not fit neatly into Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern temper. They should not, because of this, either be disowned as archaic throwbacks nor praised as more highly evolved post-postmodernists. They are simply humans as we always have been; meta-narrative has never died out and cannot disappear, because we are wired for it, whether it be by a Creator’s hand or by a grand accident. Faith exists, in fact is quite widespread, in the postmodern world. Those who accept religious or humanistic meta-narratives problematize the secular definition of postmodern that Lyotard himself called “simplifying to the extreme.” Most of the rest of the writers below, though they may be skeptical of old and established meta-narratives, are themselves committed to some narrative thought-world, often to smaller sorts of meta-narratives that are not so presumptuous as most religions, but that still have the power to delineate and frame a
good deal of an individual’s sense of self: for example, contemporary forms of the American Manifest Destiny narrative; Chinese anti-foreign nationalist narratives; or some brand of a narrative of female liberation and empowerment. Let us now try on a few examples to aid in concretizing the abstractions of the last several pages and to hint at the sort of “art as life as art” analysis that will follow in the chapters ahead.

Mr. Casaubon’s Solipsistic Meta-narrative

First let us look at a famous character from Western literature to illustrate the idea of meta-narrative as well as the idea that meta-narrative can serve as a tool (or a trap) of personal subjectivization on the assumption that we relate to the world via meta-narratives, and we can be shaped and controlled by those meta-narratives. The life and death of Mr. Casaubon in George Eliot’s Middlemarch teaches us, by a terrifying negative example, about the seductive lure of the meta-narrative, and also about the destructive hegemonism of these grand unified theories, at least when they are excessively introspective and centripetal in their dynamics. This character, Eliot tells us, is “the center of his own world” and is “liable to think that others were providentially made for him.” Casaubon is miserably unconscious of the fact that he exists in someone else’s novel, both that of the narrator/author, who can see where Casaubon is blind and can so easily relegate Casaubon to a lowly supporting role, and that of Dorothea Brooke, Casaubon’s wife and the actual center of this fictional world.

This self-centered character, this pretender to the protagonist’s throne, is ever hard at work on his dissertation. His great book, which is doomed to remain unwritten, is a grand meta-narrative, a “Key to all Mythologies,” a Joseph Campbell-esque
extravaganza which will gather all the stories of mankind under a grand universalizing meta-narrative umbrella. What is clear to us as readers looking through Eliot’s ironic description of the man, and what Casaubon is incapable of seeing, is that this “large” umbrella is nothing more than the cap of his own skull. Casaubon’s sense that he is the center of the world, that all things converge in the vortex of his own subjectivity, has created the illusion for him that everything in the universe must actually have a point of convergence, that there exists indeed a “Key to all Mythologies.” But he, and not God nor anything else exterior to himself, is the embodiment of his own key; he finally has no tools, or much desire when it comes to it, with which to communicate his subjectivity to others around him. Before we mock him too roundly, though, Eliot, with her trademark humanity and charity, reminds us that we all have some of Casaubon’s self-delusion in us: “[T]his trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, [he] claims some of our pity.”

Meta-narrative faiths are not exclusively hope-giving, angst-battling elixirs of life. Meta-narrative faiths ever face the danger of growing stagnant and insular when they are translated into the old shrunken wineskins, the small narrative vessels of the individual believer. There is no avoiding the tension between the standard dialect of the meta-narrative Tradition and the idiolect of private belief, the Mandarin Chinese of the capital vs. the (to Mandarin-speakers) barely comprehensible barbar dialect of the hill country. Nonbelievers will dispute, of course, the existence of any “standard dialect,” imagining any meta-narrative to be merely a loose or illusory agreement between peoples who in fact believe in very different gods, all probably non-existent. However, believers, and this includes most contributors to this study—and, in point of fact, most members of the
human race—almost all agree that orthodoxy is real and possible even if they sometimes argue heatedly about the details of that orthodoxy. The relative health and consistency of several major religious groups over long periods of time suggest that they are correct; people frequently succeed in allowing some type of outside pressure from a meta-narrative shape and revitalize their lives rather than, like Casaubon, simply rewriting the world in their own image and self-destructing as a result.

The Marxist and Christian meta-narratives have both maintained more or less high degrees of vitality over the years and have had more or less high numbers of believing adherents. While they both admit a good variety of “schools” or “denominations” into their respective folds, they consistently rely on a relatively small number of foundational texts, and entertain fairly small ranges of divergence in goals, values, and narrative teleologies among these sects.

Religious Narrative and Meta-narrative

For a second example of the interwoven threads of literature, religion, and reality, we turn to the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative that many of the writers below will claim to adhere to and to agree substantially with each other about. Believers in Judeo-Christian meta-narratives look back some four millennia—to the era of the Jewish patriarchs—to trace the importance of story to their belief. These earliest narratives of the Jewish people become patterns for later stories to follow; they metonymize the larger meta-narrative of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people believe that beginning with Abraham, they were blessed by God, who called them into a special relationship. Because of this “chosen” status and the
higher standards to which the Jews have been called, they suffer in order to be purified and to become the vessels for the purification of the Promised Land to which God guides them. They are enslaved more than once and wander for many years in the desert, usually because of their disobedience or lack of faith. The people are rescued from slavery and led to the Promised Land, which they sanctify through a series of bloody battles against the supposedly God-cursed cultures that are living there. These few points form the basis of the narrative portion of the Hebrew scriptures as well as, when taken symbolically or archetypally, the meta-narrative which can be applied to present history: the Zionist return from Diaspora, the horrors of the Holocaust, the founding of the state of Israel in the aftermath of World War II, the continuing war for the Promised Land. It can also be applied to the individual life experience of a particular Jewish believer: “I was in bad straits last year; then I turned back to God, and he rescued me as He did my people out of the houses of Egypt.”

That the lives of this group of religious believers center around narrative is further evidenced by the fact that the telling and retelling of the narratives of God’s goodness and mercy, what He has done for His people, are themselves central events within the Old Testament narratives. The Torah and the rest of the Tanach (to Christians, the “Old Testament”) texts are the orthodox and standard versions of a long narrative oral tradition, but these Hebrew scriptures also contain constant summary rehearsals of the stories they contain, reminders to the reader of the oral narrative tradition behind the later written narratives we have before us. “When your children ask you, tell them . . .” is a refrain in these pages. Deuteronomy 6:20 is a good example:

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?”
tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.\textsuperscript{65}

The question posed by the son, “What is the meaning?” does not, to our modern ears, necessarily call for the kind of answer he receives. We might expect analysis, explanatory discourse. The son here receives a narrative answer. The significance of God’s law is defined in the context of a repetition of the story of what God has done for His people. The entire book of Deuteronomy, in fact, is a speech by Moses (God’s servant who led the Israelites out of slavery, and thereby the narrative precursor to the Christian “messiah”) in which he repeats the laws of God while placing them into the narrative context of their recent history and of Moses’s own death.

This concept applies in precisely the same manner to Christian formulations of history and the individual life. Christians have, of course, adopted the Jewish Tanach narratives as their own and adapted them to their understanding of “New Testament” events. The rite of Christian baptism hearkens back to Jewish purification rituals and even further back to the prefiguring narrative of the flood of Noah’s time; the flood, like baptism, wiped away sin and inaugurated a new beginning. Christians regularly retell and act out through the sharing of the Eucharist both the last supper and the final sacrifice of Jesus; these regularly rehearsed narratives are further tied back to Jewish narratives of Passover and of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. Religious meta-narrative gives form and meaning to personal narrative.
In part because of each individual’s unitary consciousness through which all experience is filtered, we, like Casaubon, have an instinct toward grand unifying meta-narratives. The “ready-made” and shared grand meta-narratives, like those offered by some religions and philosophies, are clearly more popular and apparently healthier than wholly personal idiolectic meta-narratives like Casaubon’s. This is perhaps because religious meta-narratives are truer, or perhaps simply because they are more socially oriented and relieve their adherents of a great deal of responsibility and the hard work of thinking up everything for oneself. Whether true or merely useful, religion is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, and the deep connections between religious narrative and the lived experience of the believer are plain.

Chapter Outline

The human conflation of life and narrative and the continued existence and weight of meta-narrative are the twin pillars supporting this study. The chapters which follow will describe several interactions between meta-narrative and “mini-narrative.” The smaller narratives, we will see, sometimes seem to depend on and sometimes seem to feed into the larger meta-narrative structures. Each of the five chapters below will sometimes adopt a diachronic perspective, showing trends in a certain kind of text as the genre changes over time. But the larger framework of this study is synchronic and dialogic. Rather than moving through time as the chapters progress we will move through space, spiraling inward from the outer circle of political bodies (in chapter two) toward the personal sphere of the lay Christian experience (in the conclusion). The work will be dialogic because Reality or Truth, if such things exist and can be closed in upon by
human effort or supernatural dispensation, are best approached through the art of conversation, sometimes of debate, with many voices speaking out their stories.

In chapter two we will hear the patriotic narratives of the U.S. and of China. These political and historical meta-narratives largely dictate the ways in which these governments are able to describe religious freedom and to relate smaller narratives regarding the state of the Christian Church in China today. The power of the Marxist and patriotic American meta-narratives of this chapter should not be underestimated. They are not merely propagandistic bluff, but rather contribute strongly to the worldview of many of the writers discussed in later chapters and are second only to the Christian meta-narrative in their influence throughout these pages.

Chapter three will give a voice to today’s foreign missionaries in China as they write their stories for public consumption at home. While endeavoring to show great respect for much of the work these missionaries do, we will see how their missiological narratives fit patterns which are sometimes not so different from the official government narratives of nationalism. These Western narratives, therefore, sometimes clash with China’s own missionary narratives, which are nationalistic in their own right.

Chapters four and five, the broadest-ranging chapters involving the most traditional literary analysis, will catalogue and describe most of the major writings in the U.S. and in China over the past quarter century that deal with Chinese Christianity. Much of this American literature is hesitant to embrace Chinese Christianity as anything but an imperialist legacy and a contradiction in terms. Chinese literature and academia, by contrast, are surprisingly more open, on the whole, to considering Christianity as a valuable and indigenous movement. However, as Lewis Robinson found in his work on
the first half of the twentieth century, we will still today find a great variety of reactions in China that reflect the disparity of opinion among the masses of Chinese people, most of whom still know little about Christianity.

In the conclusion I will bring some resolution to the question raised by the doubters in chapters four and five: “Can Chinese Christianity exist?” It can and does exist, but the narratives it tells about itself are not always the same as the narratives told about it by those outside the Church. If we misunderstand the stories of Chinese Christianity, we misunderstand its very life.
Notes

1 Rules for the capitalization of “Church” are a matter of some controversy among Christian groups. In this dissertation I have tried to be consistent in using “Church” to designate the larger body of self-professed Christian believers in specific national regions or around the world regardless of denomination. For example, I will sometimes speak of the “American Church” and the “Chinese Church” as well as the universal “Christian Church” when I find it possible or necessary to generalize about all self-designated Christians in a nation or in the world. When referring to smaller divisions within the “Church” or to specific congregations or buildings, I will use the word “church”; for example, “the church was made of brick” or “the official-church policy in China as opposed to the house-church situation.” Specific churches’ names will naturally take the capital letter, as in, the “Haidian Christian Church in Beijing.”


4 Aikman 292.

5 A missionary named Doug Sutphen (also known as Brother David) witnessed some examples of localized cooperation between Party officials and unregistered Christians as early in the post-Mao era as the late 1970s. Kim-Kwong Chan notes that the CCP is still not able to acknowledge officially that Christianity in itself might have a salutary moral effect on the populace, but at the same time religion-based charitable


7 The PRC was recently among the handful of nations who did not send a representative to attend the funeral of Pope John Paul II. They cited the presence of a representative from Taiwan—which does recognize the Vatican and which the Vatican still recognizes as the legal Chinese authority in the world—as sufficient cause to be absent.

8 Lewis Stewart Robinson, *Double-Edged Sword: Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction* (Shatin, Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1986).


10 The original reads as follows: “‘China,’ then, is an orthodoxy, a dogma, which disguises politics as culture and nation as race.” See Ian Buruma, *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing* (New York: Random House, 2001) xxii.
Although even one Chinese Christian friend of mine laughed when he heard about this plan, considering the difficulties many foreigners have in using China’s “squat toilets,” this proposal is not as ridiculous as it may at first sound and is actually quite sensitive to visitor needs. I should mention here that, as of summer 2004, the church was in temporary quarters while the old building was being rebuilt, and there was no sign of a dedicated bathroom for foreigners. I should also note that the church now uses a wireless headphone system that allows foreign guests to sit where they will and still hear the sermon in English.


David Aikman writes about the English teacher missionaries, “The steady drip-drip-drip of one-on-one Christian evangelism by these earnest foreign teachers has had a deep impact among young Chinese intellectuals. Almost every urban young Christian I met in China had come to the Christian faith through a foreign, English-speaking teacher.” See Aikman 279.

Aikman 271-75.

The U.S. is at the top of Jenkins’s list, with an estimated 330 million Christians by the year 2050, and China is the ninth nation with 60 million by mid-century. We should note, however, that Jenkins is intentionally using conservative numbers so as not to overstate his claims. He is very aware that many Westerners and Chinese alike claim that China already has well over 60 million Christian believers. With some calling the Chinese church the fastest growing religious movement in history, the most extreme estimates would put the 50-year projections at several times Jenkins’s 60-million guess. See Jenkins 90.

See Democracy in America, Book II, Chapter XIII.


From Book III of The Republic, Benjamin Jowett’s translation (Adams 23).


26. Quoting Dr. Jeffrey Thompson of Wheaton College.


29 From *Ion* (Adams 15).


31 *Poetics* section XIII: 2.

32 I will refer to Borges’s “The Circular Ruins” and Murakami’s *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* later in this chapter. Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* is also a good example of fantasy that delights in blurring the lines between fiction and history.

33 Quoted in Gardner 24.


35 See Sartre’s *No Exit* for the darkness of hell where “hell is other people” and Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power* for the hope of what the great man can accomplish without other people when he has a great spirit.

36 Derrida 1126.

37 Derrida 1126.


41 Latour 246.

42 Latour 243.


44 Abel 336.

45 Derrida 1125.


48 Jenkins 215.

49 Jenkins 215.

50 Jenkins 10.

51 N. Scott Momaday, The Man Made of Words (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997) 3.


59 子曰, 诗三百, 一言以蔽之, 日, 思无邪也. [The Master said, “In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence—‘Having no depraved thoughts.’”] *Analects* 2.2. James Legge’s translation.

60 孔子, “系辞上传,” 第四章. [Confucius, “Preface to the Book of Changes,” chapter 4, my translation.]


62 Lyotard xxiv.

64 Eliot 57.

65 New International Version (See Deuteronomy 32:7 and Joshua 4 for two more instances of this pattern.)
National narratives loom large in the background of Chinese Christianity. The Chinese government continues to narrate a rather paranoid nationalism of self-sufficiency and resistance to foreign interference, while at the same time portraying itself as a rising force on the swiftly globalizing world stage. China’s religion policies are precisely as complicated as these national narratives require them to be; distrustful of outside religious forces, the Chinese Communist Party yet wishes to demonstrate to the world that it represents a nation to which religious freedom based on international standards is important. The U.S. narratives of nation, on the other hand, include powerful and uncompromising elements borrowed from Christian tradition: an expansive confidence in our ability to know the Right, a continuing belief in a duty to speak that Truth that we know, a messianic sense of national destiny. Add to these the related but more recent American narratives of anti-Communism, which persist and were reinforced by the Cold War’s end, and we are left with a U.S. policy toward China that seeks drastic change in that country and believes that the U.S. has a role to play in those reforms. The two nationalisms are not without their commonalities, but even that common ground often seems to provide nothing more than a convenient battlefield.

The U.S. and China thus continue to have strongly contrasting meta-narrative national visions. This difference in how these nations “tell” themselves becomes plain in the ways their policy documents define religious freedom and in the ways in which they narrate mini-narratives of freedom and persecution. The incompatibility between the
meta-narratives seems, and may actually be, an insuperable barrier to effective international communication and political compromise on human rights issues.

As an opening example to illustrate this thesis before we unpack a fuller argument for the same, let us turn for a moment to the case of Bible smuggler Li Guangqiang. The Chinese government arrests a man for breaking the law; the U.S. rises to his defense. The opposing positions of each side are shaped by a narrative national vision, and the versions of the story of this particular individual also vary in accordance with these larger narrative influences.

The Arrest and Release of Mr. Li

Two narrative versions of the same event will reveal much about the narrators of the divergent stories. These narratives will then be related to one literary and one not-so-literary example of twentieth-century cultural discourse: Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s short story “In the Grove” (1922), on which Akira Kurosawa’s film Rashomon (1950) was based; and a popular American TV series from the 1970s, Happy Days. In the tradition of Paul de Man, who in 1973 famously deconstructed Archie Bunker’s words “What’s the difference?” from the popular TV show All in the Family, I will look at a pop-culture text alongside an “elite” or “high-culture” narrative to reveal some narrative patterns that dominate our culture and our individual psychologies. I bring Happy Days alongside Akutagawa and the literature of later chapters, however, not to deconstruct it in the manner of de Man, but rather to construct a hypothesis about Americans’ willed or helpless misunderstanding of a Chinese meta-narrative, and to show how personal
loyalties diverge even when the narrative structures behind these national loyalties are similar.

Two versions of a recent news story about Bible smuggling in China are told as follows:

In May of 2001, a Hong Kong businessman named Li Guangqiang was arrested in accordance with Chinese law for smuggling 33,000 contraband books and bundles of other subversive literature across the border into mainland China. He was bound for the headquarters of a religious cult called The Shouters, so named for their frenzied worship style. The books in question were copies of a heretical edition of the Bible edited by a leader of the cult. This cult is a threat to public order in China and has been outlawed. The group, which started among dissident Chinese living in the U.S., is not Christian, makes no secret of its designs to undermine the authority of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and is merely using the guise of religion as a mask for its unwholesome goals.²

That is one way of telling this particular story about the limits of religious freedom in China. That is the version told by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through their official news sources. The following paragraph contains the official U.S. version of the same story. (Although only the first section is a direct quote, the rest of the paragraph is an accurate representation of U.S. policy statements.)

“A Hong Kong resident, Mr. Li Guangqiang, […] was arrested in May 2001 and charged with importing Bibles associated with an ‘evil cult.’”³ The Shouters are in fact a Protestant sect, a branch of the “Local Church” founded by the famous Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee, which was driven underground by repressive restrictions on
religious practice in China. The Chinese government tolerates only religious meetings organized by state-sanctioned groups over which the Party maintains tight control. Strictures on Bible distribution are too stringent, and people should not be persecuted for bringing legal books into the country or practicing their religion in a peaceful manner.

The facts of this case seem actually to justify the CCP version of the story more than the U.S. version. We can easily recognize the crass political motives and the insecurity of a corrupt and unpopular regime behind Beijing’s actions and statements, but while the U.S. government, on the other hand, seems sincerely to be trying to improve human rights in China for, more or less, good motives through its own version of the story, the fact remains that their version of the story is not completely up-front about the Shouters. The Shouters are not accepted by other house-church groups in China nor, naturally, by the Three Self church. Their views on the Trinity are considered modalist rather than Trinitarian and are therefore considered heterodox by Christians East and West. They have been shut out of house-church leadership meetings in Henan and Anhui, meetings designed to allow the house-church movement in China to speak with a unified voice. Though there is some dispute about the origins of the Shouters, the Bible that they use and that Mr. Li was bringing from Hong Kong, “The Recovery Version,” is a kind of study Bible with extensive footnotes written by Li Changshou (Witness Lee), a former disciple of Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee). The commentaries and footnotes emphasize certain aspects of the faith, like the Second Coming of Christ and end-times theology, that are often controversial among Christians and unavoidably cause for concern by a government like that run by the CCP. The footnotes exceed the length of the biblical text by several times, and several passages in these notes reveal the sect’s dismissive attitude
toward all other Christian groups: “apostate Catholicism and degraded Protestantism.”

This version of the Bible is not legal in China and neither is it widely used by worldwide Chinese or English-speaking Christendom. “Cult” may be too strong a word, but “heterodox sect” would be the consensus of the majority of Christians within China and without. These books are more clearly a threat to the CCP than are other, unadorned translations of the Bible, and Mr. Li was smuggling this literature into China with an awareness that what he was doing was illegal and risky because it doubly undermined government authority: by breaking national laws against smuggling, and by fostering ideas that, while perhaps not primarily political in nature, were clearly subversive in their effect.

In this case of opposing narratives, despite appearances and Western prejudices that incline many of us to accept the U.S. version, the CCP version is probably more clear-minded and less disingenuous than the U.S. version. The U.S. claims that freedom of speech and religion are good for a nation. What the U.S. knows but does not come out and say—and what the CCP story comes closer to making plain—is that they believe such freedoms will lead to the fall or the radical reform of the Chinese structures of government. Washington would be happy with such reform; Beijing clearly would not. The CCP is planning to stay in power for many years to come and would clearly appreciate dialogue on religious freedom based on that forecast. U.S. narratives, by contrast, often take for granted that the Communist Party everywhere is a dead letter, that after the fall of the Soviet Union we need simply continue to apply pressure on China and wait for the other shoe to drop. Such stories, based on the Cold War model, assume that real reform in China will not take place while the CCP is in control, so the goal is to
undermine the Party, subverting its authority in order to bring about grassroots reform as soon as possible. In this way, U.S. China policy (like most American missionaries) allies itself with the underground-church movement while shunning the “collaborationist” official church. We are perhaps more accustomed to viewing foreign narratives with skepticism, but we should make ourselves aware of the national meta-narratives behind the accounts given by both sides. We will return to these ideas throughout this chapter.

Akutagawa’s “In the Grove” contains a similar example of reality obscured by conflicting narratives. A man has been murdered and his wife raped, and one by one the witnesses come forward in court to tell what they know. The key testimonies are those of the three eyewitnesses to the violent scene: the rapist, the woman he raped, and the dead man (speaking through a medium). Each one of these witnesses tells a distinct version of the story; each one claims to be the killer. The truth is never revealed. All attempts to, Sherlock Holmes-like, study the text to find the killer inevitably end in failure. The solution is not revealed because, apparently, the truth is not the point of the story. The discovery of what really happened is almost never the motive of storytelling. In Akutagawa’s story, as in the U.S. and Chinese versions of Mr. Li’s case, the relationship between the stories and the Truth is not what is important, but rather the relationship between the narratives and the people who tell them. What do we learn about human, or national, behavior and motives by listening to the stories they tell?

Arguably the characters in Akutagawa’s story, like China and the U.S., are telling their tales in a way that makes themselves look good, or possibly makes them look as bad as they feel about themselves. The husband who is killed claims to have bravely pierced his own heart rather than live with his shame. His wife claims that she killed her husband,
which is one part of her own guilt and shame, but she also avers that she had his blessing to perform the deed—he wanted to be killed. The bandit rapist portrays himself as, in spite of his choice of profession, not without chivalry: he tried to avoid killing the man, but was pushed into it by the wicked woman and even then he defeated the husband in a duel rather than stabbing him while he was defenseless and tied to a tree. All three speakers begin with the assumption that they are correct—not necessarily in terms of the facts of the case, but in larger moral terms; they are on the high ground or are the central actor to whom the usual rules do not apply. It is excusable, even imperative in their minds, for them to say whatever they can to win and to make the other party feel they are wrong. Who is actually right and who is actually wrong becomes irrelevant very early in the discussion.

The two parties in the international war of rhetoric, China and the U.S., are in a similar relationship to the disputing witnesses in the Japanese story or to a husband and wife in the heat of a row. The members of the Chinese government may already know that they tend to overreact and make themselves look foolish or brutal when it comes to arguably minor cases of Bible smuggling and freedom of expression. Likewise, it may be that certain politicians in Washington, if pressed, would be forced to acknowledge the right of a sovereign nation like the PRC to enforce its laws, control its borders, and arrest people who break its laws even if the infraction might appear insignificant on the surface. After all, one might argue, the U.S. is constantly pushing for the “rule of law” in China. It seems what the U.S. really wants is enforcement of only those laws that the U.S. likes and in ways that the U.S. would deem appropriate. Individuals in governments might be able to speak these truths frankly, but the natural inclination of national and political
narratives shapes the smaller stories, just as some deeper narrative structure in the minds of Akutagawa’s characters creates the necessity for a certain kind of smaller narrative to emerge in the courtroom.

An arguing married couple or a pair of siblings can often pull back from the brink of irretrievable divide and admit to a belief in simple objective “right” and “wrong,” in personal responsibility, not only in one’s private heart, but publicly or aloud before the partner in the erstwhile debate. Governments have less freedom in this regard, less liberty or capacity to admit wrong quickly or offhandedly. This chapter will argue that this is the result of the hegemony of certain national narratives. For the moment, however, we will blame the inability of governments to admit wrong on The Fonz, who perhaps represents a sort of American meta-narrative or archetype.

On the 1970s American sitcom Happy Days, Arthur Fonzarelli (aka “Fonzie” or “The Fonz”) is the stereotypical 1950s leather-jacketed ladies’ man gang leader with the motorcycle and the absentee parents. He is the sort of character who, in innumerable other narrative contexts on TV and in films, would find himself labeled a “sociopath” and might find himself in charge of a prison break or terrorizing a peaceful town that just wants to be left alone and undisturbed by the postwar evils. On Happy Days, however, The Fonz is a gentle version of the normally threatening biker figure, tamed through his association with a nice suburban family. He never does anything really evil, but he is not above using violence and threats of violence in the name of right. (In this context, “right” means the suburban capitalist status quo.) He has also been partially integrated into “useful society” by his ability to contribute to the booming ‘50s economy (and to mediate
Americans’ new love/hate relationship with their cars) through his almost supernatural mechanical skills. He is the sociopath domesticated, the broken stallion.

This character could easily serve as a model for both how Americans view the U.S. and how they view China. The Fonz is not an imitation of the American view of China and that view of China is not an imitation of the Fonz; more likely both of these narratives have some ur-narrative underneath them that makes the texts interrelated. The Fonz is dangerous, but good at heart. Similarly, though the U.S. has to use violence at times, it is only to protect the peaceful reality of the nice pacifist suburban family. The Fonz is an American alter-ego who does the dirty work when others are too weak, the indispensably violent Shui Ta to our kind and charitable Shen Te, to use the analogy from Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. At the same time The Fonz looks like America’s condescending view of China, the difficult character—the savage underneath a civilized veneer—who is tolerated because he does show promise of fitting into society; at least he is good with his hands even if his brain is not fully developed. And just like both of the governments he resembles, Fonzie is supremely confident, aloof, and cannot admit when he is wrong. He cannot even say the word “wr-wr-wr-wr-wrong” without stuttering through it like an engine revving.

Americans are not overly concerned with the disagreement between news stories like the one above, because they tend to believe optimistically that the truth will out, and that, in any disagreement with China at any rate, they are not the ones who are “wr-wr-wr-wr-wrong.” They believe their own government to be stubborn like the Fonz, but basically good at heart and honest about its mistakes. They also believe that China will eventually admit it was “wr-wr-wr-wr-wrong” and will suffer its government to be
reformed. If China refuses, the middle-class suburbanites of the world can threaten the leather-clad rogue with expulsion from the family of nice nations. This threat of excommunication always worked with the Fonz; it will work in the world as well, and that then the family order in the world can be restored, with the U.S. continuing to play the parental superego role. We believe this will happen because this is part of an American narrative that we grew up with, that we have retold in our popular culture narratives. We believe this is how the world is, in part because we watched many episodes of Happy Days when we were younger, or if not Happy Days, then The Honeymooners, or maybe several of those screwball comedies and movie romances in which two stubborn lovers cannot admit they were wrong—cannot, of course, until they suddenly can.

The rules of narrative are the rules of life. How the Chinese government treats religious believers and how Americans believe China will eventually change are shaped powerfully not by studies and numbers and objective lists of facts, but by the ways in which situations and peoples and governments can be fit into well-rehearsed narrative patterns. The same rules that viewers rehearsed when watching a situation comedy like Happy Days in the 1970s, they readily apply to China/U.S. relations in 2003. It is even possible that the synergy between the actions of Nixon and Carter in the early 1970s and the late 1970s respectively and the network run of Happy Days (1974-1984) might not be pure coincidence. Nixon once used an analogy that sounds very similar to the dynamic of adoption and threatened expulsion seen for years on that TV show: “We simply cannot afford to leave China outside the family of nations.”10 In the pages that follow I will look at some of the stories, Chinese and American, that are affecting these international
relations, specifically at questions of religious freedom and, more specifically, how the Christian Church in China is shaped and controlled by the narratives that others tell about it and that it tells itself.

To resolve the narrative of Mr. Li: Although some news reports in the U.S. emphasized the possibility of a death sentence for Li, thus playing to American ideas of Communist brutality, the papers of record and serious China watchers in the U.S. government were commendably more sober and realistic. Though China in October 1999 passed anti-cult laws that were designed to justify the government’s harsh dealings with Falungong and other allegedly dangerous groups, though the laws enjoin the enforcers of government policy to “be on full alert for cult activities and smash them rigorously,” and though charges of “counterrevolutionary actions” like those leveled against Li can indeed lead to execution in China, few analysts seriously believed such a high-profile case against a Hong Kong resident would ever be taken that far. At the end of January 2002, Li was sentenced to a two-year prison term. From the CCP’s point of view, this represents a lenient interpretation of the new anti-cult regulations. Even for a lesser charge of working in concert with overseas groups to distribute “a large amount” of illegal literature, the laws provide for punishments of three to seven years or more of jail time. Two mainland Shouter leaders, Lin Xifu and Yu Zhudi, were arrested with Li and both given almost equally lenient three-year sentences. Li and Lin were both released early, in 2002, and Yu was released in March of 2004 after serving his full term.

The conflict of national narratives becomes, if anything, even more apparent here at the end of the story. The U.S. credited official pressure, particularly President Bush’s February 2002 visit to Beijing, with the two paroles. Li was released just in advance of
Bush’s visit, Lin some time later. Bush had agreed to the state visit predicated on the condition that he might speak publicly and privately about religious freedom during his stay. The U.S. continues to carve out for itself in an intercessory role in the world, particularly on moral issues like religious freedom, issues, that is, on which it feels itself particularly qualified to speak. The Chinese government, by contrast, may concede an individual case or two, but even in those cases it will not submit to U.S. portrayals of China as backward or barbaric in its treatment of the Chinese people. The Chinese response is to insist on the fairness of its laws, to characterize itself as just and merciful in its application of those laws, and to maintain that, in any event, these are questions of Chinese national sovereignty over which foreign countries should have no say. Rather than concede even the smallest amount of authority in the Bible-smuggling case, the CCP finished the story with a very different ending than the one we heard in the U.S. The Chinese government said that Li Guangqiang and Lin Xifu were both released on medical parole and that Li would be serving the remainder of his sentence under house arrest in Hong Kong. (Hong Kong authorities denied that they would be keeping tabs on Li.)

**Goals and Scope**

The international drama of religious freedom plays itself out slowly, with infrequent fits of action like Li’s rapid indictment, sentencing, and parole all rushed through in the two months prior to Bush’s visit. The U.S. throws its weight across the Pacific and tells stories that take credit for the token breakthroughs made in certain human rights cases. China, for its part, maintains its high degree of control over religious activities within its borders and bridles at outside interference in its internal affairs. Even
as it makes concessions at key moments, Chinese narratives still set those small mercies in the context of intact national sovereignty and of China’s allegedly strong record of permitting a high degree of religious freedom over the past quarter-century.

These smaller human narratives like those of Li Guangqiang, Lin Xifu, and Yu Zhudi can be helpfully placed in the context of the legal documents and official statements made by both governments during the past twenty-five years, and ultimately these documents belong in the context of national narrative. The negotiations surrounding a case like Li’s seem to be founded on laws and policy statements, not stories, but all of this action has roots in larger narratives, narratives of nation that shape personal identities and worldviews. I will spend the next major section of this chapter analyzing the major government documents and policies concerning religion in China’s Reform Era, using texts from both the U.S. and China. In the final portion I will put these texts in the context of the shared and divergent national narratives of China and the U.S. past, present, and future. Past: What is the plotline of the two nations’ histories up to the present day? Where do the primary U.S. and Chinese narrative identities begin? How have they emplotted their national experiences of the past century or two? Present: At what point in their national stories do Americans or Chinese see themselves living today? How are the people of both nations shaped in their current policy conversations by the narrated past and the imagined future? Future: What is the future they envision for their two nations? Where is the anticipated climax and telos, the end or goal, of these stories?

This chapter is in some ways a bit of a stretch; it is, however, foundational to the chapters that follow. A background review of government policies will be useful to an understanding of future texts, but the texts analyzed here are admittedly the furthest
removed from traditional definitions of literature or narrative. I am beginning with the outermost concentric circle, the farthest circle from the highly personal sphere to be reached in the final chapter. These are legal/political texts without clear authorship, not written with any aesthetic purpose in mind, and written usually for a worldwide audience. Chapter six will close this study with highly personal stories intended for relatively small groups of readers. Despite these present texts’ apparent distance from literature, we will quickly see how much these dry government documents have to do with meta-narrative. They are shaped by, retell, and propagate many of the national narratives that will appear in texts discussed in every other chapter of this book.

The most recent and most relevant essays of political commentary concerning U.S. views of China can be found in China in the American Political Imagination, edited by Carola McGiffert, and a word of comparison between that book’s approach and my own might be helpful here.\textsuperscript{13} McGiffert’s collection emerged from a conference studying U.S. images of China. That approach is helpful, especially in considering the masses of the American public and, some of the writers claim, legislators who control relatively little information about contemporary China. Many Americans, the book implies, have little ability to construct a full narrative of China because they lack enough information to formulate anything but strings of still-shot images. However, the governments and individuals who contribute texts that will be studied here are dealing with much more than images; they have in fact given full backstories to their images, incorporating their stills into entire emplotted movies. Furthermore, McGiffert and her contributors are not clearly committed to a definition of image that would exclude narrative, but are rather using “image” loosely and in conjunction with the “imagination” of their book’s title. In
the end, looking at these texts in terms of narrative will be more fruitful, I believe. China and the U.S. have trouble talking to each other, not simply because they have conflicting “images” of each other, but because they are telling different stories about themselves and about the world.

We will move on here to several pages of rhetorical analysis of U.S. and Chinese government documents on religious freedom before placing these documents fully into their meta-narrative context. This analysis should be useful background for many of the arguments in future chapters, but these political texts are clearly not narratives in and of themselves. These are not the “tales governments tell,” but their narrative foundations are real and will be discovered below.

The U.S. Documents

To open our exploration of the relevant government documents, let us begin with the primary U.S. documents before we move on to the more complex situation within the Chinese government. The U.S. Department of State is the official government clearinghouse for all Western narratives concerning the Christian churches and other religions in China. The narratives are collected from various NGO’s and other intelligence sources and are organized into three different annual reports whose rhetoric reflects the tenor of the debate at the time. All three documents cite instances of persecution of all official and underground religions in China, but Christianity tends to dominate the field each year, as Christianity, along with Islam, is the least tolerated and most feared of the legal religions. As the most recent religious freedom report states, “Official tolerance for Buddhism and Taoism has been greater than that for Christianity,
and these religions often face fewer restrictions.” The tenor of these reports, more or less tense from year to year, has been, like the government’s Reform Era China policy, overall highly consistent since President Nixon’s trip and especially since President Carter’s normalization of U.S./China relations in 1979. President Reagan makes an inflammatory statement about Taiwan; there is a fear after June 4, 1989, that China has returned to totalitarian rule and that we need to cut off ties; President George W. Bush calls China a strategic “competitor” instead of “partner”; there are tensions in the Taiwan straits in the mid-’90s; tragic accidents threaten ties when a Chinese embassy is bombed and a U.S. spy plane bumps a Chinese fighter out of the sky—all these circumstances called the two nations’ new formal relationship into question. In the long run, however, after 25 years of the U.S.’s “one-China policy” and China’s “reform and opening up,” those troublesome events, horrible as some of them were, finally appear as smallish potholes in the more-or-less level road of U.S/China relations. This is not to say all is well. The road is not a high-speed freeway to utopia, but the major U.S. documents concerning human rights and religious freedom reflect a consistent post-Cultural Revolution policy in the U.S. of engagement, if engagement with criticism.

The oldest of the three State Department reports in which the U.S. officially comments on religion in China has been published annually since 1961; this is the hefty report on Human Rights in which the U.S. State Department includes a “country report” on every current member nation of the U.N. The “Freedom of Religion” portion of the most recent China report (covering 2004, published in February of 2005) is revealing of the complex situation we find in the PRC. The stories and examples included here are a mixed bag, mostly negative, as we would expect from a text concerned with documenting
human rights failures around the world. Persecution of unregistered religious groups, unwarranted arrests, destruction of property including the closing or razing of religious structures by the government—such brief narratives and generalized examples make up the majority of this report’s content each year.

The report is somewhat balanced in its admissions of some progress and of some real freedom in China’s complex case, but almost all positive descriptions are accompanied by a modifying adverb: “The Constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe; however . . .”; “While the Government generally did not seek to suppress [religious] growth outright . . .” (emphasis added). The inconsistency and non-monolithic nature of the Chinese situation is admitted more clearly in sections like this:

However, in some areas, supervision of religious activity was minimal, and registered and unregistered churches were treated similarly by authorities. Coexistence and cooperation between official and unofficial churches, both Catholic and Protestant, in such areas were close enough to blur the line between the two. In some areas, congregants worshiped in both types of churches. In others, underground churches procured Bibles with the help of colleagues in registered churches. In many areas, small house churches and “family” churches were generally tolerated by the authorities, so long as they remained small and unobtrusive [. . .]. The Government continued to restore or rebuild some churches, temples, mosques, and monasteries damaged or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and allowed the reopening of some seminaries during the year.

Even these passages, however, are followed up by criticisms, and the overall conclusion of the U.S. document every year is a negative assessment of the situation on the ground in China. All the myriad instances of real religious freedom and good deeds of the CCP are swallowed up in the sheer number of negative examples and in key words and phrases which imply at least a continuation of poor conditions, if not a degeneration of those
conditions. These phrases are repeated verbatim or shift slightly along a scale of seriousness year after year: “Overall, government respect for religious freedom remained poor.” “This national campaign to require religious groups and places of worship to register or to come under the supervision of official ‘patriotic’ religious organizations continued and, in some places, intensified during the year.”¹⁹ We should note that the phrase “remained poor,” used in the former quote and in the reports from the most recent two years, is a rhetorical step forward from the word “worsened” used in some previous reports.

In 1999 a supplement to the Human Rights report began publication in accordance with Section 102(b) of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This report describes more completely the religious situation in China and offers more background on China’s religious policies and the organs of government control over religious activities; more specific examples of the abuses of government are also included. The positive statements are still in place here and the overall negative tone is essentially identical to the religious material in the human rights report. Much of the language is copied from one document to the other (or both have the same original source behind them) as the same State Department Bureau is responsible for both reports (The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL)).²⁰ This supplementary report, then, is not particularly significant for any peculiarities of content, but its existence reflects a greater will-to-policy and interest in religious issues in recent years, another indication that postmodern skepticism may be outmoded or might never have applied to the U.S. in any facile way. The 2004 report (released December 2004) is the most recent report available.
In addition to the State Department reports, a third annual report is prepared by a body called the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). This body, though created and funded by the federal government under the same 1998 act that necessitated the new State Department religious freedom report, is independent of direct federal oversight and control. The USCIRF serves in an advisory role, and its reports have the purpose of focusing government policy on the areas of the world where intervention is most needed or might be most practicable. Each year the commission recommends a list of countries to be designated Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs). The Secretary of State reviews this list and ratifies several of the choices. These countries do not become targets then of any new economic or political sanctions, but commission recommendations for other official pressures that might be applied are taken seriously.

The CPC designation has not been an issue of serious debate internationally, as “Most Favored Nation” status or calls for UN reprimands of certain countries have been, but the commission’s recommendations have led to visible action on the part of the U.S. government. If the USCIRF is a fair judge of its own impact (the following information is plausible, but is taken from its own May 2003 report rather than from independent sources), it was its urging that led President Bush to “condition a state visit to China on an opportunity to make a major speech on religious freedom and other human rights that would be televised live and uncensored to the Chinese people.” The 2004 USCIRF report again takes credit for the intercession on behalf of Chinese religious believers made by President Bush and Secretary Powell in 2003. I was present in a crowded Peking University cafeteria on February 21, 2002, when Bush delivered his speech over
the TV screens that were surrounded by interested university students. Not only was Bush’s speech televised live and uncensored, but the speech, which was strong in its statements on religious freedom, appeared in full (though only in English) on the People’s Daily website. Such cooperation from the Chinese government seems to indicate less insecurity and authoritarian control than the U.S. documents consistently imply exists.

The Chinese Constitution

CCP policies of give and take toward its populace with regards to religious and other freedoms are complex, as the example of Bush’s freedom of speech in China and the mixed language of the State Department reports amply demonstrate. However, as with U.S. policy of recent years, there exists an overall Party-line consistency in the Reform Era that justifies us in considering these few decades as a fairly unified entity. There has been no major shift in Party policy toward religion, no theoretical tide change, since 1982. Even the 1982 documents are considered by the CCP to be a return to the correct Party ideology which had been implemented from the very beginnings of the New China in the early 1950s and which had been distorted by the “leftist” errors of certain factions during the Cultural Revolution.

Implementation of Marxist theories of religious freedom has been erratic at times, but the Chinese government has given a significant amount of thought to religion. Religion has been fit neatly into the CCP’s Marxist theory and the Marxist historical narrative, and religious freedom has often been directly encouraged and the protection of that freedom enforced since the late 1970s. If the state of China’s religious freedom is not
yet what the U.S. would wish it to be, it is not because all Chinese Communist Party members ignore the question of religious freedom nor that they all necessarily hate religion and want to see it stamped out. Such ignorance or hasty repressive actions would in fact be in direct contradiction to many CCP initiatives. If religious faithful in China are still persecuted for their faith it is no doubt partly due to abusive implementation of often vague CCP directives, but at the root it is because the CCP is working from a different definition of religion and of freedom than the U.S. government is, and, most importantly, the CCP is working from a different narrative about the place of religion in history.

The two 1982 documents that must be considered if we are to understand the CCP narratives of religion are China’s revised constitution and the famous Document 19. Article 36, regarding religious freedom, of the 1982 Chinese constitution reads as follows in the Chinese and in the official English translation:

1. 中华人民共和国公民有宗教信仰自由.
2. 任何国家机关、社会团体和个人不得强制公民信仰宗教或者不信仰宗教，不得歧视信仰宗教的公民和不信仰宗教的公民.
3. 国家保护正常的宗教活动。任何人不得利用宗教进行破坏社会秩序，损害公民身体健康，妨碍国家教育制度的活动.
4. 宗教团体和宗教事务不受外国势力的支配.
6. No organ of state, mass organization, or person is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not to believe in religion. It is impermissible to discriminate against any citizen who believes or does not believe in religion.
7. The state protects legitimate religious activities. No person is permitted to use religion to conduct counterrevolutionary activities or activities which disrupt social order, harm people’s health, or obstruct the educational system of the country.
8. Religion is not subject to the control of foreign countries.24
The language, in Chinese and in English, is obviously more vague than many Westerners would wish, particularly in the third clause—What is a “legitimate” (the word is also sometimes translated as “normal”) religious activity? Does teaching a child about God “obstruct the educational system” if that system is based on atheistic materialism?—but there are no serious translation difficulties to speak of. There is no sense that the English version is softened for foreign audiences or that concepts are intentionally obscured by means of the translation.

The article is brief, but this in itself is no evidence of a government’s lack of concern for religious freedom. This article, it is worth considering, is not so laconic as the U.S. constitution on the subject of religion. The relative longwindedness of Article 36 compared to the “no religious test” and “establishment clause” of the U.S. constitution reveals the inner workings of an atheist government body that is forced to struggle with the question of religion, a question that is by definition foreign to it; the CCP, because it is so unfamiliar with religion, finds that it must think and theorize about it, probably overthink and overlegislate it. This is in contrast to the drafters of the U.S. constitution who were steeped in the Christian meta-narrative and took free religious practice almost for granted as a foundation of the new nation.

The result of the CCP’s consideration of the religion question is this Article 36, a clear attempt to balance freedom and restriction, and to decide how much liberty to grant its citizens in this area. The CCP wants to grant its people enough freedom to provide a psychological safety valve, allowing as many religious as possible to experience no contradiction between their faith identities and their national identities. Beijing sets limits on that freedom, however, that are well shy of U.S. liberties. The U.S. constitution,
accepting *a priori* broad and continuing liberties among its people, is concerned with keeping the government out of the religious arena by keeping religion out of the government’s business. The PRC constitution starts with no such preexisting belief; the CCP is deeply concerned about maintaining centralized control over potential centrifugal forces like the spread of religion in the provinces, and its interference in religious affairs is more pronounced in consequence.

The very length of Article 36, not its brevity, is problematic from an American perspective. The more words there are, the more interference and control the government asserts in the realm of religion. As one of my mainland Chinese university students astutely opined in a class in which we read the Declaration of Independence and other key American documents, Americans believe that the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” come from somewhere else, perhaps God, perhaps “the Universe,” but certainly not from government; Americans believe they are born with them. The Chinese constitution, this student went on, suggests (as may be expected from a society long taught that there are higher priorities than personal freedom, an ideal which in itself cannot be faulted and will not be dismissed here) that these rights are granted by the central government and that they are conditional.

The perceived need for bureaucratic control over religious activities within China’s borders is perennial. This point is made by Daniel H. Bays in *God and Caesar in China*, using an incident from the Qianlong period. What Bays calls “a tradition of state dominance” can also be seen in Jonathan Spence’s *Emperor of China*, an “autobiography” by Qianlong’s grandfather, the Emperor Kang Xi, which Spence spliced together from various primary texts. This early Qing emperor Kang Xi (1661-1722) kept
the Jesuit missionaries in the China of his day very close to him in court and appeared to
treat them much as he would his other advisors and courtiers. Concerned at one point
about the Pope’s apparent desire to exercise more independent control over the Beijing
mission, Kang Xi sent one Vatican envoy back to Rome with a dismissive reply and
instituted a registration system for foreign clergy, whereby any of them who wished to
live in China would have to agree to residence in perpetuity and to certain other
restrictions on their actions. Similar legislated restrictions had been in place at various
times for Buddhists and Taoists as well and indicate that today’s registration system is
again not the “Communist way,” but rather the “Chinese way,” a return to an old form
after a century of a weakened China being forced to give in to the demands of foreign
missionaries who had the backing of powerful overseas imperial interests. This will be
important to our consideration of the long-standing Chinese narratives that reach deeper
than recent CCP propaganda.

The already overly specific phrasings of Article 36 (“to believe or not to
believe”—is the “or not to believe” really necessary? we are inclined to ask) are stretched
out even further in the dozens of official texts whose task it is to interpret Chinese
constitutional law. Here is a typical passage from a Party journal:

As stipulated in the constitution, freedom to believe in religion is the basic
policy by which our Party and our country handles religious problems [or
“questions”]. As set forth in this policy, every Chinese citizen enjoys
freedom to believe in the religion of his choosing; he enjoys freedom to
believe in one sect or another of the same religion; he enjoys freedom to
believe in religion today and not to believe in it tomorrow, and also
freedom not to believe in religion today but to believe in it tomorrow; a
clergyman enjoys freedom to preach theism in a house of worship, and an
atheist enjoys freedom to propagate atheism.
Is the phrase “or not to believe” really necessary in Article 36? The government clearly believes it is. The article and this more-detailed paragraph “doth protest too much,” as Shakespeare would say; its enumeration of all the different possibilities for belief implies a certain calculation and observation of the different configurations religion can assume in the eyes of the government. It also gives the impression that anything not named must not be assumed by anyone. Chinese religious believers are hemmed in by walls of words in every direction as the CCP asserts control over the permissible vocabulary of religious freedom. U.S. courts are faced with the difficulty of interpreting the too-brief religion clause in the first amendment; Chinese courts have their own problems, but a dearth of historical or bureaucratic directives is not one of them.

Article 36 clearly contains both good news and bad news for followers of religion in China. The first two clauses give and the last two clauses take away, or at least potentially take away, what has been given. The first two statements unequivocally guarantee “freedom of religious belief.” The positive 1982 wording even reflects a liberalization of the 1979 constitution that had included the phrase “freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism.” We can see this older language repeated in a 1982 People’s Daily article written before the new revision had taken effect: “[I]n the course of implementing the policy of freedom of religious belief, CCP members should make it clear that citizens have the freedom to believe in religion, as well as the freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism.” Some clergy and other leaders protested, were listened to, and the offending phrase was removed. The fears that led them to object are made apparent when we read statements like the following in several government documents concerning religion: “Atheistic propaganda should not be carried
on in churches, temples, and places for religious services; it is even more improper to 
force others to accept atheism by harsh and simplistic methods. In this way we can avoid 
the useless disputes between believers and nonbelievers which affect unity.\textsuperscript{32} This 
statement was released about the same time as the 1979 constitution and describes and 
tries to stave off potential misunderstandings of the original constitutional phrasing. 
Those misunderstandings apparently were not completely avoided, and after several 
disruptive incidents of atheist evangelizing, the emendation to Article 36 was made.

The first two clauses of Article 36 remain, therefore, from 1982 until today, a 
fairly model statement of religious freedom. The two clauses that follow, however, are 
full of vague loopholes that open the door to all the abuses that so many inside and 
outside China see and decry. Again, the goals of these statements are predictable, even 
understandable, and are nothing new in Communist or Imperial Chinese history: China 
wants to maintain domestic order and stability and not cede an inch of its sovereignty to 
interference by foreigners. We see these motives—perfectly good motives for the ruler of 
any country, we should note—in Qing Emperor Kang Xi’s letter to the Pope and in his 
dealings with certain Buddhist and Taoist practices of his day;\textsuperscript{33} we see the same logic in 
the language of Article 36 and consistent throughout today’s government literature on 
these matters. Very simply, the position is that superstitious or otherwise non-legitimate 
religious activities are bad for people, and bad for the country as a whole. A document 
from the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1979 elaborates these 
concerns. Speaking specifically to traditional Chinese folk practices like shamanism, 
divination, and phrenology, the Party is concerned, not only because such beliefs are 
“absurd and ridiculous,” but also because “the daily life and economic output of the
people have been affected and their mental and physical health have suffered." On the issue of sovereignty—the danger of foreign control of religion expressed in the fourth clause of the article—this 1983 speech by then Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Qiao Liansheng, singles out Catholic Christianity as one of the worst violators of this patriotic precept:

There is much factual evidence that the Vatican has never given up its plotting to control the Chinese Catholic Church, even to “changing the structure of Chinese Socialism,” and restoring the colonial system in our nation, to serve the ends of modern-day imperialism. Therefore, in the struggle of Chinese Catholicism against the imposition of foreign domination, it is clearly a political question, a question of loving or not loving our country. Protestant Christianity is no more favored than Catholicism, as we shall soon see.

The Chinese constitution has been amended several times since 1982, but primarily as regards changing economic theories and reformed treatment for members of the previously disenfranchised capitalist class. Article 36 has not been altered in these two decades and more. All official statements about religion make some reference to these several sentences and all so-called abuses of religious freedom are defended with reference to the second half of the article. The Falungong crackdown of the past five years is a textbook example. The persecution was precipitated, not unlike the crackdown of June 4, 1989, by a public challenge to the government in the form of mass protests that had the potential to bring down the CCP. The Party in these situations is very mindful of China’s history of popular revolt, in which at times “the leaders of the uprisings put a religious cloak over the struggles. In this way, the inevitability of the class struggle was mingled with religion." The violent suppression of the Falungong “uprising” has been justified time and time again in official statements with stories of Falungong adherents
refusing to seek medical treatment, embarking on mad killing sprees, and encouraging suicide, clearly actions which “disrupt social order” and “harm people’s health.” Falungong’s spiritual leader, Li Hongzhi, who is based in New York, is also said to be part of the perennial foreign cabal that seeks the overthrow of the CCP, a clear reference to clause four of Article 36. Other accusations are more closely tied to the new anti-cult laws passed in 1999, but the CCP’s continual referencing of its constitutional provisions to explain, perhaps justify, apparently excessive force, is unmistakable.

Document 19

A fuller elaboration of the CCP’s religious theory and policy was also released in 1982, emerging out of the watershed Eleventh Party Congress which had inaugurated the Reform Era and had begun to reopen places of worship three years earlier. This “Document 19,” or “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period,” is the most complete and influential CCP statement on the “Religious Question” to the present day. MacInnis opens his anthology of primary sources with the full text of this document, and a great deal of the remaining content in his collection sounds redundant because of it. At least as important as Article 36 of the constitution, Document 19 has summarized quite succinctly the CCP’s perspective on religious freedom and control. There have been developments in the past 20 years, but as with the U.S. policy of engagement with China, the overriding consistency of viewpoint, summarized in this document, makes the “new” religious policy papers seem like footnotes. It will be worthwhile to describe the contents of this document in some detail and to quote passages from it at some length below.
Document 19 is not long, less than 20 pages in the Janice Wickeri translation that MacInnis reprints, and is divided into 13 easily digestible topic sections with explanatory subtitles. A preface precedes these sections and urges all Party members to “undertake conscientious investigation and discussion of the religious question, and [. . . to] increase supervision and prompt inspection of the implementation of each item related to this policy.”

The first three body sections, very significantly, begin by putting religion in China into a narrative framework as part of a Marxist historical narrative of the rise and fall of religion, with the emphasis on “fall.” The document begins and ends with the Marxist theory of the gradual decay and disappearance of religion in the world as the superstitious fears that engendered religious belief are overcome by education, and the class conflicts that aided the survival of exploitative religious structures fade away with the disappearance of class distinctions. The opening two sentences of the document proper read, “Religion is a historical phenomenon pertaining to a definite period in the development of human society. It has its own cycle of emergence, development, and demise.”

The specific history of religion in China is then summarized, with Roman Catholicism and Protestantism singled out subtly as the particular products mainly of the Opium Wars and the influence of “foreign colonialist and imperialist forces.”

It quickly becomes clear that the main purpose of Document 19 is to make the Chinese experience of the continuing, even growing, health of religion accord with a Marxist theory of the natural decline of religion and to instruct Party cadres in how to deal with religious believers correctly in this time before religion finally withers away. When this document was written, religion was rebounding dramatically in China after the overly harsh “leftist errors” of the Cultural Revolution tried to leap too quickly into
religion-less utopia, and it was not immediately obvious how Marxism could account for
the people’s continuing and renewed interest in the “idealism” of religious belief. As to
this first question—why religious faith persists among the masses despite years of
revolutionary education, the smashing of the old feudal class society, and the expulsion
of the imperialists—the answer provided in Document 19 is that religious belief is a long-
term “contradiction” that requires patience on the part of the Party: “Those who think that
with the establishment of the Socialist system and with a certain degree of economic and
cultural progress, religion will die out within a short period, are not being realistic.”\
Religion, in the absence of class coercion and imperialistic interference and when
separated from harmful superstitions, is not a dangerous thing to the country, but merely
an innocuous holdover of habit in the people’s minds. Its decline, though not obvious, is
real and can be seen in the fact that, so the writers claim, although China is seeing
“somewhat of an increase in absolute numbers [of religious believers], [. . .] when
compared with the growth of the population there has been a decline.”\

Therefore, regarding the second question—what is the Party to do with these
human contradictions still living in a Socialist society, these people who do not seem on
the face of things to fit the truth of Marxist theory?—the answer is to work with them
toward the common goal of building up a powerful Socialist China. The Party must stand
back to some extent and allow history to take its natural course, to reach its fated
conclusion in a society in which materialism will be the accepted belief of all. This is not
to say cadres should take a laissez-faire attitude or follow the path of Daoist “inaction”:
“We Communists are atheists and must unremittingly propagate atheism. Yet at the same
time we must understand that it would be fruitless and extremely harmful to use simple
coercion in dealing with the people’s ideological and spiritual questions—and this includes religious questions.”\(^{43}\) The Party must not forget that encouraging the speedy death of religion not only will probably not achieve the desired results, but also will make Party members lose focus on the bigger picture: “then we forget that the Party’s basic task is to unite all the people (and this includes the broad mass of believers and nonbelievers alike) in order that all may strive to construct a modern, powerful Socialist state.”\(^{44}\)

Though these statements seem to require an overall culture within the Party that would make the alleged constant persecution of religious believers in China impossible, the reality is that, as with Article 36, Document 19 takes back with one hand what it grants with the other and closely proscribes religious activity in order that 1) it may be suited to the goal of Socialist construction, and 2) it may continue its “natural” process of aging and dying without interference from the forces of counterrevolutionary ignorance or foreign imperialist hegemony that would seek to keep religion artificially vital and long-lived, with their ulterior motives of doing harm to China and the Chinese people. Religious freedom is therefore restricted to “normal religious beliefs and practices.”\(^{45}\)

This vague term (the alternate translation of the same Chinese word, 正常 or zhengchang, we saw in Article 36 as “legitimate religious activities”) is defined elsewhere as the activities of organized religions with long histories, as non-superstitious activities, and as the sorts of activities that are the “functions of patriotic and self-supporting religious organizations.”\(^{46}\) That is to say, activities that contribute to or at least do not distract from larger Socialist goals. In order to keep the churches shrinking, children under the age of 18 are discouraged (if not forbidden—the wording is ambiguous and implementation of
this point has been inconsistent over the years, particularly as believing parents insist on raising their children to believe in the same faith) from receiving religious instruction, clearly out of concern that young people are less developed in their education regarding materialist “truth” and more vulnerable to idealistic and superstitious beliefs.

Related to both of the above goals—the agenda of Socialist construction and the slow death of faith—religious belief is described in Document 19 as a purely individual matter and one that, it is implied, should remain private, not public. This prevents Party members—essentially public beings—from participation and discourages certain forms of evangelism. “[I]t should be emphasized that the crux of the policy of freedom of religious belief is to make the question of religious belief a private matter, one of individual free choice for citizens.” 47 The language does not go far beyond that of Article 36, but the fact that the word “citizens” here clearly (and elsewhere explicitly) excludes Party members indicates the special status of the government official, an idea that is also not new in China with the Communists. Again to cite Jonathan Spence’s constructed autobiography of the Qing emperor Kang Xi, despite this emperor’s strong personal tendencies toward Daoism and Buddhism (and his respect for, though not strong attraction to the faith of, the Jesuits in his court), he more than once cites a belief that true spiritual cultivation and good governance are incompatible. Kang Xi simply feels he does not have time to devote himself to both at once. 48 The Chinese Emperor plays an important role in the national religious rituals, but here we see, just as we see with the CCP leadership, and as we see, I think, in these long documents theorizing about religion, both a powerful interest in religion (see especially former President Jiang Zemin’s remarks in chapter three below) and a strong separation between one’s curiosity about
idealist fancies and one’s adherence to materialist realities. This separation is imperative when making policy in order that officials do not lose sight of the first priority of the leader of the nation, i.e., in today’s China, the construction of a powerful Socialist nation.

Further restrictions described in Document 19 include clauses about 1) church building, 2) bodies of bureaucratic control, and 3) unregistered meeting places. First, religious building projects should be encouraged, but kept to a minimum “lest we consume large sums of money, materials, and manpower and thus obstruct the building up of material and spiritual Socialist civilization.” Second, the eight national patriotic religious organizations are the “bridges” between government and religion and are the channels for the administration of all “normal” religious activities of the five recognized religions. In this scheme of eight bodies for five religions, the Protestants have two committees over them and the Catholics have three, while the older, more nearly indigenous religions of Islam, Daoism, and Buddhism, only have one each. As we saw in the U.S. State Department reports, those other faiths are viewed as less threatening, and therefore require less supervision. Third, “As for Protestants gathering in homes for worship services, in principle this should not be allowed, yet this prohibition should not be too rigidly enforced.” Freedom of religion is provided for and real, but the groundwork is laid with these restrictions for the repression of any group or individual that crosses any one of a complex matrix of boundaries. The encouragement of freedom of religion is recognized to be important to domestic tranquility (see section IX of Document 19) and to international relations (section XI), but the document at the same time expresses fears about “criminal and antirevolutionary activities which hide behind the façade of religion” and “reactionary religious groups abroad, especially the
imperialistic ones such as the Vatican and Protestant foreign-mission societies, who strive to use all possible occasions to carry on their efforts at infiltration ‘to return to the China mainland’ and expresses the will to deal with such false religion. The CCP giveth and it taketh away.

**Chinese Documents Since 1982**

This Document 19, not out-of-date after more than two decades, is still the best summary of CCP religious policy and will naturally be the focus of our attention below, particularly with its Marxist narrative of the birth, growth, and death of religion. There are, however, a few trends in Chinese law since 1982 that should be mentioned here so that we may see how the give and take of the two seminal texts has been interpreted over the years, the better to understand how we have arrived at the conditions described by the contemporary U.S. documents of censure. After a decade of growing freedom, apparently growing even more in the Chinese imagination than in reality, the 1989 crackdown had a chilling effect on the reformist dreams of millions, including religious believers.

Westerners who lived in Beijing in the late 1980s (prior to 1989) often talk excitedly about the atmosphere, particularly on university campuses, of extreme vitality, of conversations shouted across dorm halls and quadrangles, conversations about democracy and reform and the future of China; visitors felt a sense that anything was possible and that we were living in momentous times.

The Christian churches were not immune to the spirit of this age, and there were rumors, even strong indications from the head of the Chinese Protestant Church, Bishop K. H. Ting himself, in 1988, that radical reform, perhaps even phasing out, of the TSPM
oversight structures could be in the offing. Both Tony Lambert and David Aikman describe the seminary students and other Christians who marched with the throngs in May of 1989, singing hymns, parading a cross before them, waving banners with Bible verses. In the wake of the June 4th grip-tightening, the “disorder” was officially blamed on a small group of extremist troublemakers within the largely innocent mass movement. These “rebellious conspirators” were said to have “colluded with overseas and other foreign hostile forces.” The Christian Church, ever on the defensive regarding its loyalty to China because of the suspect history of the Christian faith in China, its foreign origins, and its strong ties to imperialism in the past, was forced to retreat from its dreams of greater independence. Bishop Ting performed a full about-face, and the framework of government control, with the TSPM and the China Christian Council (CCC) both directly under the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), has shown no signs of weakening in the 15 years since.

In the wake of the reassertion of government authority over all aspects of society, including religious faith, Document 6 reiterated in 1991 the policies of Document 19. This so-called “Circular on Some Problems Concerning the Further Improvements of Work on Religion” seemed designed to place the fundamentally unaltered ideas of the older document in the new post-1989 context, both because of the Tiananmen incident and because of the new leadership of Jiang Zemin, who made a statement on religion in the same year, 1991. He thereby made official, and gave justification for, a reinvigorated religious bureaucracy, in order that “illegal elements” cannot use “religion or religious activities to stir up disorder.”
Thus began a spate of government pronouncements on religion that has continued to the present, an endless series of regulatory acts from the Party and from local offices based on Party templates. Mickey Spiegel of Human Rights Watch calls this Beijing’s “rule of law” strategy that is in reality “rule by law,” “a scheme whereby those in power used the law for their own purposes.” These documents added specificity to the theories expounded in Document 6, and in Document 19 before it, but nothing else. Furthermore, though these regulations look and sound like laws and can be used by the authorities as de facto laws, they are not legal pronouncements in the sense that they have been passed by the People’s Congress, and therefore are useful only for prosecution (or rather persecution) of offenders, and not for their legal defense in court.

Two such key directives with the appearance and partial force of law were signed in 1994 by Premier Li Peng, a man hated by the vast majority of the Chinese people and blamed by many for the hard-line response to the 1989 demonstrations. (Interestingly, Aikman claims that Li Peng’s daughter is a baptized Christian.) Like all other statements and documents of the time, these directives, numbered 144 and 145, add nothing new to the legal landscape, but seem rather to be a reiteration in response to reemerging specific fears about foreign interference in local branches of the legal church and through the illegal house churches. These were released at the height of Dennis Balcombe’s evangelistic success, and he was not the only foreigner working illegally as a missionary in China in the early 1990s. The two Li Peng documents, one specifically about the religious activities of foreigners in China and the other about the administration of religious meeting places, contain provisions which, typically, are mostly positive, but include key and ambiguous restrictions: foreigners are allowed to visit (the implication is
“to visit legal and registered”) Chinese places of worship and even speak and preach, but they must not start their own religious groups, administrative agencies, or schools; foreigners may bring religious materials into China for personal use, but may not bring materials which have content that will “危害中国社会公共利益” (“do damage to the public interests of Chinese society”).

The number of these rules emanating from the Chinese government is daunting, but volumes of regulation do not automatically translate into a felt loss of freedom. A brief narrative digression will illustrate this. As I translate these two Li Peng documents, I am working from a photograph I took outside a registered church in a small town in the hills of the southern province of Hunan, a church that felt as free as any big-city church I visited, in spite of the prominent display of the regulations concerning foreign religious believers in China. There in the alley beside the entrance to the church—newly remodeled and whitewashed but still spare by U.S. or Beijing standards—were posted large-print versions of these two documents, alongside other specifically provincial counterpart laws, all on 8’x8’ printed metal sheets. They looked new; perhaps they were all posted at the time of the release of the most recent provincial document, which was dated 2000. Although I knew it was impossible, it was almost as if the foreigners’ rules had been put up for my sole benefit. The town had not seen but half-a-dozen foreigners who could possibly violate such regulations in all the 20 years since “opening up.” During the church service, I was welcomed in kind fashion, and I was indeed, as I had outside read was permitted, asked to say a few words. As it happens, I said nothing very controversial (except perhaps from the point of view of a Chinese grammarian), but I also did not get the sense that anyone was particularly worried about what I might say. The
regulations were posted outside the church, but they did not seem to be prominent in the minds of those inside.

I visited the town’s Catholic church the following day, and there they did not have regulations posted on the walls and there they welcomed me even more warmly. They were a mostly elderly bunch who remembered their local history well and told stories of the Italian fathers who founded the church before Liberation came in 1949. Far from fearing “foreign interference” in China’s affairs, the church elders—they had no priest and had no hope of having one any time soon—openly discussed the property dispute in which they were currently embroiled with the town government. The town leaders were claiming half of the church building for their own uses; the line they had drawn ran right through the altar in the small church sanctuary that took up one side of a courtyard. I actually felt that the churchgoers wanted interference from me in the matter, as I lived in Beijing at the time and might have connections there, but they did not ask directly for my involvement. I at least felt some obligation to do what little I could, so I mentioned the case later to a reporter friend of mine. I was told, however, that news bureaus in Beijing, like the emperors of old, receive such memorial petitions for legal help, or at least for international exposure of cases, daily, and most pleas must of necessity go unanswered. Rule by law and mountains of regulations or no, the daily experience of Christians and foreign visitors is not one of palpable oppression, but neither is it always of sufficient freedom. The at once generously open-handed and knit-browed stern tone of all these legal documents reflects this daily living of the Chinese religious believer: reveling confidently, sometimes rebelliously, in real liberty, and at the same time always ready for the arbitrary fist.
This fist came down again in 1999 with another series of legal measures aimed at harmful “religious” influences and counterrevolutionary foreign interference in China’s affairs. The anti-cult laws of 1999—this time with an actual congressional stamp of approval—were designed to allow the government to continue to deal harshly with the remaining members of Falungong, who had shown the extent of their organization earlier that year with massive sit-down demonstrations outside CCP headquarters in Beijing. Again these laws do not alter anything in the 1982 pronouncements, but rather are a nuancing or reemphasis of longstanding policies in response to a perceived crisis. The vague definitions of “cult” and the difficulty of using these criteria to effect a clear distinction between “cult” and “true religion” are the same ambiguities which have plagued the CCP’s religion/superstition dichotomy for years. These new texts, then, are not theoretically significant, but practically, in terms of the actions they have both justified retroactively and caused proactively in recent years, these documents are key to understanding recent events in China and the reasons for inflamed U.S. criticism.

Most of the criteria mentioned in government documents trying to describe or define “cult” or “evil cult” are in fact based on the unchanging policies against superstition: cults “spread superstitious and heterodox beliefs,” “deceive the people,” and “engage in disturbing social order in an organized manner that brings injury to the lives and properties of the citizens.”63 The phrase “in an organized manner” seems to be specifically directed at the Falungong demonstrations rather than the fortunetellers, exorcists, and geomancers who are the usual targets of anti-superstition campaigns. One new aspect also of the definition, which is apparently drawn from (at least the CCP’s understanding of) Falungong leader Li Hongzhi’s or his followers’ claims, is that cults
are organizations which “deify their leaders.” As with Document 19 and all the other
documents we are dealing with, however, the clear and simple purpose of these
documents is to maintain the long-term goal of centralized government control of
religious activities.

Related to the anti-cult laws of 1999, a damning set of “secret documents” was
recently smuggled out of China and published in 2002. These alleged internal public
security memos describe procedures for identifying cultic groups, provide a partial list of
the groups already so designated, and suggest that brutal suppression of these groups
might sometimes be applied. There are affidavits appended from Chinese Christians who
allegedly suffered rape and torture at the hands of Public Security Bureau (PSB) agents.
The claims are horrifying and hard to read, but, even if these texts are genuine, the
abhorrent aspects of these texts and of the anti-cult movement are complicated by certain
other facts: 1) most Chinese Christians have no love for the Falungong; 2) they are
frankly glad for government assistance in putting down a cult like Eastern Lightning,
which is described in the secret documents and which has itself committed acts of
violence against Christians; and 3) even many of the “Christians” who are being
persecuted under this law are groups whose orthodoxy is in question among Christian
groups worldwide. The Shouters discussed in chapter one and some of their offshoots are
mentioned, and they are relatively orthodox compared to other groups included in the
secret lists.

In general, then, it seems that the CCP and Chinese Christians might agree in a
good percentage of the cases about the application of a definition of “evil cult.” So while
the anti-cult laws of 1999 are a serious issue for religious freedom in general, it is not
clear that they do very much to alter the status quo for Christians in particular. The official church seems largely unaffected and the house-church movement has never been safe from charges that their activities are a threat to the powers-that-be, for their simple refusal to join the registered-church movement. It is likely, however, that the anti-cult movement, though indicating no real shift in underpinning theory or surface policy toward Christians, has fanned flames of suspicion in places where previously house churches were left alone and has led to more zealous application of old registration laws.\textsuperscript{65}

The previous trend toward regulation emerged out of the 1989 crisis and the first years of Jiang Zemin’s administration. The final and most recent set of religious policy documents to be discussed here emerges out of the 1999 crisis and the final years before Jiang’s recent retirement. In December 2001, at a special session concerning religious policy called by Jiang, the soon-to-retire President again called for tighter ("strengthened") state control over religion. The “new” policy was written into a volume by the RAB, Religious Issues and Religious Policy in China, and summarized in a January 2003 speech by Premier Zhu Rongji.\textsuperscript{66} The only interesting shift of significance to be found here is a possible (though vague) admission by the CCP that religion may have a permanent place in society rather than being a long-term, but slowly dying, phenomenon. Nothing else in all these pages indicates a change worth noting here, and even that potentially exciting shift in theory shows no immediate signs of leading to a policy shift. After all, the “long-term” status of the religious question was already, for all intents and purposes, being treated as a permanent question.
The most exciting news for the future of religious freedom in China is the rumored drafting of a comprehensive “Chinese Law on Religion” by members of a major Beijing think-tank. Such legislation, if approved by the CCP, could replace all the dictatorial mountaintop commandments of the past decade and give people of faith greater legal recourse against abuses of power. Even if rejected, such a draft law could at least bring the government to the table for future discussions about how to implement religious freedom in China in a way that would be acceptable to all parties.\textsuperscript{67}

\section*{From Text to Narrative Context}

Despite appearing at times to be brutally inconsistent and arbitrary in its interpretation, China’s religion policy is actually carefully thought through and grounded in Marxist theory as well as in Chinese national narratives. While it does grow from a soil of Marxist articles of faith, the policy emerges from the seeds of China’s history and culture; it does not spring, as the common American anti-Red narrative would have it, simply out of “evil Communist philosophy,” nor out of a corrupt and decadent oligarchy that cares nothing for its people or its nation. The policy grows out of a national narrative that, if Westerners could absorb it, might go some way toward humanizing China’s leadership and explaining their manner of governance, though it would almost certainly not recommend or excuse all the choices they have made in the exercise of their power. A close scrutiny of the U.S. national narratives, by contrast, while revealing much that is noble in their character, probably goes some way toward justifying at least some of the CCP’s fears about losing control of its people through foreign interference.
The U.S. and Chinese political documents described above are clearly not narratives in and of themselves. They are not the “tales governments tell,” but the narrative foundations are clear and will be demonstrated below. As noted in chapter one, Ricoeur, Bruner, and others have demonstrated that individual human lives and broader human histories are intimately connected to narrative. Therefore every text produced by humans, even if not narrative in itself, must not be too far removed from narrative. The U.S. State Department reports contain many small narratives, allegedly nonfiction, about instances of religious persecution. These reports, however, focused as they are on a foreign nation, tend to disguise the American narratives that are the setting for their criticisms of China. The uniquely American perspective is confessed somewhat in the Preface and Introduction to the State Department documents, but their universality is largely taken for granted and treated as Truth, rather than as one nation’s biased viewpoint. The Chinese documents contain almost no concrete smaller narratives and spend most of their time making broad abstract theoretical claims or describing highly specific regulations. But the reader has little difficulty deciphering the national narratives in the background of some of these texts. In particular, the key text, Document 19, begins with several paragraphs of foregrounded historical narrative describing the entry of religion into China and the current situation. Document 19 also lays out the Marxist narrative of religion, from its inception in the fears and superstitions of primitive people, through its cooption and abuse by unscrupulous “oppressor classes,” on to its predicted decline and disappearance under Socialism and Communism. These national and nationalist narratives that governments adopt as their own, the narratives made explicit in China’s Document 19 and the narratives hidden behind the State Department reports, are
the tales governments tell, and they are tales that we all know very well, whether consciously or unconsciously.

What We Share: The Central National Meta-narrative

The texts above apparently document a history of wide divergence between the two nations, but while the differences are real, they actually begin with a broad narrative common ground. Homi Bhabha opens the edited volume *Nation and Narration* with a discussion of the “nationalist discourses” which “attempt [. . .] persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation.”68 The U.S. and China, these two nations and perhaps all nations, exist first and most basically in the minds of their peoples as evolutionary narratives. In simple outline form: We the people have emerged out of some gruesome miasma of the past; we rise and stand on our own two feet; and we continue to march boldly and unified into the future. We all know, when we think on it, that there is actually nothing this simple about history. We know, or can discover with a little effort, all the particularities and complexities of our national circumstances. We often wonder how unified we are and if such a vast array of peoples can be summarized helpfully by the word “American” or “Chinese.” U.S. citizens are able to debate the viability of the Republican experiment in the U.S., and Chinese citizens are able to debate the probable lifespan of the Chinese Socialist state in its present authoritarian form. Nevertheless, like animal instinct behind higher intellect, like reflex, we can discern the unconscious influence of the simple nationalistic stories that we hear throughout our lives and that the majority of us probably
want to, and tend to, believe. The people of the United States of America broke away from the British Empire with righteous cause, cast off its shackles, and fulfilled their destiny by achieving national self-determination and expanding their borders from sea to sea. The historical inevitability of America’s current exalted position in the world seems manifest, and despite the lessons of history that teach the mortality of all empires (including so recent and familiar an example as that of the myriad abandoned colonies of America’s own former rulers), Americans cannot quite or do not often bother to imagine a future without the U.S.A. in a leadership position in the world. Such is the grip that national meta-narrative holds over the blind hubris of a young and powerful nation.

The Chinese, too, are no gullible fools. They understand quite well the vicissitudes of history—understand them, quite possibly, far better than Americans do—and yet they often rehearse and feel inclined to accept an optimistic national narrative similar to that of the Americans. The “New China” also arose, as Marxist theory explicitly states, out of historical inevitability, not unlike a materialist version of the U.S. “manifest destiny.” The “New China” also arose out of a great struggle with imperialist and feudalist powers. When Chairman Mao stood before his new nation on Tiananmen Gate on October 1, 1949, and proclaimed “China has stood up!” he was announcing China’s independence and the inauguration of a new story very similar to that begun across the ocean on or around July 4, 1776. After many more difficulties, the story continues, the New China has emerged, battle-scarred but undeterred, a growing international power with perhaps even more room than the U.S. for arrogance, since the U.S. may be at its peak while China is undoubtedly still growing. China’s manifest destiny includes only a little more territory for itself, but a lot more time than has the
“strategic competitor” across the pond. The 21st century has been called “the Chinese century,” and not only by the Chinese. All nations probably tell some version of these, what Hayden White would term “comedic,” tales of rising national fortunes. These two nations happen to be perhaps the only two in the world today in a position to tell narratives in which this optimism ends (or continues) in some form of world conquest. They name even the centuries after themselves.

If the U.S. and China hold in common a certain bildungsroman plot of national development, the plots each uses to tell the story of the other are also shared property. In chapter one we looked at Paul Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative to describe the interplay if not identification between history and fiction. Ricoeur makes extensive use in that book of Hayden White’s Metahistory. Specifically, White’s terminology of “emplotment” might be helpful at this juncture. For White, a plot lies somewhere between a story and an argument; it is itself not a full narrative, but rather a narrative coat hanger that could as easily be described by its shape and function through an expositional argument as it could be illustrated by hanging the clothes of a narrative over it. What we have been calling the Marxist “meta-narrative” that controls the CCP’s narrative of religious history in China is very similar to a “plot” in White’s terminology. White enumerates four “modes of emplotment,” following Northrop Frye’s system in Anatomy of Criticism—Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire—and claims that written histories are all emplotted according to these meta-narrative structures in the same way fictional literature is. This is his description of Romance and Satire:

The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it—the sort of drama associated with the Grail legend or the story of the resurrection of Christ
in Christian mythology. It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the fall. The archetypal theme of Satire is the precise opposite of this Romantic drama of redemption; it is, in fact, a drama of diremption, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitively the dark force of death, which is man’s unremitting enemy.\textsuperscript{71}

The nationalist discourses of the U.S. and China, and perhaps those of all successful countries, are Romantic Comedies in the Frye/White sense of the phrase. The plot or meta-narrative behind the documents above is a plot—on both the Chinese side and the U.S.—of national transcendence and triumph over adversity. The stories of the Other, by contrast (China’s stories of the U.S. and of religion and U.S. stories of China), are stretched across the tentpoles of the satirical and tragic persuasion. Each nation is triumphing over impersonal obstacles, but also over something else, over the Other. The Other stumbles and falls under the dominant nation’s feet because of some particular hubristic failing or blindness.

These commonalities in national narratives appear in the documents above as a confident and stubborn belief in each nation’s own correctness and in the need for the Other to reform itself. China tells a story of religion in quantifiable decline; the U.S. tells a story of the CCP in moral decline and of the religion (with which many in the U.S. identify the nation) on the rise. The common narrative ground is unfortunately not a basis for easy compromise; rather than a shared narrative vocabulary, the two nations share narrative weaponry in a cold-war, rhetorical arms race. The shared narrative territory provides no immediate hope of reconciliation, any more than do the points at which the stories diverge.
The U.S. Narratives: Past, Present, and Future

We turn now to some of the particularities of the U.S. national narrative situation and look at how these peculiar mythologies of the past, present, and future have determined the tone and content of the government documents above. The U.S. is still working largely from a Christian meta-narrative foundation. This entails a firm belief in universal and internationally translatable values and a missionary impulse to propagate these ideals, this American Way. Part of what many would and do call American arrogance emerges out of a history of idealistic religious belief in absolutes and a peculiarly American, because Puritan, faith in a chosenness that includes the right to speak about and impose those absolute values on others. Anders Stephanson’s Manifest Destiny is a helpful and recent summary of these attitudes and their sources.\(^\text{72}\) The apparent success of the American Way in terms of national wealth and prominence has given force to this national meta-narrative, particularly in the post-WWII era. But survival and success are relative concepts; Stephanson provides ample evidence that for Americans to believe in this continent’s special place in the world did not even require the international recognition the U.S. has today. World conquest—under the most benevolent of U.S. rules, of course—was part of the national rhetoric from the earliest days of the Republic. Stephanson quotes a poem by David Humphreys written in the years just after the Revolutionary War:

> All former empires rose, the work of guilt,  
> On conquest, blood, or usurpation built:  
> But we, taught wisdom by their woes and crimes,  
> Fraught with their lore, and born to better times;  
> Our constitution form’d on freedom’s base,  
> Which all the blessings of all lands embrace;
Embrace humanity’s extended cause,  
A world of our empire, for a world of our laws [. . .].\textsuperscript{73}

The assumptions the U.S. carries into its relationship with China—that the American systems of religious freedom should be welcomed by all because they should work well for the entire world—are not new and not even a mere half-century old, but rather are deeply set in the national consciousness. America’s national plot is part imperialist “White Man’s Burden” (Kipling wrote the poem for Americans, after all),\textsuperscript{74} part Great Awakening evangelism, and part expansionist Manifest Destiny. All these impulses are neatly compatible, easily combined into one plot, and highly consonant with a narcissistic human individual instinct that says, “I’m OK. You need to change.” Because of this, the U.S. national narrative is readily incorporated into the attitudes of the individual citizen, and easily passed on and propped up.

The U.S. policy statements on religious freedom, in addition to being made up of dozens of micronarratives, reflect in their structure and rhetoric this larger national plot of universal rightness and American destiny. The following words of President George W. Bush are quoted in the introduction to one of the most recent annual State Department Reports on International Religious Freedom (2003): “It is not an accident that the freedom of religion is one of the central freedoms in our Bill of Rights. It is the first freedom of the human soul—the right to speak the words that God places in our mouths. We must stand for that freedom in our country. We must speak for that freedom in the world.”\textsuperscript{75} We hear here, explicitly or implicitly, the old U.S. conflation of religion and politics in a statement intended to show that they are separate. The traditional twin American faiths in theism, if not Christianity, and democracy are intertwined and both must be propagated. Americans, in this viewpoint, are speaking for freedom throughout
the world, not only in the U.S., and God Himself is speaking these words through their mouths. The special position of the U.S. as God’s mouthpiece, God’s prophetic instrument on this earth, is a plot element as old as the nation itself. Violators of religious freedom have earned at least America’s censure, and perhaps the sword.

The granting of religious freedom by previously repressive governments, likewise, is seen to be equivalent to the spread of American-style republican democracy. This assumption was made clear by the same President Bush in the speech he gave in Beijing, in which he echoed the following language from the 2001 report:

A commitment to the inviolable and universal dignity of the human person is at the core of U.S. human rights policy abroad, including the policy of advocating religious freedom. Governments that protect religious freedom for all their citizens are more likely to protect the other fundamental human rights. Encouraging stable, healthy democracies is a vital national interest of the United States.76

The spread of religious freedom is the same as the spread of democracy, according to the U.S. narrative plot. We hear this assumption again in the following post-September 11 freedom of religion report introduction:

Promoting democratic governance is and will remain the best way to ensure protection of human rights. The United States recognizes that a world composed of democracies will better protect our long-term national security than a world of authoritarian or chaotic regimes. A democratic form of government fosters the rule of law, open markets, more prosperous economies and better-educated citizens and ultimately a more humane, peaceful and predictable world.77

The chicken/egg dilemma appears again here. It is unclear whether religious freedom can come before democracy, but it is clear that the U.S. desires both for China.

Based on these texts, it seems disingenuous for the U.S. to pretend a friendly and equal relationship with the CCP-led Chinese government. Despite a surface demeanor of respect for long-term CCP authority, according to the U.S. narrative plot clearly the push
for “religious freedom” is, if only in part, code for “regime change,” though perhaps a more gradual one than has occurred elsewhere. Based on its narratives of the past and present, the U.S. narrative of the future includes a Chinese government that looks very different from the authoritarian regime of today. It is too easy to characterize the CCP as repressive and paranoid, as foolish for believing a flourishing and unrestricted religious culture in China would not be an unqualified good for the nation, or for believing that foreign elements are using religion as a ploy to subvert the government. Given these U.S. texts past and present, there can be no doubt that the U.S. actually does hope to subvert CCP control by encouraging religious freedom. Because of this national narrative, those in the U.S. generally take for granted that liberal human rights policies and multi-party democratic systems go hand in hand. President Bush’s Beijing speech, like the texts of the reports above, is all about subversion and U.S.-style reform:

Life in America shows that liberty, paired with law, is not to be feared. In a free society, diversity is not disorder. Debate is not strife. And dissent is not revolution. A free society trusts its citizens to seek greatness in themselves and their country [. . .]. Change is coming. China is already having secret ballot and competitive elections at the local level. Nearly twenty years ago, Deng Xiaoping said that China would eventually expand democratic elections all the way to the national level and I look forward to that day. 78

Is Bush trying to mold his Chinese student audience into American forms with this speech? Is he evangelizing for democracy against the CCP’s status quo? That would be a fair interpretation of the speech. Officially spoken and reiterated U.S. policy is that of “one China” and of cooperation with the CCP in Beijing, but the underlying American narratives tell a slightly different story. Quite apart from the question of U.S. correctness or incorrectness, their good intentions or their possible evil counterrevolutionary plans, the contemporary U.S. texts on religious freedom in China are, for better or worse,
participating in a “plot,” the basic American narrative of conforming the world to our own standards, a plot to change China.

The older U.S. national narrative elements of manifest destiny play their part in this vision of the future world, but the specifically twentieth-century narratives about and against Communism are also of great consequence to our emplotment of U.S./China relations and our respective futures. In recent history, the threat of Communism has been the primary obstacle to the spread of the American dream overseas. In the twentieth century, the U.S. responded to Communism very much as the CCP has responded to religion. In U.S. narratives, as in Communist propaganda narratives against Falungong, Communism became a kind of evil cult, a sect whose teaching was known to be false and harmful, but against which America seemed strangely powerless. The CCP acknowledged that it must take a long-term containment strategy toward religion; they cannot eradicate it quickly, but they can hopefully control it, slow its growth, encourage its obsolescence. Likewise the U.S. looked on somewhat pessimistically as masses of people, entire nations, fell under the sway of the Communism America was trying to contain within acceptable bounds.

During the Cold War with the Soviet Union, Americans told themselves surprisingly dark and fruitless Duck-and-Cover stories of preparedness. American confidence in democratic world domination was at low ebb for many years. The U.S. tried to keep the faith strong throughout the wars in Korea and Vietnam by emplotting these conflicts into a theory of the domino effect. The U.S. was the heroic Dutch boy with one finger in the dyke holding back very real and dangerous floodwaters of Communist aggression. But this, though Romantic and heroic, is a dark and defensive
plot, an admission that Communism is oddly appealing in the disadvantaged Third World and that the U.S., having little more going than force of arms to push back the hordes, seemed to be powerless to convince by reason or win over the hearts of these people. The American dream of “A world of our empire,” in Humphreys’s phrase, had come up against a worthy foe, and America’s popular narratives for many years reflected the nation’s own uncertainty, even negativity, about the end of this Cold War narrative, this face-off of two giants, “the American way” vs. “godless Communism.” Films played out the nuclear holocaust endings with Dr. Strangelove and Failsafe. Communist infiltration and invasion endings to the story were imaginatively worked out in Invasion of the Body Snatchers and Night of the Living Dead. Both of these latter fantasies have often been read as workings-out of our Cold War-era nightmares, and both have notably unhappy endings. In neither film is there any hope of saving the people who have already been “changed.” The only hope for the characters is to keep themselves and their loved ones safe from the “pod people” or the zombies and possibly to keep the mysterious and incurable plague from spreading to other areas. It is no wonder these narratives seem like allegories for the paranoid internal purges and foreign containment policies of the 1950s and 1960s.

These two genres persisted well into the 1980s: witness The Day After for the “mutual assured destruction” genre and Red Dawn for the “Russians are coming” genre. President Reagan, however, at what turned out to be the tail end of the Cold War, revived some of the nation’s confidence and tough-talking cowboy-movie American fantasies and, by the end of the decade the U.S. once again seemed justified in reviving the myths. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union soon after,
and despite the Tiananmen Square crackdown and the refusal of Chinese communism to go quietly, the U.S. has reverted largely to its post-Revolutionary triumphalism about its system of government. The U.S. “won the Cold War,” outlasted the enemy, and remains the sole superpower, in prime position to encourage what appears inevitable: the decay and disappearance of Communism and rise of democracy. Americans no longer fear the falling Communist domino that will knock down all the others. Now they look for the reverse domino effect. They wait for the flag of democracy to be hoisted soon over capital buildings all over the world; they hope that Iraq will be a “model democracy” for the Middle East, a key domino in that part of the world’s future.

Where does Beijing fit in the American plot of democratic dominoes and the triumph of truth, justice, and the American Way? Quite simply, the CCP will either gradually conform itself to international standards on issues like religious freedom and other human rights, or the CCP will be replaced by some group in China more fully committed to freedom and democracy and who will be certain to receive U.S. support in their efforts. At the moment, gradual reform in China through engagement seems to be what all sides want. China is neither powerful enough nor any longer so isolated as to become another dark Doppelgänger as the USSR had been. The Chinese are for the moment a cautious friend, and the Americans a critical and hopeful ally. This is particularly true since September 11, 2001. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, any tensions with China have taken a back seat to the war against the new world threat to (from the U.S. standpoint) freedom and democracy and (from the Chinese standpoint) legitimate governments around the world from Islamist extremists and other terrorists. China has even become a helpful negotiating partner with North
Korea. This easement might account for some of the lighter rhetoric in certain phrases in the religious freedom criticism (“continued to be poor” instead of “worsened”). But the fact remains, from the U.S. perspective improved relations with China are predicated on an optimistic narrative in which the U.S. will triumph, in which the CCP will change or is already changing to become less authoritarian and more like the U.S., while the U.S. is not changing at all.

Without slighting the positive achievements of the U.S. or the honorable intentions of those who truly care about the wellbeing of those among the Chinese people who are being mistreated by their government, we should be clear-minded about the plot or meta-narrative in the background of these U.S. documents. It is a meta-narrative whose setting is a world of absolute rights and wrongs, and whose main character is liable to confuse the will of God with the will of the U.S. The U.S. does not have a “plot” to take over the world in the sense of a hidden stratagem, and yet the plot of the nation, in White’s sense of the word, is a plot in which the world, China included, will change to conform to U.S. systems, political and moral. Only by keeping our ears open to alternate narratives can we start on, in Ricoeurian language, “the journey to self-hood [. . .] by receiving new ways of being.”

The Chinese Narratives: Past, Present, and Future

In many ways, China’s narrative of progress for itself is very similar to what the U.S. hopes for China. As Bush’s appropriation of Deng Xiaoping’s words reveals, the CCP also touts democracy, and it always has. Communism and democracy are contradictory only in the U.S. meta-narrative, not in the Marxist or Chinese meta-
narratives. In practice, both the Soviet Union and China have allowed only very limited public participation in government and still the theoretical term for this extremely cautious and stunted democracy—“democratic centralism”—is used to describe the current situation, but as Deng and others have claimed, there are hopes, even plans, for sweeping, if slow, democratic reform. Chinese newspapers frequently advertise the successes of the latest experiments in local elections. Also like the U.S., China has cultivated a heroic narrative around itself and its glorious future, and the CCP, like the U.S., ties religious freedom to national stability and prosperity. The major difference between the U.S. plot for itself and China and the Chinese plot concerning itself and the U.S. is that while the plot of U.S. nationalism over the past centuries has been absorptive and expansive, the Chinese nationalistic meta-narrative has been defensive and oppositional; the U.S. narrative is an arrogant “You are just like me” or “You should be just like me” narrative, the Chinese narrative is an insecure “We don’t need you. You can’t change us” narrative. The U.S. narrative is focused on the U.S. and the Chinese narrative also tends to be focused on the U.S., on opposing the outside as much or more than building up the inside. The Chinese plot is largely built on “anti’s”: anti-imperialism, anti-traditionalism, anti-feudalism.

The Chinese national narrative is based, like that of the U.S., on patriotic nationalism, but while the U.S. nationalism is founded on a triumphalism going back to the Puritans and the Revolutionary War, a triumphalism only slowed but not stopped by the Cold War and the war in Vietnam, Chinese nationalism is still haunted by the ghosts of defeat and humiliation. U.S. nationalist rhetoric is still based on the confident Declaration of Independence in its positive assertions, while the list of specific anti-
British complaints is largely forgotten. Chinese nationalist rhetoric is likewise based on the remarkable Communist achievement of unifying China in 1949, but then as now the victory was partly written into the negative rhetorical context of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. Now that there is serious doubt as to the viability of the traditional positive rhetoric of “socialist construction,” the negative rhetoric blaming foreign powers and influences for the ills of society is frequently trotted out to displace potential anger among the people.

The Chinese emplotment of its recent history, based as it is on Marxist materialist theory, on anti-foreign sentiment, and on the corresponding desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency, proves a triple threat to religion, particularly to Christianity. First, in the Marxist view of history as retold in the first few pages of Document 19, religion is at its root superstition, born out of primitive fear and fostered by “oppressor classes” as a means of controlling the people, of making them content with their miserable lives spent in the service of exploitative greed. In China’s national narrative, the classes that made improper use of religion have been eradicated and the means to educate the people out of their ancient and stubborn beliefs—i.e., the final truth of historical materialism—are available. It is only a matter of time now before religion will die. The last stage, this third act of the drama, may be long, but religion is clearly in its decline.

Second, Christianity has a special and unfortunate place in the Chinese national narrative, for it is not only tied to old feudal ways and the outdated and exploitative class system the CCP conquered; Christianity is also linked directly to national humiliation at the hands of foreign powers. Section II of Document 19, describing “The Religions of China,” twice singles out the Christian sects for special treatment. “There are many
religions in China. Buddhism has a history of nearly 2,000 years in China, Daoism one of over 1,700 years, and Islam over 1,300 years, while Roman Catholicism and Protestantism achieved most of their development following the Opium Wars. The humiliating Opium Wars are mentioned here significantly, for they are a touchstone of modern Chinese nationalism. They and the unequal treaties that came out of them are illustrative to Chinese, familiar from birth with this plot, of the evils of foreign imperialism, an evil eradicated in the Liberation of 1949, but still a lingering threat in the “guise of religion.” Later on the same page the connection between Christianity and the evils of imperialism is made in less oblique fashion: “Within China, the Buddhist, Daoist, and Islamic leaderships were mainly controlled by the feudal landowners, feudal lords, and reactionary warlords, as well as the bureaucratic capitalistic class. The later foreign colonialist and imperialist forces mainly controlled the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.”

Thirdly and directly related to the latter point, the Chinese national and nationalist narratives depend on the glorification of that freedom achieved by Mao and others in 1949 and on a continuing sense of complete self-determination, a complete absence of outside interference in China’s internal affairs; this latter is a phrase varieties of which are often repeated when the U.S. complains through the UN or to China directly concerning issues like Tibet or religious freedom. A speech translated and reprinted in MacInnis titled “Concerning Questions about Control of Religious Organizations and Affairs by Outside Forces” nicely summarizes this defiant national stance toward the outside world: “There are historical reasons for bringing this up [the matter of China’s religious affairs being free from foreign interference], as well as current reasons. It is
based on our country’s policy of absolute independence and selfhood toward the outside, and our nation’s history of over 100 years of oppression by foreign imperialism.\textsuperscript{84} Any religion in China is considered a thing out of the weak feudal past, but Christianity is particularly suspect. Setting aside for the moment, as the CCP tends to do, any earlier Christian presence in China, it was Christianity that came on the same ships as the opium, and it was Christian missionaries who landed on Chinese territory on the same boats as foreign soldiers in the fierce nineteenth-century wars that weakened China and put it under the thumb of foreign powers. The Chinese narrative since the Opium Wars has been a narrative of “What can China do for itself without foreign aid or intervention?”

This nationalist narrative is very much controlled and encouraged by the CCP, and therefore it may seem fragile by comparison to the U.S. national narratives especially now that by some accounts Marxist theory is more for show than an actual article of faith. Ellis Joffe wrote in 1997 that “[Marxist] ideology is widely disregarded by cadres and people alike, and the prevalent attitude toward it is cynicism.”\textsuperscript{85} However, two points must be made in this regard. First, whether or not Marxism is actually a “dead letter” in China as Joffe claims, it shows no sign of disappearing as an essential form of discourse in the People’s Republic. We should first wonder if Joffe is correct in his assessment, since the Chinese leadership and their media organs show no sign, eight years since Joffe wrote, of giving up this rhetorical faith in which they supposedly no longer believe. And even if Joffe is correct, which if one avoids the Party newspapers and political speeches is certainly the impression one can get in China these days, he himself explains that this orthodoxy is not easily thrown away, linked inextricably as it is to the great “anti” victories of 1949 Liberation. If Marxist theory were suddenly discredited, the CCP and its
claims to the Mandate of Heaven, its claims to be the indispensable and continuing unifier and savior of China from those old imperialist designs, would soon follow. As with all reforms in China today, rhetorical reform, if it is to be done, will have to be done slowly.

Second, although the CCP has incorporated anti-imperialist materialism into its Chinese Marxist meta-narrative in a way that makes them perilously inseparable, we should not forget that the Communist Party did not invent the anti-foreign nationalism that persists in modern China, any more than it invented government control of religion. The anti-foreign, anti-imperialist part of the narrative is not the cynical creation of an insecure leadership, but a very real independent force in China. Even if the CCP falls and the Marxist meta-narrative is forgotten, that anti-imperialist part of the nationalist meta-narrative will not pass away quickly. Even among students who have no great love for the CCP and no great faith in Marxist theory, the instinct to stand by the Party in opposition to the U.S. in times of crisis is strong. Despite U.S. meta-narratives that saw the 1989 demonstrations as a confirmation that the Chinese people were more American than they were Red, we have seen recently, after the embassy bombing in 1999 and the spy plane incident in 2001, that the majority of Chinese people, when forced to decide between a free but hegemonic U.S. and a repressive but Chinese leadership, find the choice a simple one.

Conflicting Ends

So the teloi, the ends, of the two national narratives are in clear conflict. Each country’s estimation of the future puts itself at the top of the heap politically and
economically; if the twentieth century was the “American Century,” China imagines itself as heir to the crown in the Chinese twenty-first. The U.S. cannot but imagine itself as holding the title for many years to come, with a transformed China acting as a younger brother or at best a slightly less senior “strategic partner.” China continues to imagine, or claim to imagine, a Marxist utopia where religion and capitalist hegemony are humbled if not eradicated. The U.S. continues to imagine—and there is no doubt as to the sincerity of this faith—a future world of democracy and market capitalism, a world in which Marxism finally completes its decline and disappears with a bang or a whimper. These divergent plots will control many aspects of the narratives in the following chapters, and will prove a special challenge to those who live in the border regions, those areas where these two plots cannot be kept comfortably apart but must find a common ground of compromise if we are to live coherent lives.

Conclusion: The Death of the National Narrative?

Many cultural critics in recent years, Homi Bhabha being only the most famous among them, have questioned the value and efficacy of these national narratives. In a globalizing world, how much longer can these stories, whose primary purpose seems to be to draw lines in the sand and identify enemies, survive? It is Bhabha’s desire to go far beyond these simple nationalist discourses to discover what he believes are the narrative futures of nations, not the powerful and insistent nationalist meta-narratives, but the narratives of the “in-between spaces.”86 Bhabha contends that part of the generally twentieth-century and specifically Derridean revolution, which broke down centers of significance in language, is that narrative centers also now cannot hold. Centers of
nationalist discourse break down and disperse outward to rapidly multiplying boundary regions. The points of contact between nations are growing exponentially; the borders—which were always imaginary, even when marked clearly on paper by cartographers—grow long and diffuse. These narrative centers, which by force and through our own collaboration have exercised such hegemonic power, are being replaced by diverse “narrative positions between cultures and nations, theories and texts, the politics, the poetic, and the painterly, the past and the present.” And the religious, we will add here and trust Bhabha would have no objection, for this study will soon leave these centers of nationalist discourse behind and move to the narrative border regions of international religion.

However, we must, as Bhabha does, begin with the centers, and we must not underestimate their continuing, possibly long-enduring, influence over those who know them and need them. Bhabha expresses his faith that it is in the interstitial narratives that all the work gets done now, that it is the “agency of ambivalent narrative that holds culture at its most productive position” as opposed to the stagnant reiterations of nationalist orthodoxies. We can see, especially in the Chinese documents’ sweaty and unsatisfactory struggles to contend with the “religious question” and to make these border narratives conform to state doctrine, that the narratives of religion are part of the vanguard of this revolution in nationalist orthodoxy of which Bhabha speaks. Philip Jenkins confirms this in The Next Christendom when he states that nationalist narratives, especially secular ones, will need to be revised if they are to survive: “the international politics of the coming decades are likely to revolve around interfaith conflict, above all, the clash between Christianity and Islam.” The narratives discussed in this chapter may
indeed be dying. If so, this and parts of the chapters which follow will be an extended
description of a death rattle. But the old narrative emperors have some life yet in them,
for these narratives of self-justification and imagined immortality are to a nation what our
own youthful delusions are to the individual. These national centers, like the individual
narrative center, like the religious narrative, are proving highly resilient. Living and
writing at the borders is useful, essential even, in comparative projects such as this, but
the magnetic draw of the still-weighty centers should not be easily dismissed in the
service of some still-vague replacement meta-narrative of international or human
evolutionary progress.
Notes


4 David Aikman, Jesus in Beijing (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2003) 89.


Why does the Chinese government overreact? Thomas E. Quigley suggests that the hardliners in the government who win these debates over the moderates overreact “as a smokescreen to cover over the existing divisions within the Party” (Roundtable Before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, March 25, 2002, p. 4). Ian Buruma describes this tendency as a paranoid panic-mode. Referring to the same sort of overreaction in response to the Falungong “crisis” of 1999, he writes, “Neither a history of peasant messiahs nor the scale and efficiency of the Falun Gong organization entirely explains the panicked reaction of the Chinese government in 1999. It is something more like the paranoia of seventeenth-century Japanese shoguns, or that of the current Chinese government, for that matter, about Christianity” (Bad Elements 281-82).

9 See Marlon Brando in The Wild One for a good example.


The paragraph does go on to say that groups like Falungong, often described as a Buddhist/Taoist hybrid, are clearly exceptions to this rule of tolerance.


These lines are taken from the previous year’s report (published 2004), but nearly identical passages appear in the most recent report.


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28 Spence 84.


30 MacInnis 7. (MacInnis’s anthology is used frequently in this chapter. In most cases, the original Chinese text, not included in MacInnis, will also not be included in my text. Words taken directly from primary Chinese-language sources, translations done by myself, and instances where matters of translation are significant will include the Chinese text printed first and translation after.)

31 “Communist Party Members Must Adhere to Atheism” (People’s Daily, 19 March 1982), in MacInnis 419.

33 Spence 75-86.

34 “Religion and Feudal Superstition” (People’s Daily, 15 March 1979), in MacInnis 34.

35 Qiao Liansheng, “Concerning Questions about Control of Religious Organizations and Affairs by Outside Forces” (The Catholic Church in China, No.7, 1983), in MacInnis 44.


40 “Document 19” 11.


42 “Document 19” 11.


45 “Document 19” 15.

46 Zhang Sui, Religion Yesterday and Today, trans. Tam Waiyi and Donald MacInnis, in MacInnis 100.

47 “Document 19” 15.
The extent of the practical influence of the TSPM and the CCC over relatively conservative Chinese Christian clergy has been called into question, however, particularly after the apparent failure of their Theological Construction Campaign in the late 1990s. See Jason Kindopp, “Fragmented yet Defiant: Protestant Resilience under Chinese Communist Party Rule,” in Kindopp 131-32.

Mickey Spiegel, “Control and Containment in the Reform Era,” in Kindopp 44.

This information comes from a May 19, 2004, conversation with Liu Peng, a well-placed professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, a government think-tank. The distinction between “law” and State Council “pronouncements” is also hinted at in Spiegel’s essay (Spiegel 44).
The translations of these two documents are mine, made from photographs I took of posted regulation boards outside a church in Hunan.

This language can be found in many places. Descriptions and definitions of an “evil cult” and rationale for Falungong being included in that category were and are readily available in open news sources. Even though these ideas are not classified or secret in any way, I am drawing the quotes in this paragraph from the collection of secret documents described in the text above and cited here. See Li Shixiong and Fu Xiqiu, eds., “Religion and National Security in China: Secret Documents from China’s Security Sector” (February 11, 2002) 19. Online at <http://www.opendoors.org.au/assets/fis/Secret_Chinese_Documents.doc>.

Li and Fu.

“The party-state’s campaign to exterminate the Falungong has also spilled over to other forms of unauthorized religion, including house churches” (Kindopp 140).


This material is also gleaned from the May 19 conversation with Liu Peng.

It is true, of course, that nationalistic Chinese narratives, including those propagated by the CCP in their “New China” era, do not begin exclusively in 1949, but rather make various uses of all ages of Chinese history. However, the comparison between the short narrative history of the U.S. and the abbreviated narrative of the “New China” (from 1949) is appropriate here, particularly since, whatever use the CCP may make of Chinese history before 1949, this new post-Liberation era is, as in the U.S., described as a decisive break from an Imperial past and as the next necessary stage in a new linear (arguably Western), not cyclical, view of history.


Hayden White, Metahistory (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973) 8-9.


Stephanson 19.

“The Englishman wrote it explicitly in order to urge Americans to take on the ‘burdens’ of civilization in the Philippines” (Stephanson 88).


82 “Document 19” 11.

83 “Document 19” 11.

84 Qiao Liansheng, “Concerning Questions about Control of Religious Organizations and Affairs by Outside Forces,” trans. Donald MacInnis, in MacInnis 42.

85 Ellis Joffe, “Ruling China After Deng,” in Schell 144.

86 Bhabha 4.

87 Bhabha 4.

88 Bhabha 3.

Chapter Three
Missionary Narratives from China

“The Christian faith,” says David J. Bosch, “is intrinsically missionary.”¹ If this be the case, then missionary narratives should have much to tell us about Christianity everywhere and at all times, not least in modern and contemporary China. The New Testament Gospel According to Luke relates what is arguably the very early advent of Christian missions, with two parallel narratives of “sending out” in successive chapters. Jesus first commissions his inner circle of twelve apostles (the word itself means “one who is sent out”) to “preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (9:2); and in the next chapter he exhorts a larger group of 72 of his followers to go forth ahead of him to various towns, apparently to pave the way for Jesus’s own pastoral visits (10:1).² Most Christians would probably point to the writings of the apostle Matthew as the clearest biblical mandate that today’s faithful believers must also be missionaries. At the end of his Gospel, the tax-collector-turned-disciple records what seems to be the final command of Jesus before the Savior is taken up into heaven: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (27:19). Several Bible scholars over the past 50 years have argued for a more nuanced reading of this final passage in Matthew and have claimed that these words should not necessarily be applied indiscriminately to all Christians in all ages, nor read simply in the context of the modern-era push for a certain type of foreign missions work.³ It would be difficult to convince a Protestant missionary, however, that this mandate of Jesus cannot be applied directly to her Christian vocation.

Moreover, it would be difficult to convince an American missionary, whether she lived in the year 1800 or in the year 2000, that China was not key, even preeminent,
among “all [the] nations” to which Jesus is commanding Christians to go. St. Thomas is sometimes forgotten by contemporary Protestants for anything but his “doubting” nature, but Christians through the ages have revered him as the first missionary to Asia, the counterpart to St. Paul who brought the “good news” to the Western world. Tradition holds that St. Thomas traveled as far to the east as India. The Christian Gospel is arguably an Asian gospel to begin with; only much later did the West become missionary to the East. According to James A. Field, Jr., though India and the Near East were first in Western missionary hearts and budgets until the late nineteenth century, China and the Far East had taken over decisively by the 1890s. “American Christians in particular saw their destiny in China,” says Philip Jenkins regarding Protestant missions in the early twentieth century. Jenkins goes on to describe this perceived missionary destiny in a vein that should not surprise us after our discussions of the political documents of chapter two: “Americans claimed their nation had a special role in the divine plan.”

The development of the missionary narrative in China is indeed caught up in the development of the American narratives of nation. The confluence of the religious and the nationalistic has often been blamed for Western imperialistic abuses in China, and frequently it is the missionary meta-narrative that is accused of radicalizing or bringing a special arrogance to the meta-narrative of nationhood. In the early 1970s Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., called the Vietnam debacle “a missionary legacy.” Stuart Miller similarly describes many nineteenth-century missionaries as bloodthirsty apologists for the Opium Wars and for other acts of international vengeance. Without going as far as Schlesinger and Miller, chapter two above describes the potentially unhealthy link between the U.S. national narratives and the nation’s Christian history. A certain brand of
American nationalism is clearly intent on changing China and is somewhat resistant to carrying on a dialogue of equals with the CCP, in part based on America’s near-religious sense of certitude and national self-confidence.

Many of the unfortunate facts of Christian missionary history and America’s current diplomatic disadvantages are undeniable, but some of the stronger statements made by Schlesinger and Miller seem to have at their root an unfair assumption about the relationship between these two sorts of meta-narrative. Their emphasis on “the serious dangers involved in assuming a position of moral absolutism”⁹ suggests that religious meta-narratives are inherently more dangerous than secular national meta-narratives, that nationalist motives, while not always pure, are essentially inert until activated by the “blind self-righteousness” of the missionary. The evils that have been done by governments without the imprimatur of organized religion—indeed, done in the context of an explicit rejection of all “idealistic” faiths, as in the twentieth-century experiments in Communism—and done instead in the name of utopic secular nationalism should be enough to prove that it is not religion per se that is the problem. Aggressive arrogance and “blind self-righteousness” have no necessary link to religion in general or to Protestant Christian missions in particular. We could just as easily and perhaps more accurately claim that it is the national and imperialistic meta-narratives—sins of national or racial hubris—that tend to infect pure religious narratives, rather than the converse. The intersection of religion and nationalism is often the site of bloody collision, but it is rarely clear which is to blame. Bosch in his study of changing missionary paradigms says of nineteenth-century North American missions simply this: “The religious and the
national impulses were fundamentally not separable.\textsuperscript{10} A more moderate and defensible claim this.\textsuperscript{11}

In chapter two we looked at the Christian Church in contemporary China from the vantage point of American and Chinese national narratives. In this chapter we move on to religious narratives, with stories by American missionaries to China, and just as the religious narratives impinged on the national in chapter two, so here we will see the national narratives, among others, impinging on the Christian missionary narrative. The secular and the sacred cannot be separated in this study, in spite of U.S. attempts to legislate a church/state divorce and in spite of the PRC’s continuing Marxist dream of creating a nation based on the philosophical principles of materialism. Bosch wisely reminds us that it is not only the U.S. that has a sense of manifest destiny and not only Christians who feel the missionary impulse. Marxism too, Bosch decides, is “intrinsically missionary.”\textsuperscript{12} The U.S. and the PRC both have missionary ideologies inextricably tied to their respective nationalisms. It is only natural, then, that their national narratives and the narratives of Christianity overlap again and again. In this chapter we will look primarily at U.S. missionary narratives of China, their meta-narrative underpinnings, their sources in popular Christian narrative, and their close relationship to the U.S. national narratives.

There are two kinds of missionaries from the U.S. in China today, and two corresponding kinds of missionary narratives. The following personal narrative will serve as a helpful brief on this contemporary situation before we pass on to a more formal and historical introduction.
The Legal Meets the Underground in the Chinese Church

When I arrived in China in the late summer of 1997, I automatically became a member of a group that I will call the “legal missionaries” of China. Although all missionary work is ostensibly illegal for foreigners in mainland China, every year Beijing issues work visas to thousands that it knows or suspects will be involved in spreading religion in the PRC. Many of these short-term immigrants come as businessmen; most are English teachers like myself. Priority of motives naturally varies from person to person: some are only incidentally missionaries because of their personal faith in an “intrinsically missionary” belief system. For others the cover of employment is mere façade, and all energy and free time are focused on evangelism. Secular and religious impulses are undoubtedly mixed even in the most pious, and where one falls on the spectrum depends to some degree on how employment is obtained. Most Christian English teachers, and increasingly teachers in other disciplines such as Business, arrive in China under the auspices of a “sending organization” whose ulterior motive it is to make inroads for Christianity in the PRC and, as one group’s literature unabashedly proclaims, “to change the heart of China.” Many working businessmen, as opposed to teachers of Business, are also entering China through introductions made by such religious organizations, some of which have good relationships with Chinese officials or have built up one or two or more decades of history and guanxi (a special sort of relationship that implies mutual obligation) with school administrations. Some other Christian workers (I fall into this category) happen onto some other method of procuring a teaching post independently and are not closely tied to a missionary organization, but in big cities and big schools, where several foreign teachers may live in close proximity or where weekly foreign fellowship
meetings bring believers together with reminders of a common cause, the distinctions between the different sorts of “legal missionaries” in China are often foggy.

The legal missionaries of China are all clearly characterized and distinguished from other missionaries by a desire to spread their faith combined with an unwillingness to trespass the Chinese government’s ambiguous regulation of “foreign expert” religious freedom. What constitutes violation of the government’s will is not always clear. Standard teaching contracts insist vaguely, “Party B shall respect China’s religious policy, and shall not conduct religious activities incompatible with the status of an expert.”¹⁴ But the knowing complicity of the government in hiring large numbers of religious foreigners (Aikman estimates 2,000-3,000 annually),¹⁵ combined with a high degree of freedom in the classroom and in personal relationships with students, leads to a sort of de facto “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy.¹⁶ Legal missionaries, for their part, avoid contact with underground Christian groups and do not engage in public evangelism, and in exchange no one looks too closely at what they do with their free time or stops them from teaching Christmas carols in December.¹⁷ China gets responsible native-English-speaking teachers with, to speak generally, high moral standards at bargain prices, and so the “open secret” continues.¹⁸

Less welcome in the CCP are what I will call “underground missionaries.” Foreign underground missionaries are committed to aiding the underground or house-church movement in China, often over and against the official church. They may be Bible smugglers bringing copies of the scripture to areas where the legal supply is insufficient, American pastors offering Bible training to house-church clergy who have no access to legal seminary education, or members of Christian human rights lobbies investigating
claims of persecution. These missionaries, while they may be very knowledgeable about China and may have lived longer-term in China at some time in the past, tend to do this risky work on short-term visas, try to get in and get out quickly to avoid endangering both Chinese Christians and their own future ministry, and generally have little contact with or sympathy for the official church. The lines separating individual legal and underground missionaries are not always clear; one person may play both roles from time to time—a legal missionary may decide to take advantage of an opportunity to visit a house church, for example. But the two roles can be defined with fair clarity, and the stories the missionaries tell follow two different narrative traditions, as will be described below. Foreigners generally stick to one loyalty and one narrative style.

Living the staid and dull life of an English teacher who had signed away some of his freedom in a government contract, I had read about the adventures of the underground missionaries, but I had personally met only a couple of Chinese Christians who were troubled by the Chinese system of bureaucratized religion and who therefore divided their time between the legal churches and their own secret missionary work for the house-church movement. One Sunday, however, while ushering foreigners at the Haidian Church, I finally came face to face with a member of the foreign underground.

I saw her being pointed into the foreigners’ section by the usher at the door; he then caught my eye and pointed her out to me with a smile that said, “Passing one on to you.” This was his custom; there was no real need to draw special attention to a foreigner. The woman seated herself on the inside end of the row, next to the plaster-coated brick wall. She did not look around, even as I approached. These details struck me only later as meaningful, as perhaps something other than what these common signs usually meant. I
had often acted in the same manner before my confidence in the language grew: sitting in secluded corners, avoiding eye contact, thinking, “Please don’t let anybody talk to me in Chinese. I’m not in the mood today. Please let me just sit quietly and listen.” Later, though, in the spy-like narrative my imagination spun around this visitor, these common gestures of an expatriate in China came to signify a more intriguing background.

She was not as young as most English teachers and not as old as the rest. Teaching in Chinese schools is a job more rewarding in life experience than in financial compensation, and foreign teachers in China therefore tend to be in the midst of their college years, recently graduated from them, or of retirement age. This foreigner was in her 30s probably—not impossible for an English teacher, I thought as I considered my own situation, but slightly unusual and worth a question. She still did not look up when I sat beside her and waited a moment for acknowledgment, so I stuck out my hand, introduced myself, in English naturally, and asked her name. She shook my hand, not limply but not enthusiastically, and paused before she answered evenly with another question: “Do you mind if I don’t say?”

I felt a sting of embarrassment at the rebuff, but, normally timid, I was now caught up in my “hail-fellow well met” manner that I trotted out to meet strangers; I barely hesitated before I asked, huffing a one-breath laugh through a dopey smile, “Why?” There was no doubt a hint of offense in my voice, because, though obviously not one to descend to nicety when honesty was called for, she replied in a gentler tone. “It’s just that, every church I go to, there’s always someone asking for my name and address.”

“So much for my second question.” I was trying to make a joke, to ease the tension I felt, but my annoyance with her was already bubbling, so the sentence probably
came out as something closer to goading sarcasm than pithy icebreaker. She just looked at me, not quite as apologetic as I wanted her to be.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said.

Not happy, but remembering my place and feeling foolish about my angry and lame attempt at humor, I offered her the earphones for translation and returned to my seat a few rows back. I took a piece of paper and pen out of my pocket. On the paper I had scribbled the names of several countries. Next to “U.S.” I added a fourth tick to the total.

That scrap of paper was the reason I was even more defensive than I might have been. One of the duties assigned to me by the pastors was to keep track of how many foreign guests attended each service and what country they were from. The information was innocent; no names or addresses were recorded; the head pastor was someone I trusted, a “liberal” official-church pastor who allowed house-church groups to use church facilities during the week. Even if the foreign statistics, like the segregated foreigners section, had roots in some paranoid notion of necessary bureaucratic control, I figured the information was now just part of the pastor’s work to gauge the composition and needs of his congregation.

Still I was glad the secretive visitor did not know about my own covert task. We both had our secrets. But even absent any real evidence of my job as informer, the woman still suspected me of collaboration. I was a running dog of the Chinese government, a willing or stupid pawn of the godless Communists and their puppet church. I felt wronged and needed to dig a moat against her accusation, but I also envied her secret-agent closeness and the hints of unseen but mighty works of God that hung about her like a cloak. So when a Chinese usher came up to me after the service and
asked for the foreigners’ count, when I got to the “U.S.” numbers—a feeble attempt to participate in the great deeds of man or an equally strained and sad attempt to erase the spy from my memory, I don’t know—I told the usher there were “san ge,” only three Americans. They would never know she had been there.

**Goals and Scope**

My first thought later that day, as I reflected on the morning’s events, was to laugh at this woman who seemed to be treating a trip to church like a secret mission. I wished I had warned her against visiting any churches in the U.S., lest there too she be welcomed warmly and perhaps even put on a mailing list. But in calmer moments I knew that this was not the U.S. and that such underground missionaries (despite my lack of solid evidence, there is little doubt in my mind that this is what she was) were not fools. There is cause for mistrust in China still. Christians may try not to be as suspicious as the mysterious visitor seemed or as cynical as I felt that day, but the Chinese divided-church situation leads understandably to division among foreign missionaries as well. Paranoia, collaboration, a sense of loyalties chosen and defended—these are all part of the narrative dynamics of contemporary missionary stories coming out of China. After a further review of pertinent background on the missionary enterprise in China, we will turn to a few examples of the two very different styles of story that emerge from the legal-missionary community and the underground.

We will first allow the current topic a brief historical contextualization and will then begin to unfold the various narrative contexts of today’s stories, in three contexts in particular. Contemporary Chinese missionary narratives are told first in the context of the
various meta-narrative interpretations of what Biblical texts say about a Christian’s call to missions. Second, these narratives are written in the context of a history of missionary narrative from the first century AD through the twentieth, particularly a body of narratives about Protestant missions in Asia over the past two centuries. Finally, as we will see when we analyze the contemporary texts themselves, they are shaped by contemporary U.S. national as well as pop-culture narratives.

Brief History of the Christian Missionary Enterprise in China

If we are to understand the stories of today’s missionaries in China, it will be helpful to know something about earlier missionaries to China and their different approaches to the same, or similar, work. The history of Christian missions in China is a history of fits and starts. After four major and largely unsuccessful attempts to plant the Christian faith in Chinese soil, attempts separated from each other by centuries, at last it seems that Christianity in China today has a significant indigenous foundation and a real chance of continued survival and growth. There are theories that suggest hopefully that China—as India apparently was by St. Thomas—was reached in the very first missionary push of the Christian era, as early as the first century AD. However, the first Christian group of which evidence remains is the Nestorians, the followers of a “heretic” labeled so by the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) for his heterodox stand on the divine/human nature of Christ. The famous Nestorian stele, still on display in the old Chinese capital of Xi’an, was erected in AD 781 and relates the arrival of the “Luminous Religion” in the capital a century and a half earlier. At that time a Nestorian priest arrived from Syria, translated Christian scriptures into Chinese, and received the emperor’s approval to spread the faith
legally within China’s borders. This appeal to the emperor is significant and will be repeated by the early Catholics as well as by today’s Protestant missionaries. Also worth noting here is the rehabilitation of the Nestorian heresy by modern Christians. The former heretics are now seen as the first Christian missionaries in China, the “brave, heroic Nestorian teachers” as one mid-twentieth-century Protestant missions primer describes them. This return to grace, as well as those theories of possible first-century missionaries in China, has everything to do with the contemporary Christian narratives of Chinese history that will be described in the following section. For the moment we return to our historical survey.

The later Christian capacity to forgive the Nestorians their faults is no doubt aided by the fact that the Nestorians no longer constituted serious competition. The Nestorian Church was practically destroyed by Muslim persecution in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and finally wiped out entirely by the Turks in 1915. It had almost vanished from China even before that. However, there was still a significant Nestorian presence in China at the time of Marco Polo’s thirteenth-century travels. The Nestorians had apparently continued their missionary appeal to the upper echelons of society, had won several converts among the Mongol emperors’ family and court, and had persisted in official favor for centuries after their arrival. Catholic emissaries who also arrived at the Mongol court in 1254 were clearly not pleased to find their old doctrinal adversaries in powerful places in the Chinese empire. The Franciscan Willem de Rubruck tried and failed to make Guyuk Khan a Christian, and on his return to Europe he described the Nestorian Mongols as “absolutely depraved.” Other Roman Catholics sent later in the thirteenth century were better received by the new Khan and would eventually claim
thousands of baptized converts, including many high officials, some of them leaving the Nestorian Church in the process.

The end of the Mongol regimes and the return to native Chinese rule, with the advent of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, proved disastrous for both the Nestorians and the Catholics, who were too intimate with the outgoing foreign rulers to be accepted as a separate foreign entity deserving independent consideration by the returning Chinese ruling class. Therefore, though Christianity presumably survived in tiny inaccessible enclaves, when the third wave of missionaries arrived in Peking in 1601, for all practical purposes, it was as if they were entering a new land once again; they encountered a people who did not know that their country had already experienced at least seven centuries of missionary history. These newly arrived Jesuits under Matteo Ricci, like the previous missionaries, focused a good deal of their attention on the imperial court, hoping to win legal recognition as well as powerful allies who might serve as models for the Chinese populace. A formidable scholar well versed in the Confucian texts, Ricci understood the traditional Chinese theories of governance. The emperor is the wind, Confucius said, and the people are grass; as the wind blows, so will the grass bend. The Jesuits did find some significant converts among Chinese scholars, and even emperors showed interest in their faith at times, but never commitment to it. The rulers were always more intrigued by the Western maps, clocks, astronomical devices, and other technologies the Jesuits brought or built as their entrée into the corridors of power. The Jesuits survived dynastic change in the mid-seventeenth century better than previous groups had, this time because the incoming Qing Dynasty was itself foreign, and they
continued their attempts to convert the emperor and all of China until another partial interruption in missionary work in the eighteenth century.

In addition to making use of Western technology and trying to convert the emperor, Ricci and his disciples followed a missionary strategy of accommodation to Chinese culture. Rather than standing against traditional China, they turned themselves in habit and dress into Confucian scholars and attempted to distill the Christian message out of what was already present in Chinese thought, to find ways to coordinate where to others contradiction might seem inevitable. They succeeded in converting over 200,000 Chinese in two hundred years, but the accommodationalist approach finally caught the attention of the Dominican and Franciscan missionaries who had followed the Jesuits to China, and the debate that followed would once again close China to Christian missionaries.

The situation of the Dominicans and Franciscans can be thought of as analogous to that of the underground missionaries of our own day. They preached to the masses in the countryside and were somewhat disdainful of the accommodationalist ideas and apparently elitist attitudes of the younger Jesuit order. As today’s CCP invites “legal missionaries” to work for the nation, the Chinese emperors of the day were more comfortable with the Jesuits, who showed proper deference and whom they could see and keep track of every day in the courts. They were suspicious of missionaries, Christian or Buddhist or Taoist, who wandered invisible through the empire exciting the people. Jonathan Spence’s book on the Emperor Kang Xi describes the emperor’s demands of loyalty from the Jesuits (not unlike today’s government contracts for foreign experts) and procedures for the registration of the itinerant religious. The issue that finally brought
the confrontation to a head and to the Holy See itself was the question of Chinese rituals performed for deceased ancestors. Were these rites “ancestor worship” and therefore religious in nature and therefore a cancerous syncretism to be cut out of the life of the Chinese Christian believer? Or were they non-religious, even civil, acts of traditional veneration no different from a Western Christian’s erection of a tombstone or visitation of a grave? The Vatican finally sided with the Dominicans and Franciscans against the Jesuits, proscribing the rituals and thereby making all missionaries’ tasks more difficult when preaching to the common people, who did normally regard such rituals as being of sacred importance, but the decision was especially difficult for the Jesuits. The Jesuits’ primary targets of evangelism, the scholar-officials—who probably on the whole felt less religious fervor about the rituals than the common people did, but who were required to take part in the Chinese rites as part of their official duties—were now effectively barred from the church gates. In 1724 the Yongzheng emperor banned Christianity in response to the Vatican’s insult and the threat this new, more-radical Christianity posed to state orthodoxy.

Persecution of Christians intensified in the eighteenth century because of the ban, but the law was never fully enforced and the Catholics maintained a foreign presence in China from the arrival of Ricci until the 1950s. Essays by Robert E. Entenmann and Alan Sweeten in Daniel Bays’s recent Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present well describe the continued strength of Catholic communities in Sichuan and Jiangxi provinces in the years between the official ban and the forced reopening of China in the 19th century. The Chinese Catholic presence has in fact never been completely wiped out to the present day, giving the Roman Catholic Church at least four hundred
years of continuous history in China and possibly three centuries more than that if we suppose that the earlier work was perhaps never completely destroyed.

The fourth and tallest wave of Christian missions in China, however, was dominated not by the Catholics, but by the infant Protestant foreign missionary movement. The Qing Dynasty was falling apart just as the Protestant churches of the West were beginning to look outside their borders for new mission fields. In part because of the perceived decadence and increasing irrelevance of the Qing court in the nineteenth century and in part because Chinese law restricted foreign missionary work to a handful of port cities, Protestant missionaries tended to focus on the common Chinese people or to divide their evangelical vision between the local gentry and the poor. Access to the emperor, at least, was rarely a considered goal. There were missionary groups like the Student Volunteer Movement and individuals like Gilbert Reid who believed the best missionary strategy was to begin with the educated elite, but they typically found their efforts frustrated, and the greatest evangelistic success stories continued to be among the poor and uneducated. The Jesuit dream of a Chinese Emperor Constantine began to give way at times to a paradigm of underground Christian revolution. The respect the Nestorians and many of the earlier Catholics had shown to the great empire of the Far East was thus replaced, in the nineteenth century, by a Christianity of empire that saw little worthy of awe in the decaying Qing court. When the revolutionary Hong Xiuquan in mid-century proclaimed himself the ruler of the Christian Great Heavenly Kingdom that was destined to rule China, many missionaries took notice and hoped a Christian dynasty might overthrow the Qing in their lifetime. When it became clear that Hong was mentally unhinged and far from orthodox in his Christianity, Western Christians, to their credit,
turned quickly away. For a time, however, the prospect of Christian revolution from below had seemed plausible and, not surprisingly considering the Age of Revolution in which those Christians were living, had seemed more appealing and more practical than the Emperor Constantine model of previous missionary hopes. We are heirs today of both narratives.

The progress of Protestant missions was steady, but by no means rapid, during the century from the reopening of China to missionary work after the Opium War in 1842 to the closing of China to foreign Christians by the Communists in 1949. China had seemed particularly resistant to the Good News, largely because of the national shame that accompanied this fourth influx of missionaries and the confusing mixture of imperialism and religion that followed, but also, many continued to speculate, because of something obstinate in the Chinese soul or because of the need to pave the narrow road to heaven first with Western modernity so that the “Western” message of Christianity could be grasped. Because of frustration with lack of progress and theoretical tide changes in missiology, social work and education often replaced or worked in tandem with evangelism. By 1949 the numbers of converts were yet tiny when viewed as a percentage of the population, but the century had not been a complete wash: Chinese Catholics numbered in the millions and Protestants almost a million, and the missionaries had opened thousands of schools, hospitals, and other social and charitable institutions besides.30

At the time of Liberation by the Communists, China closed its doors to missionaries once again and this time more effectively than in any previous era. For thirty years, almost no Western Christians had any contact with Christians in the mainland, and
during the chaotic decade of the Cultural Revolution it seemed as if the Communists had succeeded in eradicating religion from their Republic altogether. Westerners spoke of “losing China” and of the failure of the missionary enterprise.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the fair numbers of conversions in the years before Liberation, John King Fairbank could write in the early 1970s, “By [1949] it had also become evident that few of the Chinese people were likely to become Christians and that the missionaries’ long-continued effort, if measured in numbers of converts, had failed.”\textsuperscript{32} Donald Threadgold wrote in 1973 that “the evangelicals’ few Chinese converts were swallowed up by history, leaving on the surface of the clashing and mingling tides of western innovation and Chinese tradition scarcely a visible trace.”\textsuperscript{33} Now that Western observers are once again welcome in China, they can see that the situation is not so dire as it once seemed; the church is growing so quickly under its own steam that it is not certain that a new generation of foreign missionaries is necessary. Reports of the death of the Chinese Church were clearly exaggerated, a product of the dearth of reliable information during the years of relative isolation. At first, in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, foreign Christians rediscovered and aided the reemerging Chinese Church clandestinely, entering as tourists with the first legal guided tours, learning what they could about how the Church had actually fared. Gradually we arrived at our current situation: greater freedom of movement for foreigners, a more relaxed attitude on the government’s part toward thousands of foreign Christian workers, yet continuing suspicion toward many others. The fifth foreign missionary movement in China, necessary or not, is well under way.
The Meta-narrative Contexts: Setting, Plot, and Telos

Before we look at the contemporary missionary narratives themselves, it behooves us to give some attention to the larger narratives that contribute some of their elements and plot structures to the individual missionary narratives. These plots are, to borrow White’s word, metahistories of China and of the world, histories that explain the past and predict the trend of the future in terms of particular Christian texts or a larger Christian meta-narrative. They are combinations of history and faith. Such plots are sometimes studied under the rubric of “worldview”; Bosch treats the subject in terms of “paradigm shift” in his history of missiology and describes how the waves of missionaries in each era sallied forth under the banner of a different Bible passage.34 I want to emphasize that these various missionary groups did not merely see themselves as working from different paradigms or following this or that single Biblical mandate. They saw themselves as living out different versions of Christian history. Turning as we soon will to stories of China’s missionaries, it will be helpful to see how the Bible verses and paradigms readily transform themselves into large narrative frameworks which in turn spawn or shape the personal narratives of the Christians who live under their aegis.

Intimations of these larger narratives permeated the descriptions of China’s missionary history in the survey of that history above. With great faith, but without any real evidence, J. Theodore Mueller wrote in 1947 that “It is certainly not unreasonable to assume that, if during the times of the apostles the Gospel came to India [. . .], it also came to China.”35 Whatever the heresy that got them expelled from the Church, the Nestorians are here restored to full Christian communion, at least in the context of their early missionary work. Both of these ideas emerge out of a Christianized narrative of
Chinese history, produced by the desire of the faithful to rewrite the story of China to show that apparently “pagan” China was in fact not “left without a witness to the truth” all those years, and that (the Christian) God has constantly been at work in Chinese history. For the same reason, though the idea is somewhat fanciful and not supported by scholarship, missionaries in China or Christians with an interest in China will often suggest that the magi who came “from the East” to visit the baby Jesus (Matthew 2) may have come from so distant a land as Han Dynasty China. The Christian cooption of China’s traditional religions, ancient philosophers, and even of the Chinese language by Christian scholars like Ethel Nelson and Don Richardson are part of the same missionary narrative and project. The goal is to rewrite Chinese history according to a Christian meta-narrative in order to show that the Christian God has been there all along. The same has been done with Western history, of course, with Christian adoption of Greek philosophical methods and concepts.

In practical terms, this invented Chinese narrative past, when applied to present work, can be adapted to several different missionary narratives. Ricci narrated his own theories of accommodation into this larger story of God’s work throughout Chinese history. Large portions of Christian truth are already present here in Chinese tradition, he contended; all that remains is for us to find those points of correspondence and demonstrate to the Chinese people that Christ is the fulfillment of this embryonic Christianity. Secondly, the Christianized history of God’s many works throughout the Chinese ages can be used as a narrative salve on the wounds of failed missionary enterprises. This ending to the Chinese Christian narrative goes something like this: Even after seeing great works and the many evidences of God’s love for them, still some will
not believe. Biblically, Christians find precedent for this in the stubbornness attributed to
the Old Testament Jews and in the famous Romans “no excuse” passage (Romans 1:18-
20):

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the
godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their
wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them,
because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world
God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been
clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are
without excuse.

During the slow early days of Protestant missions, descriptions of the “stiffnecked”
Chinese, echoing Old Testament condemnations of the Jewish people, are easy to find;
after 1949, similar “we did the best we could for them” narratives provided comfort to
many. Finally, and by contrast, this faith version of Chinese history can be used to justify
or enhance some of the triumphalist optimism of both nineteenth-century China missions
and, as already seems more justified, that of today. The seeds were planted long ago in
the Chinese heart, according to this plot; it has always been only a matter of time before
the harvest was ready. This narrative, like most missionary narratives, ends with great
success: full Christianization or at least total evangelization of China. The nineteenth-
century and early twentieth-century missionary dreams of easy pickings were often and
finally discouraged. Those happy endings to the Chinese narrative are being revived
among today’s missionaries, as we shall see.

If this latter narrativizing of God’s work in Chinese history looks back to the past
to explain the present and predict the future, the other narrative pattern we saw in the
brief historical review above imagined more specifically how the future Christianization
of China might take place: from the top down, or from the bottom up. The Nestorians, the
Jesuits, and some of the Protestants in the first Protestant missionary century harbored dreams of a Chinese Emperor Constantine who could in a stroke alter, or fulfill, the destiny of Chinese history and of Christian missions in China. The Franciscans and Dominicans, in contrast, concentrated on the lowly because of their vision of the “charism” (a special spiritual giftedness) of their orders and their way of living out the Christian story in the world. Many nineteenth-century Protestants followed the same interpretation of the Christian meta-narrative, but many were also directed by both their democratic and imperialist (and some by socialist) ideals to engage the common people and ignore the lofty, dreaming of an end to decadent Imperial China and the rise of a Christian Democratic ruler from among the masses. Hong Xiuquan was for a time the symbol of that hope; Sun Yat-Sen and Chiang Kai-Shek embodied the dream in the first half of the twentieth century.

Both of the imagined narratives of the future of China find precedent and support in ancient Christian narratives and/or the overarching Christian meta-narrative. The respect and deference given to the Chinese emperor obviously corresponded to an age when the divine right of kings was the dominant worldview, and when submission to authority was valued by Christians more than it is in today’s age of individual liberty and rights. Biblical images of monarchy, Christ’s silence before his accusers, and Paul’s later admonitions to “submit to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1) meant more or meant differently to premodern and early modern Christians. The Apostle Paul made use of his privileges as a Roman citizen more than once in the course of his missionary work (see Acts 16 and 22) and was in the process of making a direct appeal to Caesar himself to hear his case against his accusers when his story cuts off at the end of Acts. The
argument of the bottoms-up advocates, however, is bolstered not only by Andrew Jackson and Karl Marx, but also by the special attention and favor lavished on the poor and the outcast throughout the Gospels and the implied or spoken scorn for the rich and powerful. The “Blessings and Woes” passage in Luke summarizes what many have seen as one encompassing theme of the Christian narrative: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God [. . .]. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort” (Luke 6:20, 24).

The famous missionary narratives of Adoniram and Anne Haseltine Judson in early nineteenth-century Burma are interesting cases of the two sorts of narratives coming together as the political status of Burma changed from a powerful pre-modern monarchy to a British colony as the missionaries looked on. (Though these stories are not about China, they were certainly read by almost all the China missionaries of the nineteenth century and have, therefore, second-hand relevance.) Much of the Judsons’ work was done among the common people, but immediately upon arrival they cultivated friendships with local gentry, and central to the narrative are the missionaries’ voyages to the Burmese capital at Ava to see the Emperor and his Queen. In the first voyage the men of the mission are rebuffed when they try to end persecution from the Buddhists by obtaining legal recognition for Christianity. The second trip is made by Mrs. Judson, apparently to satisfy the Queen’s curiosity about the foreign woman she has heard about. Anne Judson, and/or her biographer, clearly has high hopes for this meeting and views it as the consummation of all their work. The following passage seems to express her hope that the time of reaping has finally come, that the audience with the Queen will lead to a great harvest of souls in Burma:
During this progress [of the boat on the river way to the capital], the spirit of the fair missionary might justly look back with gratitude, and onward with an exulting hope. The golden city was at hand, whose queen was desirous to welcome her. The consuming delays, the baffled zeal, the patient toils of so many years at Rangoon, had been nobly borne; and now the delicious fruit was to be gathered.39

A British invasion intervenes, however, and foreigners are suddenly persona non grata in Burma. Through great exertions, Anne Judson obtains the release of her husband from prison and, according to one account, the couple leaves the field “on the spotless deck of a British gunboat.”40 The missionaries then turn their attentions away from royalty and toward the oppressed, secluded, and despised wives of the upper-class men and to an inland minority race called the Karen. This passage from the end of one nineteenth-century account shows both the missionaries’ continuing hope for top-down influence and their more recently discovered dreams of vast numbers of other classes of converts:

The latest accounts represent the mission as in a prosperous state: about thirty natives had embraced Christianity in the year 1828, among whom was a learned Burman, an eloquent man, of great influence among his countrymen. The Karens began to occupy much of the attention of the teachers; a wild and original people, who in their manners and habits resemble the native Indians of America; they had invited the former to visit them, with the assurance that their people would receive the Christian religion.41

We have been told previously that the Karens, in contrast to the thirty Burman converts, are ready to receive Christ whole villages at a time:

During their stay, they expressed a strong desire to receive a written language and books; they said that all the Karens would then learn to read, and would come to the knowledge of God. There are more than two thousand of this people in this province, and Karen villages are dispersed all over the wildernesses of Burmah, Pegu, Arracan, and Siam.42

The work is imagined to take place either according to the Roman model of imperial conversion or as a mass movement from below, and both plots will reappear in our
contemporary narratives. Whether the country is Burma or China, whether it happens from the top down or the bottom up, the telos of the missionary narratives is the same: all the people are converted or at least get the message.

Whether the missionary narrative ends with universal positive response to the Christian message or not depends on a third narrative structure behind many of these stories, past and present: the narratives of Christian eschatology, i.e., the Christian narratives of the end of history. The larger eschatological narrative the missionary tells will shape the smaller narratives of their missionary experience. (The experiences they have on the mission field might also influence the eschatology they choose and speak.) At the end of history for all Christians is the Second Coming, a doctrine summarized succinctly in the Nicene Creed with these words: “[Christ] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.” What this return of Christ will look like, when it will come, and what happens next are matters about which the Bible and Church Tradition are more mysterious. Therefore, in addition to this basic article of faith, many Christians hold further to some millennialist, or chiliasm, narrative of the end times. Revelation 20:6 states, “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.”

The major Protestant eschatological narratives have centered on this mention of a millennial reign of Christ apparently taking place on the earth. The early Church had a history of apocalyptic writing for hundreds of years after John’s Revelation,43 but Catholic Tradition has maintained a strict amillennialism in its creeds—we see no mention of a millennium in the Nicene Creed above—and other statements of doctrine at least
since Augustine. In that saint’s *City of God*, Zachary Hayes tells us, “The thousand-year reign of Revelation 20 is [. . .] identified with the time of the Church, and all millenarian speculations are rejected.”\footnote{\textit{The Catechism of the Catholic Church} today still makes no reference to and no attempt at a gloss of Revelation 20:6. Many of the eschatological details described in Revelation and other books are included, but the Church is silent on the issue of a thousand-year reign on the earth and rather follows the Augustinian line suggesting that the age of the Christian Church is the reign of Christ on earth:}

Since the Ascension God’s plan has entered into its fulfillment. We are already at “the last hour.” “Already the final age of the world is with us, and the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real but imperfect.” Christ’s kingdom already manifests its presence through the miraculous signs that attend its proclamation by the Church.\footnote{Protestant theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by contrast, constantly rehearsed millennial narratives of the future Kingdom of God on this earth, a literal thousand-year reign of the Lord and His saints.}

Protestant theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by contrast, constantly rehearsed millennial narratives of the future Kingdom of God on this earth, a literal thousand-year reign of the Lord and His saints.\footnote{The roots and histories of the premillennial and postmillennial movements are described fully by Hayes, Bosch, and James Moorhead, among others,\footnote{but a general outline will suffice for our purposes. The nineteenth-century Protestant missionary movement spent most of its time telling optimistic postmillennial narratives whereby Christ’s return and thousand-year reign would begin only after “the way is made straight” for him, that is, after the Christians of the world succeed in Christianizing the globe and thereby making the earth worthy of Christ’s arrival. Missionary work would be rapid and fecund; the grain was white in the fields. This vision of the future did not only involve the Christianization of the world, but also, as a natural consequence, the social betterment of}...}
all: an end to poverty and suffering; no more war; a *pax Christiana* which would usher in
the Kingdom it already resembled. This narrative probably could not have survived in
any but the rarified atmosphere of the nineteenth-century West with its strong post-
Enlightenment narratives of progress and empire, and it did not last long, at least not in
its original form. The American Civil War, the body blows dealt to religion by a growing
secularism bolstered by the popular writings of Darwin and Marx, the Great War, and, in
China, the surprisingly slow progress in converting the Chinese people—all these served
to dampen Christian enthusiasm and usher in, not the Kingdom, but a competing
premillennial eschatological narrative.

According to the premillennialists, whose pessimistic vision of history seemed
only to be confirmed by twentieth-century developments, Christ would return, not at the
height of human history, but at its lowest point. Taking all the violent apocalyptic
imagery of the New Testament scriptures to be descriptions of the years just before the
Second Coming, they took hope in the thought that they must be living in the final age
even as they despaired of converting the world. Rather than setting their sights on the
“Christianization” of the world, then, the premillennialist Protestant watchword for
missions became the “evangelization” of the world. “Despite the apparent concern for the
souls of humanity, the early adherents did not understand their task to be converting the
world to Christ. Their *real* concern was to engage in activity which would hasten the
return of Christ.”*47* It no longer mattered whether everyone believed in Christ; Christ
would return once the whole world had been told the “Good News.” The movement was
in some ways no less optimistic than that of the postmillennialists. Christ would be
coming back soon, they thought, so our missionary work will be done soon as well: “The
evangelization of the world in this generation” was the slogan of the Student Volunteer Movement starting in 1886. However, the perception of what achievements were possible in the time remaining, in terms of both conversion and good works, was more limited than in the postmillennial vision.

Postmillennial Christianity did not die out completely. Moorhead argues convincingly that it carried on into the twentieth century in the form of so-called “liberal” Christian churches. As was the case with many of the China missionaries in the first half of the twentieth century, the impetus to evangelize was eclipsed somewhat by the Social Gospel. With the newly attenuated sense of eschatology, with the hoped-for postmillennial end appearing further and further away, Moorhead says the goal of building up the Kingdom of Heaven slowly became “a present ethical reality growing to fulfillment in every facet of this world.” With the loss of a sense of end, a sense of urgency and of mission were also lost.

The premillennialists, by contrast, with their overdeveloped sense of end, are often criticized for an overemphasis on evangelism and a lack of stress on teaching, discipleship, and social work. They have, however, also survived and prospered to the present day. A key decade in their twentieth-century history was certainly the 1970s, when Hal Lindsey’s premillennial apocalyptic sermon *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) became one of the bestsellers of the century. These days the genre of premillennial apocalyptic fiction is not limited to, but is well-represented by, the popular *Left Behind* series. And though some might shy away from being lumped together with the more radical recent bestselling eschatological potboilers, most Protestant missionaries
in China today come from an Evangelical Christian background and are quite familiar with, if not full believers in, some premillennial version of end-times history.

This becomes clear particularly when we look at two missiological narratives that, along with the Christianized history of China and the top down vs. bottom up narratives, are the most important if we are to understand the current mission situation in China and the stories that come out of those missions. According to the first narrative, actually again a kind of metahistory narrative regarding the worldwide spread of Christianity, the Christian faith is circling the globe like the sun. Beginning in the Middle East, as the faith passed over and across Europe, Jerusalem was lost. The Americans are the current champions of the faith, but now to many it seems that secularism is chasing the sun like the night. Europe is already in darkness as the Church there shrinks and disappears, and the sun is rising on Asia as the U.S. struggles to maintain its own traditional faith. A common narrative among Christians, especially Asian Christians and the missionaries there, this puts the missionary enterprise in China at the cutting edge of world Christianity. Interestingly, large segments of the underground church in China, generally even more conservative and enthusiastic in their premillennial convictions than today’s American missionaries, have picked up a similar or connected meta-narrative of missions. They see the end of this cycle of the sun, when the Gospel will return to Jerusalem where it began, as the time of the Second Coming. Furthermore, they believe it will be China’s missionaries, not America’s, that will usher in the coming of Christ. They are even now living out this narrative, raising a missionary force that will evangelize the Muslim world and bring about the second advent. 50
The premillennial eschatology of these narratives is clear. We see the optimistic excitement about the soon-coming Kingdom, but we also see a rushed commitment to gaining large numbers of converts over a commitment to quality of life, spiritual or physical. The sun metaphor is also unfortunately fatalistic about the hope of those “living in darkness,” the ones the sun has passed over. Such a narrative can lead Christians to “give up on” Europe or to underfund re-evangelization missions there. The narrative contains an underlying theme of “let everyone have firsts before you get seconds,” and this, missiologists might be concerned, can affect the dynamics of missions work.

The other dominant narrative in missions today is the “10/40 window.” This concept is admittedly perhaps more of a paradigm than a full narrative, but the connections to a premillennial narrative are clear, and the “window” image is a metaphor almost as striking and potentially influential as the sun metaphor above. The 10/40 window is the geographical region from ten degrees above the equator northwards to forty degrees, and stretching from East Asia to North Africa. This area contains two-thirds of the world’s population and 90% of the “unreached,” that is, those who have never had the opportunity to accept or reject the Christian faith. Several websites are devoted to information about the 10/40 window, and I believe it is the only mission paradigm to receive national news coverage in recent years (see the June 30, 2003, issue of Time). In itself the 10/40 window is an image merely, not a story, but it needs little effort to place it in the same premillennial narrative mold of the Back to Jerusalem plot. Despite the fact that, according to the numbers above, more than half the world has not heard the Christian message, the constriction of the unproselytized world to a relatively small “window” makes the work seem nearly finished. We are almost there, the story
says, and we know exactly whom we need to reach before the end comes. This is a window of opportunity, the story goes, a window that is closing quickly on the whole world, for we all know what happens when that window closes at last.

Most of China sits within the 10/40 window.

The Narrative Contexts: Genre

In the previous section we unearthed some of the bare bones of missionary narrative. Chinese missionary narratives are sometimes told in a narrative context of a benighted pagan people being brought the light; more commonly, we saw, some notion of common grace or cultural accommodation has led missionaries since the Nestorians to look for God’s traces in China, so many if not most narratives are set against a backdrop of a Christianized Chinese metahistory. Though narratives vary in the path they take to their conclusion, all agree that the story of Christian missions in China ends with a dramatic Christianization or full evangelization of the country. What these narrative frameworks lack at this point are compelling characters and specific conflicts or actions that will interest a Western Christian reader and inspire her to take action herself—be it prayer, financial contribution, or future missionary work—or at least in some more passive manner to build up her faith in the Christian mission. Many of the characters and conflicts in missionary narratives, though drawn from actual events, are clearly modeled after the Christian missionary stories that have come before, from the Acts of the Apostles to nineteenth-century Protestant narratives. In addition, these stories, like the Bible itself, are not told in a cultural vacuum or a religious Republic where only the Bible is read and no other generic influences are allowed to contaminate scripture. The
influence of widespread cultural assumptions and popular genre fiction on many missionary stories is clear, the connections often explicitly made. A brief description of some of the major trends in Chinese missionary stories will put some flesh on the bones of the previous section and provide the remaining context needed to make sense of the stories coming out of China today.

Christian missionary literature has always had journeys and hardships as guiding motifs, so it should not surprise us to see how much modern and contemporary missionary stories have in common with the latter-day travel and adventure genres. The early-Church apostles, particularly Paul and his companions, traveled the first-century Mediterranean world trying to spread their faith, and their journey was not without its dangers. More than once these missionaries were put in prison (Acts 5, 12, 16); Paul was almost killed several times; and some of Paul’s contemporaries, such as the first Christian martyr Stephen, were killed in violent ways. In one particularly dramatic scene, Paul escapes from those seeking his death with the help of friends who lower him in a basket out of a hole in the city wall of Damascus (Acts 9:23-25). It is not difficult to interpolate a thrilling modern-day story full of dangerous journeys and narrow escapes from the Biblical text, yet the nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary stories are clearly of a different genre from the Book of Acts. Modern stories have much in common with the earliest missionary stories—they both relate the miraculous works of God, involve the transmission of the Christian message to distant lands, and deal with persecution as well as more natural and mundane difficulties—but clearly a change has taken place and certain features of the later stories have been borrowed from their later ages.
First of all, while the missionary narrative in modern and contemporary times can be seen as a cousin to modern travel literature, a record of contact with the exotic Other—foreign landscapes, strange customs—the Book of Acts is a very different animal. Perhaps because Paul traveled only around the “civilized world,” but more likely because Luke was writing Acts within a specific non-fiction tradition in which details were used sparingly and significantly, the earliest Christian missionary stories of Acts are, like all purportedly historical books of the Bible, short on description. The reader can barely distinguish Athens from Rome from Corinth, so despite the potential for Paul’s three missionary journeys to lay out for the reader a marvelous travelogue of the first-century world, we are left with a rather different sort of document. Luke’s goal, of course, is not to entertain his readers, but rather, as he explains at the beginning of his gospel, to bear witness to the most important truths of history: “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4). The sermon that Paul preaches in Athens is a higher priority to the writer than is a description of the Areopagus where the sermon is delivered. A clear explanation of the reason the Christian message was to be taken to the Gentiles and not reserved exclusively to the Jews is more important to Luke than is the building up of suspense in a scene of peril.

Further, while nineteenth-century tales of missionary derring-do borrow something from the lifestyle of Paul, their narrative style is not easily related to the Biblical texts. There are significant exceptions to this rule in the Book of Acts. The account of the storm and shipwreck in chapter 27, for example, is particularly rich in
detail and full in its description of events. This is almost certainly because the writer, Luke, was actually present during this episode; this is one of a handful of passages in which the first-person plural “we” is used by the narrator. But still the goals of Paul and Luke in their writings are clearly different from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century stories we will look at below. Though Paul in his epistles does ask for prayer from his readers and encourages giving financially to the Church and to missions (Acts 5:1-11, 10:1-5, I Corinthians 16:2), and though today the vivid exotic descriptions and adventure-story elements often have clear recruitment and fundraising motivations behind them, the use that is made of the action is qualitatively different. Luke and Paul describe suffering simply as an inevitable part of life, particularly of the Christian life. Danger is not a reason to spread the gospel for these men, but rather the unavoidable result of a life dedicated to the service of the Christian God. They are describing the Christian life and encouraging those who are suffering in similar fashion. Take this passage from Acts 14, for example: “Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said” (21b-22). In one of his letters to the church at Corinth, Paul famously boasts about all the dangers and troubles he has endured on his road:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. (II Corinthians 11:24-26)
He goes on for several more verses, but here again he is not, like an adventurer, gleefully boasting of his courage and exploits, trying to tickle the listener’s fancy and gather other missionaries to join him. Rather he is, he says, boasting “of the things that show my weakness” (II Corinthians 11:30). He is defending his position as apostle against heterodox teachers who are influencing the faithful, and he uses his sufferings as evidence that he is the real thing. His “adventures” are both glorious signs of his obedience and humiliations that “keep me from becoming conceited” (II Corinthians 12:7).

The Jesuit narratives of the Early Modern seventeenth century cover some of the middle ground in genre between the earliest missionary narratives and the later Protestant China narratives. If Luke’s writing often sounds like a history report, a sermon, or a theological defense, the journals of Matteo Ricci often sound like a government briefing and a defense of his missionary strategies. The journals open with, in today’s editions, over a hundred pages of geographical and cultural background about China. This no doubt reflects somewhat the popular interest of Ricci’s contemporaries in travel literature, which has persisted more or less to the present day, but it also indicates the Jesuit missionary strategy whereby Ricci—the first Jesuit, with Ruggieri, to penetrate the Chinese court in 1601—preached Christianity from a foundation of vast knowledge about the local situation. This idea of missions is not without scriptural precedent. While in Athens, Acts records, Paul quotes Greek poetry in his sermon on Mars Hill to make a point about the Christian God. But the length to which the Jesuits went in pursuit of local expertise goes beyond anything hinted at in the earliest missionary writings. Ricci describes his long introduction to the people and society of China as a practical necessity.
in order that the narrative might not be interrupted later, but the text also constitutes a
kind of briefing to the Vatican authorities, a supplement to the official Jesuit annals and
the correspondence of other members of the order. Ricci’s purpose, he tells us himself,
is to ensure that the history of the Jesuit mission is not lost to history, but the document
is often defensive in tone as he argues for his order being on the correct side of the issues
that would become the rites controversy and temporarily close down the Chinese
missions a century later. He makes clear what he and his colleagues see as an obvious
distinction between idol worship, which he opposes in numerous accounts, and the proper
reverence due to ancestors, which parts of Chinese custom, he believes, should be left
untouched by Christian missionaries. The book contains fascinating stories of
persecution, imprisonment, and escape, all presented in much fuller detail than the stories
in the Book of Acts, and we see here a kind of stage in the evolution of the missionary
narrative. This narrative is still not written with a massive modern Western audience in
mind, or with nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary motivations behind the
narratives, but with the expanded travelogue and novelistic elements clearly in evidence,
the stage is set for Protestants to create a genre in the nineteenth century.

Missionary literature as a popular genre, or a blend of genres, did not catch on
until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the lay people of the industrializing
Protestant West took it upon themselves to do what Catholic clergy had been doing for
centuries: take the Gospel to all nations. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century
missionary became a hero and adventurer in the popular imagination. “Traveler, explorer,
discoverer, missionary have much in common,” writes Phyllis Garlick in her foreword to
Six Great Missionaries (1955). It seems that in every collection of missionary stories
from the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, and on almost every page of every collection, one is bound to find the language of heroes. The aforementioned story of Anne Judson is called “this bright episode of female heroism.” Missionary Stories for Little Folks (1917) contains a group of stories under the heading “Missionaries as Heroes.” Another book is simply called Hero Tales from Mission Lands (1925). That book opens with these words: “The stories in this diversified collection provide material historically true, that will enlist on behalf of missionary work the enthusiasm, the love of adventure and the hero-worship which burn in the heart of a boy.”

If the narratives of the Apostle Paul and Matteo Ricci are affected by the culture around them, these missionary-as-adventurer stories are also clearly products of a Zeitgeist. A book like Hero Tales, with its story titles like “The Trail Breaker,” “The Knight Adventurous,” and “The Outlaw’s Friend,” is clearly trying to provide a Christian alternative to secular adventure stories aimed at young boys. A Japanese-American missionary published his memoirs in 1898 under the title A Japanese Robinson Crusoe and began his narrative with a shipwreck—a missionary story based self-consciously on one of the most popular adventure stories of the modern period. The appeal to heroism and adventure seems largely a call to young boys and to men in the turn-of-the-century age of “muscular Christianity,” but Moorhead reminds us that “images of valor and great deeds” were not purely masculine. He quotes a female missionary to China: “It’s great to be a hero.” The 1838 account of Anne Judson’s work is another example of an early heroic appeal made in “woman’s” direction as the chapter opens, “we ought not to forget that America has been the birth-place, or the scene of action, of the most eminent missionaries—Eliot, Brainerd, Zeisberger, Kirkland; till the age of these strong and all-
enduring men passed away—and woman came on the field, in all her weakness, and in all her heroism.” Jane Hunter’s *The Gospel of Gentility* (1984) is a full account of China’s female missionaries around 1900 and their often adventurous motives for making the journey.

As should be expected, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives of adventure and heroism frequently pick up crusading and martial imagery that fits with the imperialistic age in which they were written. A brief biography of Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit to have the dream of entering China, emphasizes his “soldier’s [. . . ] blood.”

One comprehensive report on missionary progress in China was researched and composed according to the model of military conquest and was titled *The Christian Occupation of China: A General Survey of the Numerical Strength and Geographical Distribution of the Christian Forces in China (1918-1921).*

Another famous story about a missionary named Henry Caldwell relates how Caldwell reportedly took out a rifle and said to one potential Chinese convert, “You agree with me that this gun is better than yours. When you have listened to what I have to say about the Christ doctrine you will see that it too is better than the religion of your fathers.”

Though this less-attractive aspect of these narratives may seem like a strictly nineteenth-century innovation, the Christian soldier of peace image is also not without Biblical precedent. Paul’s famous martial metaphor of the Christian mandate, “put on the full armor of God” (Ephesians 6), might explain some, though certainly not all, of the warrior imagery in the Protestant stories.

By the 1920s some of this crude imperialistic missionary spirit was arguably beginning to wane in China. This was in part because of the shift in much of China
missions toward the Social Gospel of the postmillennialists and in part because the bureaucratization and corporatization of the expanding missionary organizations made the heroic individual missionary cutting through the jungle a thing of the past. After this shift and the disappointment of the closing of China in 1949, however, the second half of the twentieth century seems to have recreated the necessary conditions for a revival of a missions enthusiasm similar to that in the first century of Protestant missions in China. In 1956 the world’s attention was focused on the killing of five American missionaries by an isolated Indian tribe in the jungles of Ecuador, and their martyrdom resurrected the image of the explorer missionary hero penetrating the dark corners of the earth to bring good news and clothing to the naked savage. In a similar vein, the new Communist states arising around the globe created a new sort of dark jungle for the intrepid adventurer missionary, a new kind of risk, a new way to suffer for the faith, and a new battleground for the Christian soldier. Many of the images and themes of missionary narratives from the nineteenth century, and from earlier days, will crop up again in the contemporary stories we turn to now, and some of the images of marching conquest have been transformed into plot elements belonging to a new genre peculiar to the Communist-era cold warfare of the last century, the underground-war stories of espionage.

The Contemporary Narratives: “Smuggling Bibles into China”

Let us turn now to the underground- and legal-missionary stories of the late twentieth century to see how the contemporary narratives of China missions make use of and depart from tradition. We will find in general that the underground stories have much in common with the early Protestant heroic adventure genre of missionary narrative.
Their defiance of CCP authority and support for the often-persecuted underground church movement in China give many of the stories an element of American nationalism, with flourishes of patriotism that evidence the influence of a synergy with some of the nationalist U.S. narratives discussed in chapter two. Along with this we will see a tendency to ignore or neglect the official church and to count on political change in China to take place as a result of radical bottom-up religious revival. There is a tendency, it seems, for the underground missionary stories to view China according to Soviet-era Cold War models and use spy-story conventions to describe their missionary labors. The legal-missionary stories, we shall see, also envision radical, even premillennial-style revival taking place in China, but tend to be more accommodating in their narratives, like the Jesuits and more liberal postmillennialist Protestant missionaries of the early twentieth century. More accepting of and conciliatory toward CCP authority, they carry on the tradition of a top-down revival in China, envisioning a converted Communist leadership which could then reconcile with the beleaguered underground believers, rather than being forced to change by a grassroots movement. While by no means unpatriotic Americans at the individual level, legal missionaries in their stories tend to incorporate Chinese culture into their narratives, much like we saw in Ricci’s journals and in some travelogue-style missionary stories of the earlier Protestants. They can at times even express criticism of American culture in their stories, as they imagine the dawn of Christian culture peeking over the Pacific horizon in their adopted home and fear the dusk falling in the place of their birth.

We will start with the underground missionary narratives, using the following story written for an on-line Christian news source. I reprint the story here in its entirety.67
“Smuggling Bibles Into China Test Of Faith”

“We were in China and were not supposed to be there,” said Terry Madison, president of Open Doors ministry, based in Santa Ana, California. Madison shared his adventures as a smuggler of Bibles into China when he spoke recently at Grace Mennonite Church near Berlin.

Responding to the request of leaders of the house-church movement in China, twenty men from around the world launched Project Pearl—the transporting of one million Bibles to the south shore of China in a single night by tugboat and barge. An order for one million Bibles was placed with Thomas Nelson Publishers of Nashville, Tennessee, to be printed in Chinese Union Script. A barge was built in the Philippines with the capability to be flooded internally, allowing it to float lower in the water so the Bibles could be more easily unloaded and towed to shore. In the planning stage, all the men on the crew were required to be secretive about project details, telling no one except their wives.

There was a lot of faith involved in the venture, Madison said. The small 4x4x3-inch Bibles were packaged in fifty-pound boxes, then bound together into one-ton waterproof packages like enormous slices of bread. Some engineers thought the slices would float; others said they wouldn’t. The 128-ton tug Gabriella, towing the 100-ton barge carrying 232 tons of Bibles, sailed north from Hong Kong through the East China Sea—hundreds of nautical miles—without knowing if the packages of Bibles would float.

Madison, who served as photographer, journalist and cook aboard the tug, was accidentally thrown overboard by a forceful snap of a rope. Madison still remembers seeing “the deck flying by” while being flung into the water. “I have much to praise the Lord for—not only one million Bibles to China, but also my life,” he said.

“When we tried to get that first one-ton package out of the barge, nothing moved,” Madison said. “Nothing moved.” Finally, grudgingly, the first chunk splashed into the sea.

Would it float or would it sink?

The one-ton loaf floated with six inches above the water’s surface.

Just past midnight, after three hours of unloading, the Chinese Christian leaders urged the smugglers to leave to prevent discovery by the authorities. After the crew pushed away from China’s shore and were in international water, they could no longer contain themselves.

“We had a praise and praise and praise meeting,” Madison said. From reports received later, the group learned that water-borne Bibles were retrieved with fishing nets by nearby believers. For a while thereafter, housetops were white with Bibles drying in the sun.

Some of the Project Pearl Bibles were confiscated, some burned and some pushed into the sea after being discovered by authorities, but only a few thousand copies were lost.

In the eighteen years since Project Pearl in 1981, millions of Bibles have been poured into China by Open Doors and other groups. According
to Open Doors, 27 million believers in China are still without a Bible. The group believes that there are 15,000 to 20,000 new believers every day in China.

“Because the church is growing so rapidly we cannot catch up,” Madison said.

The connections with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century missionary-work-as-adventure narratives are clear. We have exotic settings, a dangerous journey, a narrow escape; the first paragraph specifically states that the missionary, speaking at a church, is not sharing his Christian testimony or preaching a sermon, but is telling about “his adventures.” We also hear an echoing of St. Paul’s sea voyage “adventures.” What is new here is the extent to which this tale of clandestine Christian service feels like a Cold War spy narrative. Stories of secret religious meetings and Christian defiance of authoritarian governments are not new, of course. Paul’s narrow escape from Damascus in a basket and images of the disciples gathering secretly in fear after the crucifixion of Jesus (John 20:19) show that such motifs of concealment and rebellion against authority go all the way back and might recur in this sort of literature anytime the circumstances are ripe.

What is different in the case of this Bible smuggling story are the peculiar aspects of technology and nationalism which can be found only in this twentieth-century setting. The story’s focus on the printing and smuggling of such vast numbers of Bibles and the invention and building of special means for their conveyance lends a particularly contemporary feel to the narrative, and the fact that these actions and devices are portrayed as cutting edge, unprecedented in scope, and daring adds to the spy-narrative flavor. The interest in the details of modern technology is clearly akin in narrative purpose to the gadgets with which Q provides James Bond, or to the descriptions of vehicles and weaponry in a Tom Clancy novel.
The specifically anti-Communist context of the story, and all the patriotic images and cultural baggage that accompany that context, constitute the other factor that causes this story to be inevitably associated in the reader’s mind with Cold War spy drama, as opposed to the nineteenth-century adventures, which were either individualistic and divorced from political context, or confidently imperialistic and triumphalist in their blending of religion and nationalism. We see some of the Christian and nationalistic triumphalism being revived in this story—note the huge numbers of Bibles, delivered successfully, and even greater numbers of converts being made daily—but the fear and paranoia of the USSR Cold War analogy carries through in China stories like this, given their sense of a world divided into two nuclear-armed parts, with the victor, or even human survival, still uncertain.

The prominence of the Soviet-based Cold War model in this narrative is no accident, nor merely a natural link being made between one large Communist power and another. The Cold War spy narrative had been used by Bible smugglers and other missionaries to the Soviet Union for years before entering China was a possibility. Open Doors, the Bible smuggling missions organization featured in the Project Pearl story, has direct links with the writer of the most famous memoirs of Soviet-bloc Bible smuggling: Brother Andrew, as the Dutchman Anne van der Bijl was known. Brother Andrew’s *God’s Smuggler* was published in 1967 and, like Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* and Elisabeth Eliot’s account of the lives and deaths of the Auca martyrs in Ecuador, *Through the Gates of Splendor*, was a best-selling and extremely influential narrative in shaping the imagination of late twentieth-century Western Christian missions. Brother Andrew grew up with the anti-Communist propaganda of his day, fighting in the Dutch army to
keep the Indonesian colonies out of the hands of Communist rebels. After his conversion to Christianity, he relates, his youthful anti-Red search for action in the armed services was transformed into a mature, but still anti-Communist, quest for what he describes as his life’s real adventure, Christian service. Brother Andrew works in the tradition of *Hero Tales from Mission Lands* as he describes how his youthful longing for adventure came to fruition: he not only describes the Christian life as an adventure, but claims it is the only real and fulfilling adventure in the world.\(^{68}\) The formerly dull Bible suddenly reads like “a fast-paced action yarn” to his new Christian self, and his life as a missionary will be one of “perpetual risk and danger.”\(^{69}\) He is called to be a Bible smuggler and encourager of the persecuted underground church in the Soviet Union. Perhaps even more than the actual content of *God’s Smuggler*, the marketing of the book shows its links to Cold War espionage fiction. The front cover of the book shows Brother Andrew in the foreground in black and white wearing a trenchcoat and fedora, looking for all the world like the stereotypical spy, and glancing over his shoulder at the red-shaded border guard, the gate, and the Soviet flag beyond. A blurb from the *Los Angeles Times* review superimposed on this cover art reads, “Tension builds page by page in this remarkable true document . . . more thrilling than a spy story with its numerous near escapes and mounting climaxes of danger.”

To make the link between this sort of anti-Communist missionary narrative and the China narratives, Brother Andrew’s account ends with a gesture toward China, reporting a discouraging 1965 trip which makes the missionary fear that the Communists have succeeded in eradicating public interest in religion there, but which also makes him pray for someone who will carry his missionary work into the PRC. Brother Andrew
found that successor to his Bible-smuggling work and to his style of Cold War narrative in Doug Sutphen, who in his work went by the name Brother David. (The use of code names is another spy-story staple that is carried forward into the Asia context.) In 1981, early in the process of China’s opening up, Brother David published *God’s Smuggler to China*, with a foreword by Brother Andrew. Detailing his early associations with China and with Brother Andrew’s memoirs, Sutphen tells stories of daring Bible smuggling, accomplished at first using Chinese Christians to enter the country even before its “opening up,” and of increasingly audacious projects involving Hong Kong Chinese and then foreigners as China begins its reforms of the late 1970s. His methods and his spy-story narrative style are based very much on those of his mentor, and later colleague in Open Doors Ministry, the cold warrior Brother Andrew. The book ends by hinting at, but carefully not describing any specifics of, the most recent project in the works, the biggest Bible smuggling operation in history: Project Pearl.

It should be no surprise then that Terry Madison’s story told in 1999 should sound a bit like a Cold War throwback. The story took place before the Cold War ended and before it was even clear just how much China would open up to religious freedom; the fact that Terry Madison is telling the story at a church near Berlin ten years after the fall of Communism there (and ten years after the triumph of Communist authority in Beijing) also goes some distance toward explaining the spy-story feel of the narration.

There are some flaws in Madison’s story, of course, some anachronisms and inconsistencies that make the Cold War narrative analogy seem less than apt in 1999. For one thing, the story does not explain satisfactorily why, in this Communist atmosphere of repression and danger, the villagers were unafraid to dry the Bibles out in the open, on
their rooftops. It is a literally and figuratively brilliant image, but problematic in terms of narrative logic. Along the same lines, the story does not say how, if the smugglers had to rush off so quickly, the local fishermen were able to catch and unload and transport over 200 tons of Bibles in just a few hours and lose only a few thousand of them. These details are explained by another fact that is elided for the sake of the action and probably also for the sake of consistency with the Soviet analogy—the Berlin audience and most Americans are more familiar with the USSR than with China, after all—and that is the fact that the Bible, specifically the Union translation of the Bible, is and was in 1981 a legal book in the PRC. While local officials would probably be greatly annoyed at an illegal American incursion into Chinese waters, they probably did not care all that much about the Bibles. In the early 1980s, China began to print its own copies of the Union Bible at a rate of over 100,000 a year. Since 1987, when the U.S.-China joint venture Amity Press opened, over 30 million Bibles have been printed in Nanjing. The storyteller, even in 1999, gives his audience the distinct impression that smuggling organizations like Open Doors are still the only source of Bibles for the burgeoning Chinese Christian population. To be fair, the Open Doors website does describe the legal printing of Bibles by the Chinese government, though it claims the need is still far greater than government printing quotas can satisfy. Aikman claims that it was Project Pearl that in part shamed the CCP into beginning its own Bible printing, but in general, as we see from what is left out of this underground-missionary narrative, the relative freedom of religion in the PRC is a problem for the underground missionaries, who think the Cold War narrative models to be useful or essential to their cause.
The spy-story trappings are not dying out on the China mission field, however. Another smuggling organization like Open Doors calls itself “Mission: Possible,” a clever play on words, but also a clear capitulation to the conventions of a popular genre and a familiar historical model that could mislead Westerners as to the actual situation on the ground in China. David Aikman describes how many young missionaries, even those doing legal work, often speak about Christian matters using code language: “G” or “Dad” for God, “Bird” for the Holy Spirit, “PRC” for “pray to receive Christ.”\[74 I have met missionaries from the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF, the successor organization to Hudson Taylor’s legendary nineteenth-century-founded China Inland Mission) who take part in a mixture of legal work and underground evangelism and use simple code like “HC” for “house church” when they are in China. The very use of the word “underground” to describe the unregistered church in China is more of a Western missionary custom than a Chinese one. Chinese Christians, whether they belong to the official church or not, are more likely to say “house church.”

It is difficult to say that these spy-story attitudes are outdated or completely unnecessary; the situation in China is sometimes unpredictable, and persecution of house-church Christians is real. What is easier to see and to criticize is the way in which these attitudes often tie in to the Cold War nationalism, described in chapter two, that sees U.S. triumph and CCP defeat (again on the model of the collapsed USSR) rather than slow reform as the end of the story. This nationalism also tends to narrate the official church decidedly into the government—and therefore the enemy—camp, rather than telling stories of possible reconciliation of the divided Church in China. As evidence of the former trend—the patriotic, even militaristic, links between underground missionary
narrative and U.S. anti-China nationalistic narratives—another version of the Project

The CIA had kept the operation under surveillance from the moment that [boats] left the Philippines and watched with growing astonishment by satellite as the tugboat and barge anchored, discharged cargo, and returned. Midway back to the Philippines across the South China Sea, a two-plane fighter patrol from a U.S. Seventh Fleet carrier did a 360-degree surveillance sweep of the smuggler expedition and dipped its wings in a salute before departing. On his return to Manila, Doug Sutphen was invited to the U.S. embassy to talk about his operation and was introduced to cheering marines in the embassy basement.75

This version could hardly sound more like the conclusion to a high-tech spy novel, and its marriage of Christian mission to American military and political mission might be uncomfortable to many. The other phenomenon mentioned above, that of spy-narrative necessity for a black-and-white negative portrayal of the “puppet” official church, is well illustrated by the distrust of the underground missionary I met in my opening narrative, and by a house-church-Christian friend of mine, who often told me stories of Chinese Christians ratted out by official church clergy for doing missionary work with the house-church movement.

The complex Chinese situation, which does indeed include betrayal, persecution, and religious martyrdom, also presents inconvenient and inconsistent concessions to religious freedom that threaten to ruin the tight underground-missionary narrative, but the appeal of the house-church movement and the espionage adventure narratives attached to them persist. This is no doubt because of the strength of American nationalist Cold War narratives, but there may be another reason. Theologian Robert Webber talks about the “Trail of Blood” theory that he grew up with and that is still current in many Protestant churches; this is a meta-narrative of Church history according to which “True Christians
[. . .] always stood outside the established church.” Whether in the U.S. or in China, there is a powerful strain of Protestant thought that associates splittists and the underground with orthodoxy, persecution itself (remember Paul’s boasting about his troubles) being the sign of God’s blessing. Cold War anti-Communist narratives are significant, but only one thread in a tapestry of American thought that tends to favor the underground church in China.

More conciliatory and further removed from political controversy on either side of the ocean are the legal missionaries and their narratives. This other kind of missionary in China now favors a missiology that tends to be more accommodationalist, in the tradition of the Jesuits and some of the liberalizing Protestant missionaries of 100 years ago. The stories of these missionaries are not cloak and dagger spy stories. They are less “sexy” than those of their counterpart missionaries who deal with the underground churches. These missionaries are generally careful to obey the laws of China, in direct contrast to underground missionaries, whose stories often depend on opposition to the powers that be and the flaunting of human laws that are not God’s laws. Both groups find justification for their methods in the early Biblical missionary narratives. The underground missionaries are following the example of the Apostle Peter, when he defies the Sanhedrin with these words: “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29). The “legal missionaries” are taking seriously Paul’s advice concerning submission to the ruling authorities (Romans 13).

The laws of China forbid open proselytizing, so the legal missionaries attempt to do their work within those legal restrictions and rely largely on “lifestyle evangelism,” spreading their beliefs through example and through private conversations with students.
and colleagues. One pamphlet from a major sending organization called “Educational Resources and Referrals—China” (ERRC) identifies the sort of applicant they are looking for as it describes this evangelistic method:

In light of our commitment, our prayer is that the lifestyle, integrity, & servanthood of our program participants will be respected by the Chinese. ERRC expects its participants to be image-bearers of Christ: to live a transformed life that reflects the values of a Christian worldview, expressed with cultural relevance, through their profession, speech, & behavior. (emphasis in original)

In practice, their evangelism tends to be cautious and low-key rather than openly heroic, so their stories often keep the travelogue style of earlier missionary narratives but lack the adventurous flair of the underground missionary stories.

The pamphlet cited above is subtitled “Changing the Heart of China: One Life at a Time,” and this points up another important difference between the two schools of missionary work in China and the stories they tell. The first group of missionaries rely in their stories on spy—and adventure—genre conventions and on “more bang for your buck” big-number claims of efficiency: tons of Bibles and enormous numbers of converts, rather than a student here or a teacher there. Terry Madison says the Church in China is growing by 15-20,000 members per day; it is easy to find other claims of a similar 3-5 million (or even more) a year. The first group of missionaries concentrate mostly on rural “unreached” areas, following the “10/40 Window” paradigm and the other narratives of world evangelization. By contrast, the second group of missionaries, the “legal” missionaries who come as “foreign experts,” usually work in urban areas, where the jobs are and where the official church is stronger. Since they do not work directly with church planting or public evangelism, they cannot tell supporters back home stories of a million Bibles unloaded into the ocean or of revival meetings with a thousand
converts. “Legal missionary” narratives, rather, tend to make up for the impact of sheer numbers of converts by recourse to the classic top-down narrative of evangelization favored by the Jesuits and others. Rather than imagining a grassroots Christianity, millions strong, arising in the hinterland of China, the legal missionaries frequently in their stories make reference to the relative importance of the few people with whom they come into contact and have been able to “influence for Christ.” The excitement lost in the mundane openness of their witness is compensated in the narratives by a “brush with greatness” factor as important people appear on stage, and by visions of sudden and dramatic change in China instituted from the halls of power, rather than through revolution from below.

Let me here cite a couple of articles from the ERRC winter 1999 newsletter. These narratives illustrate nicely the substitution of quiet powerful stories of influencing a few at the top, compared with the flashy underground stories of a million Bibles and thousands of converts; these are stories claiming priority of quality over quantity. This is not exactly the liberal Social Gospel postmillennialism of the nineteenth century, but it leans more in that direction, and more toward Christianization than the underground missionaries’ (and house-church movements’) fast-moving premillenialist evangelization. First we have a personal narrative from Larry and Harlean Steginks, a retired couple from Washington State who taught at Peking University, which is widely acknowledged to be the top university in China. Typically kind and generous, low-key in their evangelism compared to their wild underground counterparts, the Steginks only relate one concrete story here of a student growing in the Christian faith as a result of their influence. No doubt they have many more such stories—though probably nothing to compare with the
quantity of the other brand of missionaries—but they focus only on the one ordinary

citizen, and on his growth and persistence in the faith, rather than on a dramatic
conversion story. The couple spends another longer paragraph (these two paragraphs
together make up more than half of the short essay) talking about the relative importance
of the people they have the opportunity to minister to.

We met China’s best students who are leaders today or will be
China’s leaders tomorrow. Two students were part of China’s negotiating
team in border disputes with neighboring countries. Another student was
an interpreter and liaison for the government’s effort to establish
democratic elections in rural villages throughout China. Another student
served as secretary/speech writer for China’s top leaders. One student high
up in the Public Security Bureau [PSB], whose English skills needed much
practice, became our friend and used his “guanxi” (relationship) to
entertain us while he improved his speaking skills. A petroleum engineer,
ot our student, has become a special friend because he shared his life
struggles and allowed us to counsel his decisions. These students and
many others are the “unexpected” and surprising people whom teachers
would like to meet. We met them and will remember them. We count it a
privilege to have been their teachers. 79

We see here the promise that their good influence will change China from the top down,
and though there is a seemingly politicized link made between their Christian influence
and China’s democratization of the sort we might expect from the underground, there is
also a somewhat un-American lack of embarrassment about partaking, however slightly,
in the fruits of the PSB’s petty corruption. The story expresses a mixture of both
American nationalism and a pragmatism that would rather work within a corrupt Chinese
system than openly flout China’s unjust religious policies.

Sheila Wayman’s story takes ERRC’s influence straight to the top echelons of
power:

My most memorable lesson [about taking apparent interruptions as
“divine appointments”] occurred on April 29, 1998, when I was taken out
of my scheduled role as a teacher and an hour later placed in an unknown
role at a meeting, where I was told I would meet someone famous. That someone turned out to be the president of China, Jiang Ze Min. During the meeting attended by 100 Chinese and only two foreigners, he spoke directly to me four times, and when he shook my hand at the meeting’s end, he said, “I’m very happy that you were here today.” I replied, “I’m very glad I was here today, too.” Then with trembling knees and both my hands encasing his, I added, “I pray for China and I pray for you as China’s leader!”

A similar exchange has been reported to have taken place between President Jiang and the Evangelical Christian representative in a visiting American religious delegation in February of the same year. Jiang has admitted to curiosity about religion, probably largely out of politeness, and many Christians hold firmly to such comments as reason for great hope. The underground missionaries have their secrecy and their claims of enormous numbers of converts, which frankly often strain credulity, but which, of course, cannot be easily denied, primarily because of the groups’ underground nature; the legal missionaries have their brushes with greatness and high hopes for gradual or sudden top-down reform. Chinese Christians are themselves not immune to such semi-elitist desires to win the powerful and not just the poor. Tony Lambert quotes a government document that nervously reported local Christians as preaching, “To convert a Party member is equal to 100 peasants; but to convert a Party Secretary is equal to converting 1,000 peasants!”

The legal missionaries will also, like the Jesuits and like some of the nineteenth-century Protestants, frequently seek out Christian analogues in Chinese culture to bridge gaps and aid evangelism. They will often cite the Christianized histories of China discussed above, such as the links between early Chinese history and the Old Testament Jews or between the early Chinese philosopher Mozi’s principle of universal love (jian’ai, 兼愛) and Christian charity. The president of one sending organization wrote a
newsletter lead article in which she tells a story demonstrating that Christians are like Lei Feng, a legendary Communist Party member and do-gooder servant of the people.83

Finally, while the underground missionary narratives have strong links to patriotic American nationalism, the legal missionary narratives, in contrast, especially the recruitment literature, are strongly founded on challenges to the spiritual health of the U.S. In accordance with the circling sun narrative of Christian history, one brochure calls China the “edge of the world,” that is, the cutting edge of God’s plan, while at the same time openly expressing concerns about the future of U.S. Christianity.84 Interested parties are encouraged to sign up in order, presumably, to follow the sun of Christian faith across the ocean to its new city on a hill: “Many find their spiritual life deepened and transformed in ways that are difficult to accomplish in the hectic materialistic world of America.”85 These sorts of advertisements for the mission field are easy to find in the nineteenth-century literature as well. The aforementioned Japanese Robinson Crusoe begins his memoirs with this statement of purpose:

My object in composing this work is partly to secure the attention and interest of the young people. For I see some dangers arising from the effect of the wonderful progress of this country in the development of machinery, and from the tremendous power of money. These two are most convenient substances, and have saved a great deal of time and of human labor. But, on the other hand, they corrupt the hearts of many of the younger generation; leading them to seek after pleasure, luxury, and a life without labor. The “Japanese Crusoe” will tell them that there is nothing which can be bought without a price; even for the Gospel one must pay faith and devotion.86

The appeal of material wealth and comfort and the negative effects this new prosperity might have on spiritual life have always been of concern to prosperous Christian societies; increasingly it is a concern of Christians in China itself. Again, the president of ERRC says this about China: “As in any developing or ‘money chasing’ society,
materialism easily grabs people’s hearts, and then the spirit of serving the people can barely survive.”

American Christians may soon leave for the mission field in China, hoping to escape ease and materialism, and find the same devils waiting for them when they arrive.

Conclusion

The underground and legal missionaries, and their narratives, are not always so easily distinguishable as I may have implied. David Aikman’s Jesus in Beijing is a curious example of the confluence of the two sets of narratives. Though the majority of Aikman’s study is straightforward reporting about many different aspects of Christianity in China today, in the background is a highly optimistic vision of a Christianized China that will cease to be a fierce competitor of the U.S. and become our greatest ally. Aikman takes a shotgun approach to this rosy narrative of U.S./China relations; as we might expect from someone who so tightly marries religious and political concerns, he focuses more strongly on the work of the house churches and their bottom-up approach, but at the same time he explicitly invokes the Emperor Constantine narrative of top-down national conversion. And though again he favors the house-church movement as the underground missionaries do, he clearly looks for not only a fully evangelized but a truly Christianized China taking part in a practically postmillennialist Kingdom of Heaven on this earth:

A Christianized China may spend less time thinking of ways to outmaneuver and neutralize the U.S. than the military strategists of the current regime. This is not because they will have ceased to be patriotic, but because they will not see the world as a dog-eat-dog squabble between major powers. […] A Christianized China, now an emergent global power, might find itself wanting to take on some of the burdens that the
U.S. has carried for the past five decades. [. . . A] Christianized China would be unlikely to consent to any resolution of Middle East problems that allows for the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state. A Christianized China would seek to make the world safe for Christian missionary endeavor, especially within the Islamic domains. I do not think that China would try to bully its way into the hearts of Muslims in the way Western imperial powers tried to do into the hearts of Chinese in the nineteenth century. [. . . A] Christianized China might find itself eager to ensure international law and order wherever it had the capability of doing so: suppression of piracy on the South China Sea, for example, or in the Straits of Malacca.\textsuperscript{89}

Christians may pray for such a utopian future for the PRC and the world, but thankfully Aikman is also realistic about the darker possibility of China as a new superpower engaging in policies of “dangerous and vengeful nationalism.”\textsuperscript{90} Christians may hope for the happy ending for China in this world or the next, but it is nationalism, not Christianity, that is yet the dominant narrative in the PRC, and the Church and its missionaries seem still to be as divided in their vision of the future of China as they are in their stories about the present.
Notes


2 All Bible references are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

3 Bosch 56-83.


6 Jenkins 35.


9 Miller 282.

10 Bosch 302.

11 We should note here that, despite some criticisms of Professor Fairbank in this chapter and the next, his work on The Missionary Enterprise and other projects was seminal in opening up the study of Christianity in China even before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Fairbank’s personal politics, and the limited access to China available to Western scholars before the Reform Era, led him in some of his work to
conclusions that others too have faulted, but his importance in the field is unquestioned. Even more significant, the integrity and good will Fairbank always showed in personally encouraging work that comes to very different conclusions from his own is above criticism. See, for example, Daniel Bays, ed., Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996) v, vii.

12 Bosch 8-9.


14 This sentence is found in the standard State-issued contract given to all foreign teachers for at least the past seven years.


16 I have always felt subject to more administrative control over my teaching in the U.S. classroom than I ever experienced in China, and teacher/student relationships in China are generally more personal and less subject to concerns about abuse than in the U.S. (I must add here that, while this overall lack of academic oversight and the cultural absence of a category of behavior called—and therefore absence of public concern about—“sexual harassment” is refreshing to Christian teachers who tend to be responsible and careful in their work and in their contacts with students, it is by no means an unqualified good. Stories frequently make their way through the ex-pat grapevine about abuses of power committed by some employers and teachers in China.)

17 All this information should be accurate for the major cities of China, but situations will vary from school to school and may be quite different in places where foreign teachers are a new phenomenon. Peter Hessler, a Peace Corps volunteer and one
of the first foreign teachers ever to teach at the Fuling Teachers College, found considerable resistance to foreign ways and a ban on Christmas carols even in the late 1990s. See Peter Hessle, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (New York: Harper, 2001) 336-37.

18 Aikman 278.


21 Mueller 29.

22 Jenkins 26, 170.

23 Quoted in Aikman 28.

24 *Analects* 12.19.


33 Quoted in Lambert 9.

34 Bosch 339.

35 Mueller 28.
Both the early apostles and Christ himself are often called “witnesses” in reference to how they would reveal the truth of God to the people of the world. That a nation “has not been left without a witness” is common Christian lingo when discussing the possibility of common grace. That is, that a pre-Christian or pagan people may know some portion of God’s truth instinctively, or may have played host to some Christian missionary or Hebraic prophet that their history does not record. (See Acts 1:8, Revelation 1:5, and Romans 1:19-20.)


Bosch 479.


Carne, vol. 2, 327.

Carne, vol. 2, 323.


48 Bosch 327.

49 Moorhead xv.

50 For more on Back to Jerusalem, see Aikman 196-99 and Kindopp 134.


53 Ricci 3-4.

54 Ricci 462.

55 Carne 327.


Nairne 5.

Moorhead 101.

Carne 276.


Hunter 173.


reprinted almost verbatim. I have made minor editorial changes only to correct clear typographical errors in the original text, or to maintain a consistency of format between the story and my own text, for example, changing format to standard paragraphing and spacing, and substituting spelled numbers for Arabic numerals.

68 Brother Andrew, with Elizabeth Sherrill and John Sherrill, God’s Smuggler (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001) 30.

69 Brother Andrew 40, 44.


73 Aikman 270.

74 Aikman 280.

75 Aikman 269.


77 For more on the liberalizing of Protestant missions, especially from 1900 on, see William R. Hutchison’s essay in Fairbank’s Missionary Enterprise as well as M. Searle Bates’s. Lutz’s survey of the rise of the Christian schools is also relevant. John King Fairbank, ed, The Missionary Enterprise in China and America (Cambridge, Mass.:

78 ERRC: Changing the Heart of China—One Life at a Time (Berkeley, CA: ERRC, 2000).


81 The story, apparently true, making the rounds among Christians in Beijing that year, was that the Rev. Don Argue presented President Jiang with the gift of a Bible and the President claimed to have a strong interest in religion and to read the Bible and other holy books often. This story raised in some circles sudden and, as it turned out, unwarranted hopes of possible conversion at the highest levels of the Chinese bureaucracy.

82 Lambert 238.


84 *Take it to the edge* (Berkeley, CA: ERRC, 2000).

85 ERRC’s Programs for Professionals (Berkeley, CA: ERRC, 2000).


87 Chan 1.

88 Aikman 292.
89 Aikman 286-87.

90 Aikman 289.
Chapter Four

Chinese Christianity in Contemporary American Literature

The stories told about the Christian Church in China today by contemporary American writers of fiction and nonfiction represent not a large body of work, but certainly the most complex variety of texts to be dealt with in any single chapter of this study. I will try to bring some order and coherence to this florilegium, as I have attempted in the previous chapters, using the theoretical framework that began this study. These published “mini-narratives” will provide, at the most basic level, mimetic accounts of Chinese Christianity and of the writers’ encounters with the Church in China. But these texts also contribute to and reveal meta-narrative levels of meaning; like the missionary mini-narratives, these too partake in and are shaped by national, racial, and religious meta-narratives. They also form part of a literary metahistory, a story about the progress of storytelling in America, that I will attempt to descry and set forth in the pages below.

We saw in chapter two how governmental and national narratives draw much of their strength from their univocality and their clear us-vs.-them plotline; “Our system is better than yours. Yours will have to change,” is the simple message we hear from both sides. Regarding religious freedom in mainland China, the U.S. government and its media are almost unified in their messages: “The liberty of the Chinese people is still insufficient,” they say, and they have the stories to prove it. The reply from the Chinese side is this: “Our liberty is sufficient for now. We are as liberal with our citizens as our material conditions allow us to be. Do not meddle in our internal affairs.” The controlled media of China is naturally even more useful than the U.S. press in its ability to amplify
the one-note missives that originate in government conclaves. “Religion is alive and well in China amid ‘golden period,’” trumpets one late-‘90s China Daily headline.

In chapter three we learned how the divisions within China’s Christian Church affect missionary literature coming out of that country and vice versa. The split of the Chinese Church into the “mostly free” official church and the “mostly unfree” house churches has had little effect on American nationalist narratives back home, which take the overall Chinese picture to be “mostly unfree” and leave it at that. However, the split does place a significant fork in the road for Christians doing missionary work in China proper. They have very real decisions to make about how and with whom they will go about the work of evangelizing China, and these decisions have a very real effect on the narratives they tell about the Church in China. Those narratives in turn have repercussions for public perception, government policy, and the vocations discerned by the next generation of missionaries.

This present chapter is not about the opposing monologues of chapter two, nor about the dialogue of chapter three. Rather, it is about a multiplicity of voices and narrative styles and agenda. We will look at texts by recent immigrants from China and by second-generation “American-born Chinese,” by white American writers who have spent many years in China and by foreign writers who have visited China for only a few days at a time, by writers whose meta-narrative worldview is fundamentalist Christian and writers who put Chinese Christianity into a feminist or secular humanist meta-narrative framework.

It may at first be difficult to imagine that such a diverse, and diffuse, set of narratives could have significant bearing on the state of Christianity in mainland China,
particularly compared to the near-primal force and vast reach of nationalist and Christian and Marxist meta-narratives, but we should not underestimate the power of the more modest literary texts below. In the first place, some of these writers have obvious mass-culture appeal and therefore potentially as much influence as any other medium and more than most. Peter Hessler and Randy Alcorn may not be household names at the moment, but millions of Americans have read what Amy Tan and Tom Clancy have written about Christianity in China. These writers’ portrayals of religion in mainland China have direct and powerful influence, for good or ill, over Americans’ beliefs and emotions about that country. Secondly, the contents of these books have cultural force that we must heed, as do the news stories and missionary narratives of the previous chapters, simply because of the nature of narrative described in chapter one. These small narratives are shaped by meta-narratives and may themselves shape our larger cultural narratives in turn; narratives attach themselves to, and become part of the life of, the reader. Even works with relatively small audiences—like the contemporary missionary narratives of chapter three, some of which were printed in mission organization newsletters with miniscule numbers of readers—may, by participating in larger meta-narrative structures, borrow some gravity out of proportion with their limited readership. Finally, even if a text holds small sway in the culture at large, the writer’s approach to her subject may serve to underscore some more potent cultural trends that have shaped that writer’s individual vision of Christianity in China.

These visions are in the end individual, however, more personal and self-expressive and less monolithic or “group-expressive” in their concerns than the narratives we have studied up to this point, and so at the very least we are faced with an
organizational challenge. The novels, memoirs, and travelogues in this chapter, while they all offer some perspective on Christianity in China, are rarely significantly controlled by a Christian meta-narrative or an anti-Christian meta-narrative; the Christian Church in China is almost never at the center of the text. I have therefore tried to group writers together in logical, and largely but imperfectly chronological, divisions. This structure will allow us to discern trends both diachronic and synchronic and to give sufficient attention to the peculiar features of each writer’s personal observations.

We will begin with a discussion of the question of “authenticity” in order to describe the critical lacuna that surrounds religious matters in these works and to introduce several of the themes that will recur throughout the main sections of the chapter. After addressing the authenticity question, the first section of literary overview will be a review of popular literature about China from the half-century leading up to China’s late-1970s opening to the West. Pearl S. Buck’s The Good Earth (1931) and the literary opening of the West to Chinese settings and characters will merit special attention here. Defining “contemporary” (dangdai, 当代), as the term is typically understood in Chinese literary studies, to indicate the years since China’s Reform Era began, we will then commence our study of contemporary American literature on China with the travel literature of the 1970s and ’80s. These works represent some of the first glimpses afforded white Americans of the work Mao had wrought in China since the “bamboo curtain” was shut in the early 1950s. Paul Theroux’s Riding the Iron Rooster (1988), Stuart Stevens’s Night Train to Turkistan (1988), and the more recent River Town by Peter Hessler (2001) will serve as the foci of this section. The third section will treat the case of “Chinese-American” literature, defined somewhat hotly by Frank Chin as writing
by ethnic Chinese who are “American born and raised, who got their China [. . .] from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture.” We shall see in the works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan that they also “got their China” from the emigrant generation that preceded them, from their mothers and fathers. Two Chinese-born but highly integrated, or Westernized, writers, Bette Bao Lord and Nien Cheng, will make up the fourth section with their novels and memoirs about converted Chinese women. Two white male novelists with strong and conservative agenda will form the centerpiece of the penultimate section: Randy Alcorn in Safely Home (2001) has written the most thorough contemporary fictional treatment of the place of Christians in China today, the only “Christian novel” we will cover here; Tom Clancy’s recent Jack Ryan political thriller, The Bear and the Dragon (2000), shares Alcorn’s and Aikman’s conservative Christian hopes for China’s future, and his version of future events has reached a larger (if perhaps not “wider”) audience than either of those writers could hope for. I will end the chapter with a discussion of a key passage from Ha Jin’s Waiting (1999). Ha Jin is a rarity in American literature, a recent immigrant from China who writes English-language fiction set in China, and he likely represents a step forward in American reception of the “Other” in literature. That his most popular and critically lauded novel treats Christian subject matter, however briefly and mysteriously, from within the setting of China’s Cultural Revolution makes him a writer to watch as we continue to study future narratives of Chinese Christianity.
Two Sides of Authenticity

It is surprising how scanty is the critical attention that has been paid to the religious content of the texts under review here. Apart from advancing my own themes, therefore, this chapter and the next should serve as a small rain after a long drought and an invitation to others to give fuller consideration to an oft-ignored aspect of this literature. Regarding the writers of the last thirty years who will be discussed below, only one journal article has been published that addresses at any length the place of Christianity in their work: Patricia Marby Harrison’s “Genocide or Redemption? Asian American Autobiography and the Portrayal of Christianity in Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club and Joy Kogawa’s Obasan.”

It is appropriate that Tan should get whatever little coverage Chinese Christianity has received. Apart from Tom Clancy, who has never received much serious attention from literary scholars, Tan has sold the most books and garnered the most public attention of all these writers, and, apart from Randy Alcorn, who is writing mainly for a limited conservative Christian audience, Tan’s treatment of Christian characters and situations is the most extensive. It seems strange, however, that even she has not been studied more in this light; at times critics seem even to avoid the subject of Christianity when it would be natural to address it. Jimmy Louie, from Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife, is probably the most significant Christian character in the writer’s four novels. He is the main character’s father—based largely on Tan’s own father—and the pastor of the local Chinese Baptist Church. In Amy Tan: A Critical Companion, E. D. Huntley mentions Jimmy only a handful of times in her Kitchen God chapter as she covers the “plot development,” “character development,” and “major themes and issues.”

Jimmy is described as “kindly,” but not as a Christian pastor. At the
end of the chapter, the last time he is mentioned, he is finally called, “Jimmy Louie, minister.”

By this point, however, unless Huntley’s reader has already read the novel, this description will be incoherent and perhaps give the impression that Jimmy holds a government position. Neither Huntley nor Harold Bloom, in his two edited collections of essays on Tan, spends even a full paragraph on Christianity in Tan’s work, in spite of the fact that Tan herself has credited Bible stories with having a strong influence on her own stories and has said that she learned how to structure a narrative from listening to her father’s sermons.

We see similarly odd omissions when we read the newspaper reviews of Nien Cheng’s 1986 Cultural Revolution memoir Life and Death in Shanghai. Cheng is a devout Christian who often describes her prayers and her belief in a “just and merciful God” as defining factors in her character formation and in helping her survive interrogation and torture with dignity. In their reviews of the book, the Christian Science Monitor and the New York Review of Books make natural and not ostentatious mention of Cheng’s faith—Judith Shapiro mentions how Cheng “prayed to her Christian god [. . .] to sustain herself”—but two other reviews, in the New York Times and the London Times Literary Supplement, are oddly silent. J. M. Coetzee in the New York Times says that it is her “sentiment of innocence” that “kept Mrs. Cheng alive and fighting,” but nothing about the role her religious convictions played in the drama. Coetzee creates another natural but missed opportunity to mention Cheng’s religiosity when he describes a tone of “self-righteousness” as the only jarring note in an otherwise fine piece of writing. And Delia Davin for the Times of London ignores Cheng’s faith even as she spends a paragraph describing what makes Cheng different from the other Chinese
sufferers during the Cultural Revolution. Her lack of faith in the Party, her wealth and privilege, her hold on the hope of seeing her daughter again—all these things set Cheng apart, according to Davin, but one of the most obvious points, her Christian faith, is left out of the list. This near-complete lack of critical interest in the Christian characters and themes in even those works most concerned with Christian matters cannot be fully remedied in this chapter, but just as these two central chapters build on Lewis Robinson’s Double-Edged Sword, I hope my work also can serve as a building block for future study.

Much of the lack of interest in dealing with Christianity in the “Chinese-American” context is surely a matter of the declining personal interest in religion generally among literary circles in the twentieth century. But I would argue that American literature about China also constitutes a special case in this regard—that is, critics are especially uninterested in Chinese Christianity—which leads me here to introduce a theme that will recur in several of the sections below: authenticity. What a writer and what the American audience consider to be “authentically Chinese” will shape large sections of these writers’ narratives and particularly how they deal with Christianity, just as it may shape the ways in which critics write about these books. As we read in the government documents of chapter two, Christianity—though it has in fact been in China in one form or another for over a millennium and, even using the more conservative date of the Jesuit arrival in China, still predates Marxism in China by almost three centuries—is often considered a newcomer to China and a foreign intruder. To be fair, Chinese culture, as official histories often report, goes back five thousand years, three millennia before the birth of Christ. The Christian missionary claim over the
Chinese soul, therefore, has often been disputed by Chinese since Christianity’s arrival and by Westerners at least since Voltaire used China as his model of the secular society, a society that was moral without the Catholic Church. We will see in the next chapter that the Christian Church in China today has become much stronger in its indigenous character (thanks, ironically, to the Communist Party’s policy of enforced separation of foreign and Chinese Christians), and Yang Fenggang in his 1999 sociological study Chinese Christians in America has done groundbreaking work on how Chinese Christians in the U.S. reconcile “Chineseness” and Christianity, but the notion that authentic Chineseness and authentic Christianity are mutually exclusive categories was common through the late twentieth century and still cannot be pronounced dead today.

“One more Christian; one less Chinese” is a saying that came out of resistance to the great century of Protestant missions, and contemporary American writers are still dealing with this stereotype or pushing against it. We can hear the idea expressed somewhat obliquely by Laurence G. Thompson in his popular Chinese Religion: An Introduction. In the 1996 fifth edition of his work, Thompson continues to posit a religious “Chineseness” as the only religion in China and to claim that Buddhism is the “only religion of non-Chinese origin that succeeded in naturalizing itself in China.” All other foreign faiths crashed and broke against the cliffs of Chineseness and “remained what they were when they came to China: foreign.” This may have seemed a fair conclusion when Chinese Religion was first published in 1969, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, but the wildfire spread of interest in “foreign” religion since 1979 signals a need for the reconsideration of the definition of “Chineseness” to make room, as Yang Fenggang and others have done, for a broader assimilative identity.
Many left-leaning Western scholars during China’s Communist era suggested hopefully that Marxism had enabled the Chinese to return to the natural secular Confucian Chineseness envisioned by Voltaire. Sinologists like John King Fairbank and Barbara Tuchman were able to visit China in 1972 in the early days of U.S./China détente and seem largely to have taken the China they were shown then at face value. In a famous 1972 essay published in *Foreign Affairs*, Fairbank shares his favorable impression of the progress China has made. Compared with the 1930s (a time of civil and international war), he says, “the dogs and the flies are gone, rows of poplars and electric lines march across the flat North China landscape, electric pumps supply new irrigation ditches, and crops in the big fields are diversified and interplanted. The people seem healthy, well fed and articulate about their role as citizens of Chairman Mao’s new China.”\(^{15}\) In language similar to Thompson’s, and written in the same era, Fairbank credits a monolithic and homogeneous “Chineseness” with the ability to make so much progress in only forty years and states his belief that Marxism resonates with natural Chineseness more than Confucianism does (the contradiction between Chinese identity being shaped by Confucianism, and Confucianism as the oppressor of true Chineseness, is not resolved) and more than foreign religion can.\(^{16}\) (In this essay, foreign religion is equivalent to foreign imperialism, the other great evil after Confucianism.) Fairbanks concludes, “The Maoist revolution is on the whole the best thing that has happened to the Chinese people in many centuries,” and he follows up by advertising for Marxism in the West: “Since Maoism, including Marxism-Leninism, has got results inside the country, its validity abroad stands to reason.”\(^{17}\) Thompson and Fairbank, and to a lesser extent Tuchman in her *Notes from China* (also 1972 and discussed in more detail below) are expressing,
quite reasonably for the most part, the apparent fact that Christianity, at least the foreign, conquering Christianity that China had seen up through Liberation in 1949, is incompatible with the Chinese character.

Such essentialism needs rethinking these days, but we will see the same notion clearly stated below by Pearl S. Buck and more implicitly in the Chinese-American literature. Asian-American writers born in the U.S. have much more trouble, as we should expect and as we will see in comparison with Ha Jin and the Chinese writers in chapter five, with the issue of authenticity. They tend to be more defensive about Christianity than are the Chinese writers who were born in the mainland. The most visceral and rabidly anti-Christian voice among them is that of novelist/playwright/critic Frank Chin, who in 1985 described the work of Christianity in China as a genocide: “A Chinese Christian is like a Nazi Jew.” Chin is unpopular with more moderate writers, and particularly with women writers like Tan and Kingston, but those more famous Chinese Americans, too, reveal a similar background of resistance to Christian faith and a seeking after and embracing of something they feel to be more essentially Chinese and more authentically themselves.

Although the texts studied herein cannot be simplistically lined up in chronological order to reveal a systematic change in the portrayal of Chinese Christianity over time—these writers and their concerns are far too diverse for that, and our historical distance from them is yet too small—there is at least one other theme whose progression we can trace broadly through the years we will cover. This trend is the other side of the authenticity above, the mirror image of the defensive Asian-American writers’ concern with authenticity: that is, the white American readers’ concern with Chinese identity and
authenticity. If the Chinese-American writers are asking “What is a Chinese person?” and “Can a Chinese person be a Christian?” in order genuinely to express to the reader the Chinese-American condition, then Caucasian-American writers and the vast potential white-American readership of these books are asking the same questions from the outside. They want also to have an authentic experience of Chinese reality, or at least an experience that feels authentic to them, that is, one that tallies with what they believe Chineseness to be or that challenges those beliefs in plausible ways. This outsider’s perspective is at least as significant as the insider’s, if only because for the most part outsiders have controlled what has been published in answer to those questions of Chinese identity ever since the founding of the American Republic.

The U.S. has struggled, particularly in the last hundred years, to deal with the “Other” of Chineseness in its literature and other media of the popular culture. Frank Chin’s bitter ranting (which began in 1974 with his introduction to the Asian-American anthology Aiiiiiiieee!) against Chinese Christians and Chinese “who got their China [. . .] from the pushers of white American culture” may yet be somewhat justified or, at the least, still understandable at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, the last thirty years, I judge from the texts below, have been a time of steady progress for the better. After the most important doors were opened by two highly controversial white figures, Pearl S. Buck in 1931 and Richard Nixon in 1972, we have seen increasing interest in the literary U.S. in seeing “the real China” and hearing “authentic” Chinese voices. The words in quotes are open to endless debate, and some critics will never be content with any portrayal of China that manages to find an American or international audience. Frank Chin will probably always consider Maxine Hong Kingston, Bette Bao
Lord, and playwright David Henry Hwang to be “sellouts” and “fake” or “ornamental Orientals.” Chinese critics in the mainland frequently complain about their fellow countryman and international film festival darling Zhang Yimou along these same lines: “His films have attracted a large international audience precisely because they are regarded as authentically ‘national,’ ‘Chinese,’ and ‘Oriental.’ Thus an indigenous cultural critique through the medium of national cinema becomes at the same time a cultural sellout of the Chinese nation in the international film market.”

If foreigners enjoy a particular portrayal of China, that version is almost by definition inauthentic or suspect; it must somehow be tickling Westerners’ old racist fancies about the exotic Orient.

Considering the history of racist anti-Chinese legislation and propaganda in the U.S. and the continuing competition of nationalist meta-narratives, continuing mistrust is understandable. Chin certainly makes some interesting points about autobiography being a Western and Christian tradition, and we should probably admit that Zhang Yimou’s versions of China frequently have an exotic and sensual “Orientalist” appeal. But the progress we will see in the texts below gives some reason to hope that the subaltern is finding his or her voice and that the white-American audience is not only interested in obsequious literature by Chinese Uncle Toms, but perhaps sometimes does feel the draw of an authenticity not entirely controlled by base instincts of competition and pride. The stereotypes of Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu give way to Pearl S. Buck, who opens the door to writers with Chinese names like Lin Yutang and Han Suyin. “Reform and Opening Up” in the 1970s opened the door once again to first-hand accounts of mainland China. White male travel stories by Paul Theroux (Riding the Iron Rooster, discussed
below) and Mark Salzman (Iron & Silk, 1986, not discussed below) give way to the wildly popular East/West mediation of Chinese Americans like Tan and Kingston. These, along with Zhang’s films, pave the way for the popularity of more Chinese writing in translation (Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum, 1987, and Su Tong’s Raise the Red Lantern, 1990) as well as a recent immigrant voice like Ha Jin who writes, not about Asian-American experience, but about China. The progression is not so simple, of course, and there are exceptions that do not follow the clear line I draw: Chinese-American fiction writer Sui Sin Far was being published in English a century before Amy Tan, and Tom Clancy’s portrayal of Chinese villains in the year 2000 is an unfortunate throwback to the devious mustache-twirling “Chinks” of the 1920s serials. But as a general trend, as a historiography of the evolution of twentieth-century publishing, the case can be made that, even as Chinese writers are striving and struggling to be authentically Chinese, their American audience, far from holding them back, may increasingly be willing to go along for the ride.

The portrayal of Chinese Christianity in American literature cannot be separated from these questions of authenticity and of the portrayal of Chinese generally. Can a Chinese Christian exist? Is there a way for both identities to coexist and cohere in a single person without compromising the authenticity of either identity? The early Chinese concern for retaining an authentic Chineseness meant that the Chinese Christian was actually all Christian and no Chinese. Philip West explains:

Most difficult for the Chinese Christians [in the 1920s] was the charge by the [Anti Christian Movement] activists of their loss of national character, or denationalization. Wu Lei-ch’uan [a Chinese Christian nationalist] painfully admitted that when many Chinese accepted Christianity, they “join a foreign church or mission and forget that China is a nation,” and
that Christian missions had “trained a group of students who do not love their own country.”

Early Western racism made “Chinese Christian” out to be a doubtful mix from the Caucasian perspective as well, even for some of the missionaries who had dedicated their lives to China. The “Chinese” half was too strong, these whites feared, and this made their faith suspect:

Many missionaries [. . .] expressed condescension if not contempt for the depraved and unrepentant people whose souls they are trying to save, “debased,” as Lyman Beecher had put it in an earlier time, “by their own superstitions.” Thus, one Protestant chaplain in Hong Kong declared: “The Chinese are a lying, thieving, licentious race, defiling everything which comes in contact with him, deceiving from a natural instinct to deceive.”

This “Chinese Christian” was actually all Chinese and no Christian.

A study of contemporary American literature that deals with Chinese Christians reveals a very different situation today. We will see in the descriptions below that it is the second-generation Chinese-American writers, the writers who are most conscious and anxious about issues of identity and authenticity in their fiction and criticism, who are most resistant to Chinese Christianity as an authentic identity option. Caucasian writers tend to write about their encounters, real or fictional, with Chinese Christianity matter-of-factly; to them Chinese Christianity is an unsurprising reality. A skeptic might reply that, because of the white writers’ missionary imperialist heritage and Orientalist perspective, it is only natural that they should be glad to believe in a coherent Chinese Christianity.

There are at least three problems with this skeptical argument that links today’s white-American writers with Christian imperialism: 1) The only exception to the rule that white writers express no misgivings about Chinese Christianity was herself a missionary, Pearl Buck, and she is a Modern; among the contemporaries there are no exceptions to the rule;
2) this is the case even among strongly anti-imperialist and anti-missionary writers like Paul Theroux, a contemporary white writer who is as strongly anti-imperialist and anti-missionary as any Chinese Marxist and, by all rights, should be glad to be able to describe an incoherent Chinese Christianity, yet he does not; and 3) even the old-fashioned racist missionaries whom Schlesinger describes above did not receive Chinese Christians with the equanimity of our contemporary white writers. The welcoming by contemporary Caucasian Americans of Chinese Christian identity is more likely something new than old, a postmodern secular faith in the sanctity of self-determination rather than a throwback to nineteenth-century racist Protestantism or a reliance on contemporary nationalist triumphalism (which we will yet see to some degree in both Alcorn and Clancy).

The first-generation Chinese immigrant writers, too, apparently less conflicted about identity than their children, are rarely defensive about Chinese Christianity, whether they moved overseas before Liberation or after the Reform Era began. Mainland Chinese Christianity is, for some obvious reasons—because it now exists at a large geographical and chronological distance from its Western missionary roots, and because the CCP cut it off from those roots without killing it—less contentious than Chinese-American Christianity. Christian Chineseness or Chinese Christianity is increasingly a fact of life in mainland China, and a rapidly growing fact, if today’s missionaries are to be believed. If I am correct in predicting that the trend toward “authenticity” in American literature about China is leading toward, if not a large, at least a larger market for contemporary mainland voices and settings, then the reality of Christianity in mainland
China, of “Chinese Christian” identity, will still need description, but justification may be a thing of the past.

**American Literature Before the Reform Era**

“Nobody thought a book about China would sell until Pearl Buck did one.” Lewis Gannett is thus quoted in an essay about the publishing history of *The Good Earth*. This novel, which would finally come out in 1931 and become one of the best selling and most influential books of the twentieth century, was first rejected by publishers because “people did not want to read about China.” That is to say, people did not want to read, it was thought, about the “real China” about which Buck wrote and in which she had lived all her life. For Buck’s China was not populated by portly detectives dispensing ungrammatical wisdom and thin villains with weeping-willow mustaches hatching diabolical schemes. Charlie Chan; Fu Manchu; the buck-toothed, pony-tailed, bamboo-hat-wearing caricature of racist propaganda—these were the most prominent images of China in American popular culture in the fifty years before *The Good Earth*.

Missionary writing was a significant, if insufficient, tonic to this situation. The 1925 *Hero Tales from Mission Lands* cited in the previous chapter commendably includes several stories whose main characters are not foreign missionaries. “The Silence of Han-Yu-Lan” explicitly states its “aim” to be “To emphasise the fact that Christian heroism is not confined to the Anglo-Saxon race.” It relates the story of a young Christian Chinese boy who is captured by the anti-foreign Boxers in 1900, but who bravely refuses, in the face of martyrdom, to betray his fellow Christians. The story ends with a narrative framing effect in which a Chinese teacher is telling Han-Yu-Lan’s story.
to a group of Chinese boys, who decide they want to be “Jesus-boys” just like Han-Yu-Lan.26 The American boys hearing the story in Sunday School—this is the real audience for the book—are presumably already well on their way to being “Jesus-boys” themselves and are supposed to admire and imitate the Chinese boy’s courage. Granting this sort of agency to Chinese characters—though it be through the ultimate agency of a white American narrator behind the Chinese narrator and though it be in the service of the Western missionary enterprise—is yet noteworthy to demonstrate that earlier Western writers and audiences were not so uniformly benighted by racism as is often supposed.

We find another example that plays against type in Sui Sin Far, the Chinese name/pen name of Edith Eaton. The earliest Chinese-American woman author with any readership, she wrote sympathetically about Chinese people in a Chinese voice decades before Pearl Buck found literary success. The daughter of a Chinese mother and English father, Sui Sin Far emigrated to the U.S. as an adult, “taking up” in her turn-of-the-century novels and short stories “the fight against racism and injustice.”27 In one story, “Chan Han Yen: Chinese Student,” an American mother and daughter, who are “good Christians” and devote much time to “helping the poor Chinese,” entice their Chinese boarder into proposing to the daughter.28 When they discover, however, that Han Yen is not a wealthy Chinese gentleman who can take Carrie back to China to “live in great style,” the Americans reject the exotic suitor, using the excuse that he is not a Christian.29

Despite such significant pre-Buck exceptions, they remain exceptions. Most popular fiction portrayed Chinese in ways that are almost unimaginable today. Because of exclusionary immigration policies that allowed only small numbers of laboring-class Chinese men—often only semi-literate—into the U.S., there was almost no one in the
U.S. but returning missionaries, a handful of American diplomats, and a few Chinese students who could possibly tell Chinese stories to the American people. And in any event, it was believed there were few among the American people who cared to hear such stories. Huntley tells us that “literary work by authors of Asian ancestry, while not unknown [in the first half of the twentieth century], was not particularly accessible or available, and much of what was published rapidly went out of print.”

It would take the prolific work of one of those American missionaries to convince publishers to begin to accept more work about China written in Chinese voices.

Despite her now having “fallen from critical favor,” in the 1930s Pearl Buck was immensely popular and widely respected. Her voice was about as close to a Chinese voice and her stories as close to the “real China” as American fiction had ever seen. The daughter of missionaries in China and herself a Presbyterian missionary there when she began her writing career, Buck was expert in the Chinese language and really more familiar with life in China than in the U.S. No doubt in part because of this new and exotic realism about China, because of its Steinbeckian theme about “the land,” and simply for its strong storytelling and vivid characters, particularly the moral center O-lan, The Good Earth struck a strong chord with the Depression-era American public. Buck did have her detractors as well. Her identity as a white missionary, her anti-Communist politics, and her gender set Buck at odds with a good portion of the literary establishment; her growing criticism of the dogmatic missionary enterprise and her emergence as a Social Gospel advocate in China and the U.S. lost her friends on the right as well. The reading public, the Nobel Prize, and, most recently, Oprah’s Book Club have kept Buck’s work alive and in print to the present day, even as most of the Chinese
Americans who published in her wake are difficult to find in print and are unknown to American schoolchildren.

Buck’s discontent with the foreign missionaries in China was part of her public persona even before she broke officially with her mission board, and it is almost as clearly communicated in The Good Earth as in her public speeches. Buck was a product of a mission-field childhood, with an inflexible father who seemed to her to have little love for the Chinese people and even less concern for his family, and she was a participant in an American society beginning to seriously question the idea of Empire and to equate missionaries with imperialism.\textsuperscript{36} Accustomed to stories about China, particularly stories by missionaries, in which both foreign missionaries and their faith play a large role in the drama, Buck’s fellow missionaries were surprised by the near-total absence of Christianity in The Good Earth.\textsuperscript{37} There is in fact only one, though a key, reference to the Christian religion in the entire novel. Wang Lung, the main male character and developing patriarch of the household, is handed a piece of paper one day by a terrifying “hairy and redskinned” man.\textsuperscript{38} Unable to read, Wang Lung can make nothing of the picture of the bloody white man on wooden crossbeams:

He carried the picture home at night and showed it to the old man [his father]. But he also could not read and they discussed its possible meaning, Wang Lung and the old man and the two boys [Wang Lung’s sons]. The two boys cried out in delight and horror,

“And see the blood streaming out of his side!”
And the old man said,

“Surely this was a very evil man to be thus hung.”

But Wang Lung was fearful of the picture and pondered as to why a foreigner had given it to him, whether or not some brother of this foreigner’s had not been so treated and the other brethren seeking revenge. He avoided, therefore, the street on which he had met the man and after a few days, when the paper was forgotten, O-lan took it and sewed it into a shoe sole together with other bits of paper she picked up here and there to make the soles firm.\textsuperscript{39}
This story of fruitless seed-sowing is paired with a second story of a paper being given to Wang Lung, this time by a Chinese Communist agitator preaching a different gospel.

Though Wang Lung can understand what this man says, his message and his violent propaganda leaflets, which pointedly resemble the violent Christian leaflets in Buck’s descriptions, are incomprehensible. The Marxist message penetrates no deeper in the soil of the typical Chinese farmer’s heart than the Christian one, according to Buck.

Wang Lung grew bold and asked,
“Sir, is there any way whereby the rich who oppress us can make it rain so that I can work on the land?”
At this the young man turned on him with scorn and replied,
“Now how ignorant you are, you who still wear your hair in a long tail! No one can make it rain when it will not, but what has this to do with us? If the rich would share with us what they have, rain or not would matter none, because we would all have money and food.”
A great shout went up from those who listened, but Wang Lung turned away unsatisfied. Yes, but there was the land. Money and food are eaten and gone, and if there is not sun and rain in proportion, there is again hunger.40

This paper too is brought home for O-lan to repair the soles of Wang Lung’s shoes. Buck elsewhere describes the “typical missionary” as “limited in outlook [. . .] lacking in appreciation and understanding.”41 The missionary in The Good Earth is, in addition, bloody-minded and—though this is only implied—bent on the vengeance that Schlesinger described in chapter three.42 Both the Christian message and the Communist message are equally worthless without material evidence of their efficacy: without charity, without friendship, without rain. The practical-minded Chinese takes the only thing of value that these missionaries provide, the paper, and puts it to good use; they offer him nothing else he needs.
Beyond this scene being simply a call for Christian missionaries to do their work better—to learn the Chinese language, to love the people—there is a suggestion here of what we see in Thompson’s *Chinese Religion*, a suggestion of the fecklessness of the Christian missionary enterprise in the face of an entrenched, superior, and incompatible Chineseness. Our Chinese protagonists want nothing and need nothing apart from the good earth of their native land, and the foreign missionary brings no seed for that earth, and the foreign philosophy brings no water. Abandoning her traditional Christian faith, Buck embraces a secular humanist—or better, Confucian humanist—worldview that places Chinese culture at the very highest summit of human achievement. It may absorb others, but cannot be absorbed and certainly has no need of foreign Christian missionaries. She states as much in her introduction to the 1949 edition of her most famous novel:

> The Chinese people alone have come to the high point of understanding that life is in and of itself the most valuable possession of the human being, and life therefore is to be held in higher estimation than any religion, than any ideology, even than any dream or vision or utopia. [ . . . ]

> I read many strange things today, many prophecies and passionate pleadings of what we must do to “save China.” I cannot be disturbed by those who do not know what China is. The Chinese people, too, are not disturbed. They remember the thousands of years.

> Who shall say they are wrong? Who can say they are wrong when they understood life before we and our kind were born? If the world goes as it is going, they will continue long after we destroy ourselves. Perhaps they will even save us if we will allow ourselves to be saved.\(^{43}\)

Buck is clearly part of a movement, a propagator of that narrative about China that goes back to Voltaire, and is not herself the prime mover, but her voice has been powerful and influential in the twentieth century. A Buckean vision of the Chinese dominated the Chinese-American writing that was published in her wake, as well as much of the Western scholarship on China from the mid-twentieth-century.
This vision of the Chinese as a noble and ancient people resistant to foreign religion, liable to absorb and change Christianity while remaining essentially unaltered themselves, can be seen again in Helena Kuo’s *I’ve Come a Long Way* (1942), in the memoir *Chinatown Family* (1948) by Lin Yutang, and in the novel *Madame Goldenflower* (1960) by C. Y. Lee. Kuo’s early Chinese-American feminist autobiography has been cited as a precursor to work by Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston for its flashes of “matrilineal consciousness” in the descriptions of Kuo’s relationship with her mother, but the clash between Chineseness and Christianity is probably a more significant presence in the book. Christianity plays a recurring role in Kuo’s life, but she keeps it at arm’s length, and the novel ends with her making a conscious choice for “Chineseness.” As a child in Portuguese Macao, Helena is the daughter of a contractor who builds Catholic churches. She has an early aesthetic attraction to Catholicism; she wishes for more Chinese converts, as she watches a sacred procession from her high window, but only because she wants to see more of these beautiful parades. She is sent to a Catholic convent school and describes the beauty of the chapel: “Here was beauty, a solemn, colorful, sensual, and emotional beauty that impressed my child mind.” But she is not allowed to attend chapel services because she is not Catholic, and she rebels by refusing to genuflect when she walks by the chapel doors, as students are required to do. The only Chinese student in the school, Kuo’s racial difference becomes linked to her spiritual difference both when she is young and later when she is living abroad:

Once in England I was staying with a charming and devout family who felt I needed praying for most distressingly, and added a special prayer for me at their daily grace before meals to which I always politely added my sincere “Amen.” It was only later that the small son, with that awesome
frankness that belongs to the very young or the very old, told me that I was “much more wicked” than he was—which I never doubted. I got the reason with the statement: “Mama says it is because you were born in sin, and never tried to get out of it. I got baptized so I’ll be always better than you are—even if I’m very wicked.”

But he was quite happy to lisp his prayers on my knee, so I hope that he could see more than his well-meaning mother. I had to go to England to get really acquainted with the “heathen Chinee” idea, for such we are known to certain religious communities.48

Kuo somehow maintains her respect for Christians, more than they do for her obviously, but her Chineseness gets in the way of full religious integration, both socially and in her own mind. The “Chinese truth” that states “a person is born good,” she decides, is a healthier lesson for children than the Christian doctrine of people being “born in sin.”49

Later, in times of trouble she is drawn to her mother’s Buddhism.50 She comes closer to Christian faith during a growing friendship with a young missionary named Paul, who eventually asks her to marry him. Kuo is already promised to another man, and she gently refuses Paul. She describes many conversations she has with Paul about faith, but though she has absorbed much from him and from her childhood, she does not see the need for exclusivist conversion to a single faith, and little more is said about her pilgrim’s progress.

Her Chineseness, by contrast, was neither chosen nor can it be discarded. At one point she blames “the politicians in Europe” for selling out China to Japan in the ‘30s and uses Christian imagery to express her nationalist idea as she describes the horrors of refugee life: “And these were my people, some of the four hundred and fifty millions of Chinese beginning a new Calvary.”51 The book ends with a sort of Chinese creed, a vow of remembrance to her Chinese identity: “Always I shall remember that I am a Chinese, that I belong to an old and honorable nation that is being reborn. Always I shall
remember that we are a filial nation, that our parents are judged by the behavior and success of their children. Always I shall remember the sincere desire of my countrymen to live in peace and freedom.”

Lin Yutang’s Chinatown Family contains a similar set of characters and themes: a child’s flirtation with Christianity, a woman’s toleration of and respect for other religions. And again the final fulfillment of religious longing is found, for the Chinese, in things Chinese. An important nationalistic (though not KMT Nationalist) and anti-Communist literary figure in China in the ‘20s and ‘30s, Lin Yutang moved to America in 1935 and became the most popular Chinese writer in English. The New York Chinatown family of this novel’s title is decidedly more working-class than Lin himself was, and the mother is dealing with her fears about her new Catholic Italian-American daughter-in-law, Flora. She soon discovers she need not have worried, however, as it turns out that Flora’s religious character makes her kind, obedient, respectful to elders—in short, the perfect Chinese daughter-in-law. This assimilative, even cooptive, nature of the mother, defining a certain type of moral character as both Chinese and obvious universal “Morality,” effectively frustrates Flora’s persistent but gentle attempts to convert her in-laws. Narratively speaking, the Flora/mother relationship does not go anywhere once it reaches this impasse. The mother’s only previous experience with foreigners and “foreign religion” was in her village in China, where everyone hated the Christians for relying on foreign protection and for the way they cut themselves off from everyone else and did not participate in Chinese customs or village life. Charles Litzenger’s essay in Bays’s Christianity in China describes how Christians “claimed exemption” from “temple fairs and theatrical subscriptions” and broke with “the whole concept of the cultural and social
unity of the village as represented by the local temple and activities centered on it.” The Chinese mother learns early that Christianity is a fine thing once the gunboats and garden walls are removed; she visits the church, ostentatiously donates money when God gives her a grandson, and agrees that the boy may be baptized. There is no sense, however, that Flora feels she has converted her mother-in-law to a “truly Christian” way of thinking. The mother agrees with Flora about morality, about the existence of God, about the importance of performing American customs when in America, and Flora is left not knowing what to say to convince these “heathen Chinee.” (These are not her words, but is clearly the inherited cultural attitude that prods her to this missionary work.)

The youngest Chinese son in the family takes more of a pilgrimage than his mother, though his final destination is also not Christian conversion. Like Helena Kuo’s youthful attraction to sacred pomp, when Tom visits the Catholic church at Christmas with Flora and his family, he has an intense aesthetic response to the mass: “The worship in its beauty and majesty was the most inspiring thing Tom had ever seen, almost the biggest show next to a sunset over the skyscrapers of New York.” He also responds to the social message of the sermon, and that night has a kind of conversion experience:

The family left the church, and Tom was silent all the way home. The fact that people could unite and sing was so moving. What the priest had said about Christ being a poor man brought it very close to him. If religion stood for poor struggling men and women, it was all right. The Christian religion, he thought, was not difficult to understand. He wished life could be all as beautiful and simple and true as that.

Nothing more is said of Tom’s spiritual journey until late in the novel when we discover that he, still a very serious young man, has found a Chinese well for his thirst rather than a Western one. Tom is introduced to Taoism by Elsie, his Chinese tutor and later his
wife, and there is a strong implication in this scene and at the end of the novel that this is the proper resting place for Tom’s restless soul, just as Catholicism is for Flora’s:

“What kind of religion are you preaching?” Flora asked.
“No religion. It is just a way of understanding things, of understanding life and the universe. Tao is in life, in the universe, in everything.”
“What is this Taoism?” Flora asked again.
“I don’t know how to put it briefly. Let me see. It is a philosophy of polarization, reversion and cycles, of the unity of all things, the leveling of all differences, the relativity of all standards.” Turning to Tom, [Elsie] said, “You ought to read Chuangtse.”

The insistence that Taoism, like Chineseness, is “no religion” but “just a way of understanding things,” a worldview or secular meta-narrative, naturally makes it impossible for Flora’s Catholicism, or Paul’s Christianity in Kuo’s story, to compete on equal footing, to dislodge or replace any of the Chinese identity with any of the Christian. Chinatown Family ends with a long funeral discourse by Old Tuck, a Chinatown elder who waxes Chinese on Laozi’s Taoist wisdom: “The hard and brittle breaks, but the gentle survives. That is the secret of my long life.” The long speech clearly is describing primarily the survival of the family and of the Chinese people, but it also reminds us of the direction Tom’s spirit is taking and explains the family’s gentle but impenetrable resistance to Flora’s evangelizing. The old Taoist’s reflections on long life, “a wonderful gift,” also remind us of the this-worldly bent of Chinese thought as described by Pearl Buck: “The Chinese people alone have come to the high point of understanding that life is in and of itself the most valuable possession of the human being, and life therefore is to be held in higher estimation than any religion, than any ideology, even than any dream or vision or utopia.”
More briefly, C. Y. Lee’s novel of the Boxer Rebellion, *Madame Goldenflower* (1960), contains a scene in which the eponymous heroine scolds a German diplomat for seeking revenge for the Boxers’ anti-missionary violence. She reminds him that the missionaries themselves taught a gospel of love, not vengeance, and that military action would only damage the work of the martyrs.\textsuperscript{60} Han Suyin’s 1965 blend of autobiography and Chinese history, *A Mortal Flower*, describes her many religious doubts as a Chinese Catholic\textsuperscript{61} and argues that a pretense of Christian faith was used cynically by the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War to get more U.S. support.\textsuperscript{62} She calls Mrs. Chiang Kaishek, Soong Chingling, “the only true Christian of them all.”\textsuperscript{63} These portraits of Chineseness and Christianity in competition for the Chinese soul (with Chineseness coming out ahead) predominate among the new post-Buck literature. This is understandable considering the views of that preeminent writer about China and the apparent desire of the American audience for an “authentic” China that was by definition distinct from the typical missionary narratives, those narratives of a China that had been tampered with and altered from its original state.

Jade Snow Wong’s autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), provides an interesting though not total contrast to this norm. Also a Chinatown story, this time set in San Francisco, this book foreshadows—in part because it influenced—the San Francisco mother/daughter stories of Tan and Kingston, particularly in its strong feminist underpinnings. This is the story of how a fifth daughter makes good. What is different from those later writers and from many of the other post-Buck Chinese-American voices is that Wong’s story is set up as a New World American success story, more in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin than in the mode of Frederick Douglass’s tortured
ambivalence. Wong’s father credits the Christian God with his family’s success. He is a true believer, an unapologetic Chinese Christian convert who tells his daughter to “trust the future to God,” who himself “believed in none of the usual superstitions of the Chinese” and “always said that anyone who believed on Jesus Christ could defy any ghost.” As Jade Snow starts a pottery business, she encounters racist resistance from white Americans, but the story begins and ends with the unironic and exuberant statement of her father’s belief in the Western Christian system and its superiority over old Chinese ways. These statements, at the beginning and the ending, are placed at the service of liberation for his daughters. On page five:

Her father and his bright red wheelbarrow provided Jade Snow with wonderful escapes to the world outside this block. While most Chinese women in San Francisco still had to conform to the Old-World custom of staying at home, her father believed that according to New-World Christian ideals women had a right to work to improve the economic status of their family. Because they couldn’t come to the factory, Mr. Wong took their work to them, installed and maintained their sewing machines, taught them how to sew, and collected the finished overalls.

At the book’s end, as Jade Snow has succeeded in a similar sort of storefront business plan, her father tells her a story with the same moral:

“When I first came to America, my cousin wrote me from China and asked me to return. That was before I can even tell you where you were. But I still have the carbon copy of the letter I wrote him in reply. I said, ‘You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women. Here in America, the Christian concept allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity. I am hoping that some day I may be able to claim that by my stand I have washed away the former disgraces suffered by the women of our family.’”

Then Daddy turned and looked at her kindly, “And who would have thought that you, my Fifth Daughter Jade Snow, would prove today that my words of many years ago were words of true prophecy?”
These are the forms and sentiments that Frank Chin abhors, and such passages are unusual and understandably unpopular for the way Christianity wins out over Chinese identity, but the sentiments expressed concerning the horrors of life for women in China and the relative opportunity in the U.S. will resound in the more secular work of Tan. We should note here, however, that though Wong’s father seems so very different from Lin Yutang’s mother character and from Helena Kuo herself, this book is in one way clearly a product of the same age and its assumptions about Chinese Christianity. Wong’s father may be racially Chinese and a Christian believer, but the passages above demonstrate to what extent his new belief system has replaced rather than coordinated with his old. Wong’s father is still no proof for the American reader that Chinese Christianity is possible. The two identities are still at odds in this man, and choices must be made.

**American Travelers in the New China**

In the 1970s and ‘80s, as the missionaries gradually trickled and then streamed through the widening valves of China’s ports of entry, so did many more travelers without a particular religious vocation. From the missionary side, Christians began to hear sermons and testimonies from and about the New China, and new Christian small-press studies of China rejoiced at what they saw as the working of God’s providence. Silas Hong’s *The Dragon Net* (1976) proved prophetic in its subtitle, “How God Has Used Communism to Prepare China for the Gospel”; “The Church Alive and Well!” proclaimed one chapter title in G. Thompson Brown’s *Christianity in the People’s Republic of China* (1983). Among the other pools of new travelers, travel writers and China scholars rejoiced as well that they would be able to set their eyes once again upon
the land that had been closed to them for almost thirty years. The wider American public
soon began to find China travel guides and other travel writing in the bookstores, and
from these books they could glean the occasional story about a Chinese Christian
presence in China. The Chinese Christian Church had apparently not been obliterated,
though from 1949 through the end of the Cultural Revolution, many believed that it had
been. This indigenous Chinese Christian presence appears in large-press travel
narratives beginning in the 1980s, but the instances are few and far between. Some of the
best-known early books, like Mark Salzman’s *Iron & Silk* and Peter Jenkins’s *Across
China*, make no mention of Chinese Christianity, and among those books that do spend
some time with the topic, each writer’s personal religious commitments or lack thereof
have a great bearing on what that travelers looked for and how they reacted to what they
found. Based on only a handful of quite personal texts, therefore, the generalized
conclusions of this section are not necessarily representative.

Nevertheless, it seems not overly risky to theorize, based on these texts, a
widening of America’s vision of China to embrace the possibility of Christian
Chineseness or Chinese Christianity. As noted, the earliest travelogues from the ‘70s and
early ‘80s make little or no mention of the latent or emerging Church. The texts from the
mid- to late-‘80s describe encounters with Chinese Christians, but often with some
suggestion of irony about the impossibility of their identity. These “Chinese” may be tied
back to foreign missionary days or may be desperate to leave China; even if they are
indeed “true Chinese” and in the right country, they are perhaps not of the right time, not
“today’s Chinese.” Finally, the lone 1990s text we will look at, Peter Hessler’s *River
Town*, contains a fully realized Chinese Christian character, a fourth-generation Catholic,
a priest in the small Yangtze town where Hessler teaches English. He is a highly sympathetic and fully human being, like many of the Chinese in Hessler’s travelogue/memoir, and he largely tells his own story. One problem with taking this example as proof of the final stage in some American literary evolution is the fact that Hessler himself is a Catholic, while the ‘80s writers we will look at are not themselves religious. Clearly the evidence for a literary trend here is still too scanty, but the prediction of a collective American mind opening to Chinese Christianity has a commonsensical appeal to it. As China continues to open, as more people travel in both directions, and as the Chinese Church continues to grow, the chance for American awareness and personal knowledge of Chinese Christianity grows, and the chance of this phenomenon showing up in travel narratives about China naturally increases too.

There is one more general observation to be made—and this more confidently—before we turn to the narratives in all their particularity. These few travel writers, white American males almost all, are understandably not as conflicted, or even concerned, about the inherent or imagined contradictions between the Chinese and Christian identities of the believers they meet, as concerned as some of the earlier writers were and as some of the later Chinese Americans will be. However, though Chinese Christianity for these writers does not serve as an agon or identity crucible, many of these narratives, even by the most sympathetic of writers, portray the Chinese Christian Church by analogy to its oldest members. The Chinese Church in most of these narratives is represented by its aging membership coming out of seclusion, or prison, after decades of persecution; the Church is hopeful still, not bitter, but elderly and possibly fading, a small plant long denied water. If the white American mind is opening up to Chinese
Christianity in general, it perhaps is not ready for a youthful and vibrant evangelical Chinese Christianity, nor for the kind of Christianized China that Aikman imagines.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Barbara W. Tuchman published one of the earliest records of a foreigner’s travels in the New China. In 1972 she was permitted to join one of the rare early junkets in the era of ping-pong diplomacy. She wrote about her trip in *Notes from China*, a relatively light rather than intensely scholarly account of her six-week tour: “This is what I vowed I would never do,” she begins, “put ephemeral journalism between the covers of a book.” Tuchman published in that same year (in the same issue of *Foreign Affairs* in which Fairbanks made his argument about the positive effects of the Maoist revolution) an essay that argued that things might have been better for China and the U.S. if we had backed the Communists instead of the Nationalists from the beginning. Tuchman, like Fairbanks, is somewhat disposed toward seeing the good in the New China, just as her tour guides/minders are intent on showing her only the successful side of the revolution, but she is more clear-eyed and less emphatic than is Fairbanks in his article. She admits that she must be careful since “ignorance of the language is a barrier equal to being deaf” and she is aware of the extent to which she is being guided (“Admittedly this was laid on to impress the visitors (as was everything else we met in China”) and therefore does not cite official Chinese statistics without qualification. Her main complaint is the stultifying uniformity of thought created by the relentless propaganda: “So numbing is the monotony and so simplistic the content of all this that it is a puzzle how the Chinese can bear it.” But she finds some justification for this in the “sense of purpose, self-confidence, and dignity” the working class has found in this society in which the “lid of exploitation has been lifted.” As Fairbanks did,
Tuchman sees “visible betterment” in the physical condition of the people. As should be expected in the midst of the Cultural Revolution (though she defines the Cultural Revolution as spanning the years 1966-1969, today Chinese and Western historians typically date it through 1976) religion can be prominent in Tuchman’s China only by its absence. She first mentions the issue in the context of lost cultural treasures:

Since religion has suffered the shutdown common under Communist regimes, many Buddhist and Taoist temples listed in guidebooks are not to be seen, perhaps because of vandalism suffered during the ravages of the Cultural Revolution or perhaps because they are simply closed. Others of special renown, like the Temple of the Five Hundred Disciples at Suchow with its 500 glowing golden statues, or the rich buildings and grounds of the former Jen Ci monastery in Shansi, or the Lung Men caves of Buddhist sculptures, have been preserved for public visiting without, as far as we could see, any anti-religious propaganda attached.

Christianity is specifically mentioned only in terms of the past and the current regime’s rewriting of history:

When the Westerner, to make conversation at a banquet with the Vice-Chairman of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee of Shensi, brings up the name of the famous “Christian General,” Feng Yu-hsiang, governor and warlord of Shensi for a quarter century preceding the Communists, and the Vice-Chairman replies flatly, “Feng Yu-hsiang was never governor or warlord of Shensi,” one is left bewildered. It is as if Mayor Lindsay looking one straight in the eye were to say, “Fiorello La Guardia? No, he was never mayor of New York.” What motivated the Vice-Chairman of Shensi to make his assertion I have no idea. I could only feel myself facing a cultural gap without a bridge.

As with so much pre- and early-Reform Era writing, there is a sense that Christianity has been successfully banished in China, even from the memory. Tuchman mourns the loss of freedom of speech and thought, the lively conversation of the public square. As for the loss of religious faith itself, she does not make her position clear, but she seems more
confused than afflicted by the compromise of liberties the Communists have made, unconvinced that the same progress could not have been made with less sacrifice.

We must jump to the late 1980s for our next significant examples. Several travelogues of the early and mid-’80s either do not discuss religion at all (Salzman’s *Iron & Silk* and Theroux’s *Sailing Through China*) or deal only with Islam and Buddhism (Jenkins’s *Across China* and Vikram Seth’s *From Heaven Lake*). The reasons for the absence of Christianity in these major publications of the first ten years of Reform are potentially many. I do not intend to argue that all travel writing about China since 1978 should discuss the alleged Christian revival there. The fact remains, despite claims of massive growth, that the Christian population in China is still a small minority (ten percent is the most extreme upper limit some have claimed; five percent is possible but still high) and easy to miss in most areas if one is not looking for it. Even as late as 2002 it was a rare student of mine in Beijing who was aware that there was a large Christian church near a high-traffic bookstore area within walking distance of the university, a church that was overflowing for each of several Sunday and some mid-week services. If travelers have no particular interest in Christianity or if they are traveling in Western China (as both Jenkins and Seth were) where Buddhism and Islam are dominant and the Christian minority is miniscule, the omission is even more understandable. Whatever the reasons, a significant Christian presence creeps into only two major travel books by the relatively late date of 1988: Paul Theroux’s *Riding the Iron Rooster* and Stuart Stevens’s *Night Train to Turkistan*.

Paul Theroux is one of the most popular travel writers in the U.S. He published two accounts of China trips in the 1980s; his second trip became the bestselling *Riding
the Iron Rooster. Crisscrossing the nation almost entirely by train, Theroux spends many months on the road and takes pride in seeing the Chinese landscape in all its variety, from frozen Heilongjiang to sweaty Canton, from sea level in the east across the desert to the foothills of the Himalayas in Tibet. His stories are often entertaining and descriptions vivid, but about the Chinese people and the tourists he meets on the way, he is frequently unsentimental to the point of misanthropy.

Which was worse—hearing right-wing tourists curse the Russians, or hearing them gush about the Chinese? No one cared about the rotten political systems, but only whether the people smiled at them or not. In a simple and clumsy way the Chinese knew how to manipulate these visitors, but it was so obvious it was like children making friends with other children.77

More than one review of the book picks up on Theroux’s cynicism. Mark Salzman criticizes Theroux for “passing judgment on China rather than describing it” and Isabel Hilton calls the tone “unfailingly unsympathetic.”78

Surprising for such a cynic and self-proclaimed Christian “heretic,”79 some of Theroux’s most benevolent moments are to be found in his conversations with Chinese Christians. Theroux actually seeks out a church or two, and his comments on Chinese Christianity are curiously sweet compared to the sourness of the surrounding pages. One day Theroux spies a church spire while on a walk in Shanghai, and he goes in for a closer look:

It was Saint Joseph’s Church, and the man I took to be the janitor, because he was so shabbily dressed in a ragged jacket and slippers, was the pastor, a Catholic priest. He was both pious and watchful, soft-spoken and alert—it is the demeanor of a Chinese Christian who has been put through more hoops than he cares to remember. The church had been wrecked during the Cultural Revolution, daubed with slogans and turned into a depot for machinery, and the churchyard had been a parking lot.
“Sacramentum,” the priest said, pointing at the flickering candle, and he smiled with satisfaction: the consecrated Host was in the tabernacle.

I asked him why this was so. Was there a service today?
No, he said, and brought me to the back of the church where there was a coffin with a white paper cross stuck to it. He said there was a funeral tomorrow.

“I take it you’re busy—lots of people coming to church.”
“Oh, yes. And there are five churches in Shanghai. They are always full on Sundays.”

He invited me to attend Mass, and out of politeness I said I might; but I knew I wouldn’t. I had no business there: I was a heretic. And I was often annoyed by Westerners who, although they never went to church at home, would get the churchgoing bug in China, as an assertion of their difference or perhaps a reproach to the Chinese—as if religious freedom was the test of China’s tolerance. Well, it was one test, of course, but it was exasperating to see the test administered by an American unbeliever. So I didn’t go to church in China, but sometimes when I saw a bird in the grass I dropped to my knees and marveled at it as it twitched there.80

At the simplest level of information conveyance, the American reader learns from the story, no doubt to the surprise of many, that there is an active and thriving Catholic presence in China, at least in Shanghai. Though five churches for a city of that size may sound insufficient on reflection, on a first reading and considering the Chinese context the reader is probably as impressed as the priest is proud. Beyond these simple facts, Theroux’s tone here is straightforward and certainly sympathetic toward the priest, so he is not, at least, “unfailingly unsympathetic.” Theroux constantly brings up the Cultural Revolution in the pages of Iron Rooster—so much so that Salzman says he is sometimes impolitic in his conversations with certain Chinese people—and this kindly portrait of the “pious and watchful” priest is clearly shaped by the writer’s interest in and objections to the mass injustice of that time.81

But in judging the tone and import of this scene, we should also consider that Theroux is a lapsed Catholic. Even if the fact were not mentioned in biographical
sketches of the writer, we can feel it in his reflexive reverence and politeness toward the father, the way he is drawn to the spire, and especially in the way he, with a satisfied smile himself perhaps, easily interprets the priest’s gesture and single Latin word.

Theroux protects his former faith by reserving his sarcasm for the hypocritical Westerners who, not so honest as Theroux himself (his cynicism tempts us to read him in kind), transform themselves into “cultural Christians” abroad. But Theroux does not let the Chinese government off easily. He is apparently more upset about China’s suppression of religious freedom than Tuchman was. He backs away from his ironic treatment of foreigners with the anti-government admission “Well, it was one test, of course.” Theroux’s final line about the bird in the grass is reminiscent of some idealistic sentimental novels he wrote when he was younger. After almost a hundred pages of the older cynical Theroux, we do not quite trust him enough to take the statement as it sounds—Theroux as a member of Emily Dickinson’s nature church—but after a second and third reading and considering the straight-faced respect he shows throughout this brief narrative, it is hard to take it any other way. This emotional encounter between the lost Westerner and the Chinese priest does not entirely deliver on its “Christian China re-evangelizes the West” promise, but the suggestion of such a theme is certainly there.

Theroux’s encounter in Yantai with some missionaries from Texas is somewhat less ambivalent:

One snowy day a large group of pilgrims appeared in the hotel, wearing the smile that one instantly associates with people in possession of the Christian message. These were Americans, from Texas. They had come in search of a missionary who had been in this part of Shandong a hundred years ago. Her name was Lottie Moon. The group had discovered the ruins of Miss Moon’s house about forty miles away at the coastal hamlet of Penghai. I was told that they regarded this woman as a saint and that they had volunteered to reconstruct the house and the church using
their own money, and the Chinese government was on the point of agreeing to this. In Mao’s China that would have been unthinkable.\textsuperscript{82}

His reaction to the Texans feels immediately like knee-jerk prejudice; if we have read enough of Theroux to get a feel for his general opinions of American religion and foreign tourism, his description of these pilgrims’ smile and his terse mention of where they hail from sound disdainful. But even here Theroux pulls his punch. He chooses not to dwell on the Americans, after all, but rather uses their mission to make his point about improvements in the conditions of religious freedom during the Reform Era.

Later, in Qingdao, Theroux again reserves his bile for foreign Christians:

“homesick imperialists” who “put up granite mansions and Baptist churches and Catholic cathedrals with spires.”\textsuperscript{83} But when it comes to Chinese popular piety, to what Chinese Catholics do with those spires, Theroux again forgoes his cynicism and seems almost nostalgic for his Catholic heritage. He relates what a Qingdao acquaintance tells him about how the Red Guards tore down the crosses from the churches during the Cultural Revolution:

They stacked the crosses at the Red Guard headquarters, but pious people stole them and took them away, burying them in the hills east of the city. These crosses were only disinterred a few years ago, when the reforms came into force. But the change is dramatic. For example, I bought a locally made crucifix—they were mass-producing them now in Qingdao—for seventy-five cents.\textsuperscript{84}

He describes the interior of the Qingdao Cathedral with these words:

It was a big bare church, made of gray stucco, with two spires. It had been completely renovated—freshly painted, regilded statues and crosses, the Stations of the Cross newly touched up, the ornamented nave picked out in gold—everything bright and pious looking, with baskets of fresh flowers on the altar. There was room for 600 people here and it was said to be full on Sunday, but there were only 3 people praying on the day I went. It was midafternoon on a weekday; the kneeling people whispering their prayers
were elderly. Over the high altar was a scroll painted on the wall: *Venite Adoremus Domine* [sic]. The Mass in Qingdao is said in Latin.\(^8^5\)

Since Theroux never attends a full mass, though we are told the faithful are many, the image of the three old women here and the shabbily dressed priest in the first narrative contribute to an impression of an elderly congregation, respectable but in its dotage; the Chinese Church is real and indigenous, we feel, but needs renewal.

On the other hand, the renovations provide a contrasting signal of hope. There is no irony in Theroux’s account of the cathedral decorations nor any doubt expressed about the large Sunday masses. Theroux again ties the description dispassionately to the Cultural Revolution and to the improvements since those days, the changes since “the reforms came into force”; and here as in the first scene the Church is described as somewhat healthy and wholly indigenous. The only hint of conflicted identity in these descriptions is within the author himself as he remembers the faith of his youth and also remembers that he is a Westerner, one of an “evangelizing [race] spreading the word and traveling the world to build churches, factories, or fast-food outlets.”\(^8^6\) He respects the faith of the evangelized—he treats it as something that is theirs to keep, probably because they themselves kept it and it kept them through the horrors of the Cultural Revolution—even as he questions the Western missionaries who did the original evangelizing. “What the evangelizer in his naïve seriousness does not understand is that there are some people on earth who do not wish to be saved.”\(^8^7\) Finally it seems clear whom Theroux hates more when judging between the foreigners and the Chinese: the foreigners win easily. When it comes to Chinese Christians and others persecuted by an unjust government, Theroux can be downright respectful.
With its hopeful curiosity about Chinese Christianity, Stuart Stevens’s *Night Train to Turkistan* stands alongside Theroux’s unexpected encouragement of China’s faith. Overall, Stevens is never near as sneering as Theroux can be, but his narrative about the Christians he met in Xi’an is in some ways less optimistic in its conclusions than are Theroux’s Catholic encounters. Stuart Stevens is now a GOP political strategist and sometime TV series writer who made it his goal in the 1980s to retrace the 1935 trip made by Peter Fleming (brother of Ian) and Ella Maillart from Beijing to India. Stevens had read that Fleming, despite his roasting of foreign missionaries in a previous travel book, paused in Xi’an to “mooch” off the missionaries there. Stevens decided he should imitate his forebear (though not in so cynical a spirit) and seek out some missionaries in hopes of perhaps even finding some old foreigner who remembered the earlier pilgrims. He goes on to explain why this turned out to be impossible, since missionaries were declared persona non grata by today’s government and by official-church leadership, and he takes the opportunity to describe the history of their expulsion. Stevens is probably correct that it would have been difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to track down a foreign missionary in Xi’an in the late 1980s. After a helpful and mostly accurate summary of the missionary situation over the last fifty years (he does incorrectly imply that missionaries were tolerated until 1966, when in reality almost all were chased out or imprisoned at least a decade earlier), he goes off in search of a reopened Chinese Christian church in the city.

It was tucked down an alley not far from the dreary Friendship Store. A tiny red cross was the only indication that this drab brick building might be different from any other. When we pedaled up on our rented bikes around 10:00 A.M., a large crowd was coming out, jamming the narrow alleyway.
We stopped, surprised by the commotion. A beggar—something that is more common in New York than in China—propped himself on two crude wooden crutches at the edge of the crowd, a ceramic bowl held out in his hand. His feet were twisted inward, useless and clumsy; as if on cue, an old woman hobbled past him on feet mutilated by girlhood binding.  

Inside the church Stevens sits next to a middle-aged Chinese couple and has a conversation about the crowded church with the “plump and jolly” woman, whose father was a missionary before Liberation. She had been educated in a Shanghai mission school, and her English was still very good:

[The] woman was cheerful, talking with pride about how they had reopened the church in 1980 after the “troubled times,” as she put it.

“Now many people come. Over five hundred to each service.”
“Today there are four services,” her husband explained. “Two in the morning, two in the evening.” He smiled shyly. “We would like to come to more than one but it would not be fair to take the space for other people.”

I asked if many young people came to the church.

The woman laughed, shaking her head. I said it was the same in America.

“Too busy,” she sighed. “But later, I think they will. That is why it is so important for us to keep this church alive. Later our children may need it.”

The description, of a Protestant church this time, is oddly contradictory, much like Theroux’s descriptions of the Catholic churches; it is a church bursting at the seams but worried about obsolescence. The woman is concerned about the church disappearing if the children of China do not refresh it with youthful vigor. Stevens’s comment that “it was the same in America” seems unwarranted and is perhaps merely polite conversation, but it suggests an early postmodern perception on his part of a decline in religious interest worldwide. By contrast, the typical American Christian meta-narratives, as we have seen, proclaim continuing health in the U.S. churches and evangelical revival throughout the younger generation of China. Conventional wisdom these days states that Christianity in
China has skipped a generation, the so-called “lost generation” of the Cultural Revolution. This interpretation of the current situation suggests that, while the woman’s hope for her children may be in vain, her grandchildren are part of the new generation receiving the torch as it is passed from the old pre-Liberation converts. Stevens’s story suggests that he himself held to a rather gloomy meta-narrative about Christianity in China at that time, but he nevertheless allows the narrative to end with the cheerful woman’s statement of hope.

The next day Stevens has arranged a meeting with another Christian he ran into at the church: “His cheekbones were amazingly sharp, jutting out so far they made the bottom half of his face look shrunken. Along with his kindly smile there was a deep tiredness, or maybe sadness, in his eyes. [. . .] ‘Where do you stay? I would like to meet with you so we could have fellowship in the brotherhood of Christ and I could practice my English.’”90 The reader is thus prepared for a story about a less optimistic Christian than the jolly English-speaking woman. Indeed it turns out that Mr. Ling, though a teacher by profession, tells Stevens discontentedly, “My life is church”; though he is trapped in China, Mr. Ling sees his true life in the U.S.91 He is out of place and out of time, with no means to correct the errors of Fate. Sitting in the hotel restaurant with Stevens, Mr. Ling pulls out a Bible stuffed with foreign letters and postcards that he has clearly importuned visitors to write for him, probably as letters of introduction to other “foreign friends” or to use in some anticipated, but wholly imaginary, interview with the passport office.

“To whom it may concern,” started one. “We recently had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a Mr. Ling while visiting in Xi’an, China. He was very helpful to us, assisting us in enjoying his fine city. He speaks very good English. We can honestly say that it was one of the
Mr. Ling finally asks Stevens how much money he will need when he goes to live in the U.S.:

“I do not need much. I do not eat much. I think maybe in five or six years I could get passport to travel. I have friends in America.” He carefully fingered his collection of letters. “We are brothers in Christ.” He looked at me, tilting his head. “Please, tell me,” he whispered, his eyes darting around the room. “I can save money but how much? How much?”

This pleading repetition ends Stevens’s chapter on Christianity with a voice that is both heartbreaking and grating; we feel both pity and squirming discomfort. The reader is put in the place of Stevens and Hector and Joan Rice of Houston, Texas, and probably every other person in that dingy stack of postcards. We are being begged for something we cannot or are unwilling to give. The friendly postcard greeting of some Swedish female students, “Skol!, Mr. Ling! Come visit soon!” comes to seem inadvertently cruel as we realize this man is unlikely ever to visit anyone outside China’s borders.

We have seen images of a strong and stable indigenous Chinese Christian community in Theroux and Stevens, but our final impression of Chinese Christianity in this book is of a man whose “life is church” and yet whose needs are not fully met by China’s legal-church community. He is a Chinese Christian in crisis, a man in whom two identities are not coexisting successfully. His Christian vocabulary sounds awkward, at least to Stevens’s ears: when Mr. Ling says “brothers in Christ,” Stevens remembers his Sunday School days when “We used to say prayers for our missionaries in China, and I wondered if one of ‘ours’ had taught this man his simple, strong statement.” Stevens’s description of Mr. Ling’s clothes could be a description of the man: “Western in design
but Chinese in construction.”

His idea of saving money to go to America—an impossible dream, Stevens implies, on the Chinese schoolteacher’s salary—is all the man has, and Stevens cannot answer directly and honestly because he fears for the man’s health: “This idea of coming to America, like the scraps of paper tucked in his bible, seemed to be holding him together.”

Mr. Ling is very likely one of the millions in China who were partially undone by some government-sponsored trauma, perhaps during the Cultural Revolution. His sources of hope for healing—the Church, America, his “friends” abroad—have been woven together into a web of faith, part religion, part utopia, part delusion. The Christian Church in China, we see, is not only a site of reemerging respect for tradition and prayer for China’s future; it is also a place where the legacies of both imperialism and persecution can sometimes combine to form a middle race of unhappy creatures without the ability to realize a consistent identity.

Peter Hessler’s River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze is the final work of travel literature we will engage here, and it signals an expansion of the positive Catholic portrayals of Theroux and of the hopefulness of Stevens’s first narrative. Hessler, perhaps because he is a practicing Catholic himself, takes the unexpected humaneness of Theroux to another level in his depth of characterization and length of interaction with the Catholic priest in the small Yangtze river-valley town of Fuling. Published in 2001, River Town describes Hessler’s life in Fuling in the late 1990s as a Peace Corps volunteer; he was one of the very first foreigners to live and work in the city. His Catholicism and his interest in Chinese Christians are not brought up until more than halfway through the book, and even then he does not draw attention to these facts in an evangelical way. His relationships with students are not described in terms of proselytizing, and he does not
write at length about his personal faith. He writes mainly about the Fuling church, its pastor, and finally the faith of his own grandfather. Though these passages are short in relation to the book’s four hundred pages, the narratives resonate enough that the reviews in both the *New York Times* and *Commonweal* make special mention of Father Li, Fuling’s Catholic priest.  

Hessler introduces the church and Father Li with these words:

In the old section of Fuling City is a Catholic church, and in the courtyard of the church is a propaganda sign, which consists of four lines of four characters each:

**Love the Country, Love the Religion**  
**Respect God, Love the People**  
**Throw Your Body into the Four Modernizations**  
**Serve the Masses**

The Four Modernizations are Industry, Agriculture, Defense, and Science; and it is difficult to see their connection to Fuling’s Catholic church, which was constructed by French missionaries in 1861, and whose Masses are served by Father Li Hairou, who at eighty-three years of age is more than four times as old as the Four Modernizations.

The lack of much cultural background here—no long description of the state of Chinese Christianity—is perhaps indicative of contemporary audiences’ savvy about the Chinese situation relative to Theroux’s and Stevens’s 1980s American readership. We should note, however, the brilliant conciseness of this paragraph that allows Hessler to put the church’s missionary beginnings, its current state control, and the clergy’s relation to the state all in perspective in just two sentences. Perhaps the audience hasn’t changed all that much; perhaps Hessler simply knows how evocative a small amount of information, skillfully phrased, can be.

The description of Father Li continues:

Father Li stands well under five feet tall. Usually he wears a soft black beret atop his white-haired head. He has a long, proud nose—an Italian nose for a Chinese Roman Catholic priest. His eyes are black, and sometimes they flicker and flash and show emotion when his voice, which is low and raspy, does not. Visitors occasionally remark on his brilliant
white teeth, and Father Li responds by saying that they are a species of Modernization that cost him two hundred yuan and two months of eating nothing but rice gruel. He smiles easily. He walks with a dragon-headed cane. His kidneys often hurt, as does his knee, and when these problems flare up he says the Mass in Latin, because it is quicker that way. If the pain is serious he does not say the Mass at all, but that rarely happens. He is strong, although he moves slowly, and there is a pronounced dignity in his carriage. Most elderly people in China have this dignity, because they live in a culture where age commands unquestioned respect; and many of them, like Father Li, have an extra sense of pride that comes from not only the years but the bitter way so many of them passed. Those bitter years are what lie behind the flash in his eyes.

For more than half a century, Father Li has been a priest in Fuling. Anywhere in the world that is a long time to be a priest. In Fuling, fifty years of priesthood is an eternity. After this affectionate portrait of a very human, but also noble, man of God, Hessler spends three pages telling the priest’s story, mostly in Father Li’s own words: the conversion of his great-grandfather; separation from family after the Civil War; being sent to the countryside to labor in the 1950s; struggle meetings, public humiliation, and torture during the Cultural Revolution; the death of fellow priests. And today?

But Father Li is not a bitter man, which is probably why he has lived so long. He does not complain about today’s Communist Party, and he seems sincere when he says that its policies are fine; indeed, things are infinitely better than they once were. The church is in reasonably good repair, and it is granted tax-free status by the government, which also provides Father Li with a living stipend of two hundred yuan a month. The priest is allowed to say Mass again, and his parishioners can attend without harassment. Weekday services are in Latin while Sunday Mass is in the dialect. On the average Sunday there are about fifty worshipers, mostly women, all elderly. Rarely is there anybody under forty years of age. There are no weddings or baptisms in the church—only funerals.

Despite the positive descriptions of reform, we are again faced with an image of decrepitude, a church in which there are “only funerals,” but the description of the priest is so tender throughout that we cannot see this as a narrative of a dying church. Father Li is worried about the future, actively worried rather than acquiescent. He hopes for a
future papal visit and for more vocations in priest-poor Sichuan province, and he finds satisfaction in the many faithful that do live in Fuling:

He has seen the church reopen back in 1981, and on the first Sunday he saw fewer than twenty nervous people come to Mass. Now the Fuling area has more than a thousand Catholics, even if rarely there are more than fifty at a given service, and for an old priest like Father Li there is a great deal of satisfaction in seeing that much. Others weren’t so fortunate. Even more than in Theroux and Stevens, what could have been an image of decay is placed into a meta-narrative of Chinese Christian history that is largely optimistic. This is in part, no doubt, especially with Theroux and Hessler, due to the influence of, respectively, a vestigial and a living religious faith. Furthermore, considering the situation of an American traveler in Reform Era China, finding Chinese Christians where there were recently thought to be none, no matter how old the congregation or how cynical the traveler, such a situation has to feel more like a resurrection narrative than one of approaching death. Several years from now, if we find the Church in China is not being refreshed with new blood as missionaries claim, narratives of Chinese Christian decline might begin to appear in Western travel literature. In these first two decades, such pessimistic stories are difficult to tell.

Hessler’s account further brings life to the aging church through his own participation in the mass—something Theroux could not bring himself to do—and through a connection Hessler makes between the old Chinese priest and his own grandfather.

Noreen [another Peace Corps teacher] and I went to church on Sundays, which was one of my favorite routines in Fuling, because I liked watching the priest and the old women who went there every week. They were survivors—there was a quiet strength to the congregation, and they had none of the well-dressed smugness of American churchgoers. All of
them had paid for their faith, in ways that money could not measure, and Father Li had paid most of all.

Watching the priest also made me remember my mother’s father, who had been a Benedictine monk. He had grown up in Arkansas, where his parish sometimes awarded promising students with scholarships to Italy, and in 1929 my grandfather was sent to San Anselmo Abbey in Rome. He was eighteen years old, and his plan was to become a priest and perhaps a missionary.103

The parishioners are women and they are old, as we have come to expect in these stories, but more positively and perhaps more significantly we hear here a touch of Theroux’s unhappiness with American Christians, an echo of the contemporary missionary appeal to the relative “reality” of Christian experience in China compared to the complacency of “American churchgoers.”

More importantly still, we are introduced to Hessler’s grandfather, whose story we learn, again through the character’s own voice, this time through his diaries. In his youth, Hessler’s grandfather felt a call to be both a Benedictine priest and a missionary in China. The two callings seem at last to be incompatible as, after his time in Rome, the Benedictine order decides to send him, not to China, but back to Arkansas. He lost both his vocations, but not his Catholic faith, because of the contradiction. We are not told with what degree of equanimity he responded to the situation, but Hessler shows some pique on his grandfather’s behalf and suggests that he is in a way living out his forebear’s calling:

[He] left the order and returned to America. He sold insurance. He married. He had children, grandchildren. He retired, played golf, traveled. On Sundays he always went to Mass. He never did go to China. He didn’t talk much about his time as a monk, and I never knew about his interest in China until I came across his diaries as a graduate student. But by then it had been seven years since he had died in 1987, when I was seventeen years old—nearly the same age as the young monk in Rome and, like him, too young to have any sense of time, of what the future might hold and how the past might reappear.104
This mystical link between contemporary Communist China and pre-Liberation missionary China is extended also to Father Li. The connection is made via the earthly center of the Catholic faith: Rome. The “young monk in Rome” is Hessler’s grandfather, of course, and Hessler describes how the diaries he found were “full of homesickness, but [. . .] also full of the beauty and wonder of Rome, the stunning churches and the history that caught the young man’s eyes everywhere he turned in the city.” Part of Father Li’s story describes how he “learned French and Latin, and, like the other young seminary students, he dreamed of studying in Rome. [. . .] But Father Li stayed in Fuling, serving the three thousand parishioners, working with the two French priests who lived in the area, waiting for the ripples of revolution to make their way down the Yangtze Valley.”

When Hessler takes his leave of Father Li for the last time, he asks if the priest will say a Mass for his grandfather, and the talk returns to Rome and the relationship of all three men to that holy city:

He handed me a piece of paper and I wrote my grandfather’s name: Frank Anselm Dietz. Anselm was the holy name that he had chosen when he became a Benedictine monk. I wrote it carefully and gave the paper back to the priest.

“When my grandfather was young, he was a monk in Rome,” I said. “He wanted to come here to China.” I had told Father Li this before, but for some reason it seemed important that I repeat it now.

“Rome is a very beautiful city,” said the priest.

“Yes it is,” I said. “I’ve been there before.”

“I’ve never gone,” he said, chuckling to himself.

“My grandfather didn’t become a priest. But I think he would like it very much if you said a Mass for him here in Fuling.”

“I’ll do that,” Father Li said, nodding.

The three men are conjoined in a kind of substitutionary relation: Hessler and Father Li have together lived out the grandfather’s vocation; Hessler and his grandfather have gone to Rome in place of Father Li; the two fathers have lived and will soon die for the
younger man. “It was a hot afternoon. I was thinking about my grandfather and the old priest, and suddenly I was so sad that I couldn’t say anything else. Silently I shook his hand and turned to leave.” Hessler gives us a peculiarly Christian narrative of intergenerational and East/West reconciliation.

Amy Tan’s version of the same story is largely secular, but is not without some important gestures toward Chinese Christianity.

Contemporary Chinese-American Fiction: Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan

Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan have remained the two most famous and influential names in contemporary Chinese-American fiction. Kingston published The Woman Warrior in 1976; this is still probably her best-known work, though she continues to write and in 2003 published her fourth major book, The Fifth Book of Peace. Amy Tan has published the same number of novels since her debut in 1989 with The Joy Luck Club. This first novel is also probably Tan’s most recognizable title, though she has maintained a loyal following for her successive offerings. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, apart from a single essay in Christianity and Literature which addresses Tan’s treatment of Christianity in The Joy Luck Club, barely a word has been published which seriously considers the place of religion in these women’s lives and writings. Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston only contains one brief reference to Christianity. Three books of essays on Amy Tan do no more than make passing mention of Tan’s Christian upbringing and the importance of “her childhood exposure to Bible stories.” This latter statement seems to call for at least a few pages analyzing the Christian characters in Tan’s novels or a comparison of Tan’s narrative style with that of
Biblical narrative. Such work, though, has yet to be done, and I will here only make a start on some of these questions myself.

While this is an area of research that merits more attention, the critical lacuna is perhaps understandable, as we come to realize that Kingston and Tan are not themselves terribly interested in confronting issues of religious faith or the question of if and how Chinese Christianity might function. These writers mainly explore, rather, issues of gender and ethnic identity from a foundation of humanist (largely secular humanist) or traditional Chinese (though questions regarding their authenticity have often been raised, and not only by Chin) narratives and meta-narratives. Kingston is decidedly writing “from a feminist perspective.” She self-consciously paraphrases Virginia Woolf when she describes her mother starting medical school after China’s early twentieth-century revolution: “The Revolution put an end to prostitution by giving women what they wanted: a job and a room of their own.” Her books are explorations of personal history, of how identity is formed out of old family stories, Chinese legends, and her own American experience. The Woman Warrior has rightly been called a “mother-daughter story” and therefore bears, and has often been the subject of, comparison to Tan’s work, since the slightly younger writer, in novel after novel, relates stories of mother-daughter reconciliation and sharing of secrets.

The Joy Luck Club alone contains four mother-daughter pairs that arrive at varying degrees of mutual understanding by the end of the book. In one essay on Tan, Malini Johar Schueller discusses “the difficulties associated with constructing ethnicity in the context of a posthumanistic consciousness,” but Tan often narrates her characters’ ethnic and gender identity struggles against a backdrop of straightforward modernist
humanism and will-to-power self-reliance. One key narrative in *The Joy Luck Club* begins with a question: “When something that violent hits you, you can’t help but lose your balance and fall. And after you pick yourself up, you realize you can’t trust anybody to save you—not your husband, not your mother, not God. So what can you do to stop yourself from tilting and falling over again?” At the end of the story the mother answers the question: “You must think for yourself, what you must do. If someone tells you, then you are not trying.”

Victoria Chen writes that Kingston and Tan’s first books both “focus on women’s experiences in their writings and position their uses of languages as central to our understanding of Chinese-American women’s bicultural world.”

In short, Kingston and Tan are studied largely for their insights into the intersection of gender and ethnic identities. About Chinese Christianity, or the intersection of ethnic and religious identities, they apparently have relatively little to say. They do have more to say, however, than has been discussed in the major studies or in Harrison’s *Christianity and Literature* essay. No friends of Frank Chin for other reasons, Kingston and Tan seem to disagree also with his simplistic dichotomizing of Chineseness and Christianity. Is Chinese Christianity a possible Asian-American identity, according to these two writers? The answer seems to be a qualified yes; Chinese Christianity is present, but some personal resistance or disinterest keeps Christianity at a polite distance in their books. Kingston and Tan provide evidence of religious/ethnic integration in their pages, but few tools by which we may understand the dynamics of such an identity.

Maxine Hong Kingston grew up with exposure to Christianity, but there is no hint in her writing or speeches that she ever identified with it or even seriously experimented with Christian belief. In *China Men*, her second book and a companion volume to The
Woman Warrior, she writes of two convert aunts who would often send tracts and Bibles to their relatives, including Kingston’s family. She also mentions the Christian neighbors she knew in San Francisco’s Chinatown where she was a child and some family interactions with missionaries in China. Kingston herself today, while maintaining a belief in the existence of God, is drawn to Buddhism and the more universalizing, as opposed to exclusionary, Christian sects such as the Unitarian Universalists. In interviews she frequently mentions Buddhist retreats she is taking part in. She gives readings at Unitarian churches and Zen Centers. This religious predilection has to do in part with Kingston’s ardent work for pacifism dating back to the Vietnam War: Wittman, the main character in Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey, escapes the draft by joining the “Universal Life Church,” and Kingston herself expresses her faith that Vietnamese Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh “has some answers” about world peace. But Kingston’s Buddhist leanings are also tied to her personal identification with Chinese culture, and to an apparent belief that Buddhism is more suitable to her as a Chinese woman than is Christianity. Universalist Christianity permits her sometimes to subsume Christianity into her big-tent pacifist morality, but otherwise she clearly has qualms about missionary Christianity and the evangelical appeals of those two aunts.

In one of her rare interview mentions of Christianity, we can hear Kingston’s primary identification—though she was born in and grew up in California—with Chinese culture, but also an acknowledgment that Christian American culture has undeniable influence on those who live in the U.S. She is answering a question about revenge, a theme of The Woman Warrior:

Maxine: I come from a culture where revenge is important. So many of the stories and operas I grew up on have that theme of revenge. I
think revenge has something to do with justice in our lifetime rather than justice in another reincarnation. But in American culture revenge is really questioned. Christianity says no revenge. The vengeance I will permit myself has to come in a new form.

I wrote in *The Woman Warrior* that the Chinese idiom for “revenge” can also mean “reporting to five families.” If you can find the words for an injustice and put it in some artistic shape, and let everyone know, then revenge has taken place. It has something to do with broadcasting the reputation of one that you want revenge against. Revenge cannot take the form of an eye for an eye, not like that.

**Jody:** Is Chinese morality different from white Western morality? And if so, in what ways?

**Maxine:** Morality is morality: whether we practice it or not, that’s something else. But human beings have basically the same morality everywhere, through all time.¹²⁴

Note that Kingston seems to be saying that Christianity affects her writing through its cultural effects in America, rather than through the theology. She is not herself a Christian, yet she says, “Christianity [in American culture] says no revenge. [Therefore] the vengeance I will permit myself has to come in a new form.” Kingston’s books likewise acknowledge nonjudgmentally the presence of Chinese Christianity in the U.S. This is an inevitability about which she is largely silent, and she makes it clear that for herself a certain kind of Christianity, theological rather than cultural perhaps, is incompatible with her ethnic and cultural identity. If Chinese Christianity is real, if a Chinese Christian can be a coherent person, Kingston does not deny it, but she also shows no sign that she understands how it is possible.

In Kingston’s wildly imaginative memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, the author’s mother is the role model for the daughter, and the touchstone of her power and self-assurance is here not specifically Buddhism, but rather a traditional Chineseness drawn from ancient legends and related to her female identity. “Marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc. Do the women’s work;
then do more work, which will become ours too.” Kingston sets up here an interesting contrast between the chaste Christian ideal and the more worldly and practical ideal of the Chinese woman warrior. Later, Kingston describes her mother as a sort of traditional Chinese shaman, though she attends a modern medical school in China. She battles Chinese ghosts and fox spirits using old spells and methods, while rejecting the protective talismans—including a Christian cross—of her terrified younger classmates. She is described as relying more on the I Ching and old rituals than on science. In her travels as a doctor, Kingston’s mother is imagined as such an amazing healer that villagers say she must be a “Jesus convert,” so miraculous are her deeds. But the narrator and the reader know the truth, and though there is no hint of disdain for those who say these things, the clear aptness of the comparison and falseness of the assumption do serve to separate her even more in the reader’s mind from that Western religion. What Kingston inherits from her mother is pure Chinese womanhood unalloyed with other metals.

The separation between Chineseness and Christianity is made explicit in Kingston’s follow-up to The Woman Warrior, a kind of sequel that focuses now on the men in Kingston’s past. In China Men, the men in the family are clearly as resistant to missionary pleas as the women. Speaking of the missionary women (“Jesus demonesses”) who try to evangelize her great-grandfather and his friends who are laborers in Hawai’i, Kingston does describe some of the Christian converts and, though they act as scolds among the rough bunch of workers, they are not bad men and seem to be sincere. But Kingston and the reader’s sympathies are clearly with her forefather and against the Christians. In one scene the men encourage the missionary women to drink large amounts of tea and then point them to the outhouse, in which the seat has been lined with red
paint. The story is very entertaining in Kingston’s telling, but the anti-missionary sentiment needs no elaboration. The scene also includes a *Good Earth*-style misunderstanding about crucifixion pictures: “[The women] handed out presents—candy, clothes, toothpaste, combs, soaps, medicines, Jesus pictures, which were grisly cards with a demon nailed to a cross, probably a warning about what happened to you if you didn’t convert.” Even in *China Men*, with its focus on men, the most powerful indications of a disconnect between Chineseness and Christianity are given to Kingston’s mother. “‘Are you a Christian?’ my mother asks periodically. ‘No, of course not.’ ‘That’s good. Don’t be a Christian. What *do* you believe in?’ ‘No religion. Nothing.’ ‘Why don’t you take the Chinese religion, then?’ And a few minutes later, ‘Yes, you do that,’ she’d say. ‘Sure, Mom. Okay.’” We hear in Kingston’s mother’s words the concept of “Chinese” as a religion or at least as first priority over other faiths, and in Kingston’s replies we are also reminded of Elsie’s description of Chinese Taoism as “No religion” in Lin Yutang’s *Chinatown Family*.

The conversation continues in *China Men* in a later flashback scene in which the narrator recalls,

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For the Korean War, we wore dog tags and had Preparedness Drill in the school basement. We had to fill out a form for what to engrave on the dog tags. I looked up “religion” in the *American-Chinese Dictionary* and asked my mother what religion we were. “Our religion is Chinese,” she said. “But that’s not a religion,” I said. “Yes, it is,” she said. “We believe in the Chinese religion.”

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Even then Kingston saw a difference between race and religion that her mother did not, and has clearly moved toward a more mature understanding of world religions since those youthful days she describes, but her mother’s teaching about Christianity and Chineseness struck a chord in Kingston and eventually resonated with what much of the
earlier Buck and post-Buck writings by and about Chinese were positing about the
either/or choices of immigrant identity. Kingston has nothing particularly bad to say
about Chinese Christians, only sometimes about the missionary sort, but she does not
make it her job to explore that segment of the Chinese-American community. This fact,
combined with her silence about the Christian Church in mainland China—whatever
good her writing has done for Asian-American literature and culture generally—certainly
contributes to a marginalization of Chinese Christians, and maybe inadvertently to Frank
Chin’s campaign to build a new Great Wall between Chineseness and Christian faith.
Schueller, describing the almost out-of-control pop-culture referentiality of Kingston’s
Tripmaster Monkey, states that Kingston “suggests that the very idea of what an ethnic
essence is comes out of popular representations.” Kingston’s work may go some
distance toward complicating America’s old ideas of ethnic essence, but at the same time
her own popular representations run the risk of reifying an essentialized Chineseness that
has difficulty combining with Christian faith.

Amy Tan’s work contains a handful of Christian Chinese characters who are more
fully realized and more positively portrayed than any in Kingston’s work, but the distance
between those characters and the narrator is still a significant barrier to a fully imagined
Chinese Christianity. Tan’s father was a Beijing-educated Baptist minister. Tan herself
cites Bible stories and particularly her father’s narrative-style sermons when discussing
her early influences. E. D. Huntley lists “Chinese tradition” and “Western
Protestantism” as the first two items in her enumeration of Tan’s background
influences, though religion barely registers as a factor in the rest of Huntley’s book-
length study of Tan’s work. The death of her father and brother when Tan was 15 served as a catalyst for a critical shift in the religious character of the Tan household:

Because [John Tan] had been a minister, his wife—despite her emotional and psychological attachment to Chinese traditions and folkways—had worked diligently while he was alive to learn and to practice the proper (Western) Christian lifestyle. But when her husband and son both died so tragically, Daisy Tan reverted completely to the customs and belief systems of her Chinese upbringing for comfort as well as answers. She invoked the aid of Chinese deities, and she sought out the counsel of geomancers who might be able to determine whether the Tan home was contaminated with bad energies. Amy Tan, in fact, credits her mother’s reaction to bereavement with introducing her to the Chinese culture that later would form the geography of her novels.135

“Complete reversion” is probably a human impossibility and a slight overstatement on Huntley’s part, for Tan’s mother tried to send her daughter to a Baptist college three years later, but the years after the family deaths were a time of rebellion for Tan as much as they were, in a sense, for her mother. Tan left the Baptist Linfield College, left the pre-med program there, and became a student of English and linguistics at San Jose City College, where she married her Italian-American boyfriend who is still her husband today. None of these decisions was approved by Tan’s traditional Chinese mother, and Tan thus rebelled against the beliefs of both her mother and her father. As for her later adult religious identity, speaking about her personal disbelief in the supernatural content of her third novel, The Hundred Secret Senses, Tan calls herself “a fairly skeptical person, I’m educated, I’m reasonably sane.”136 Tan has long since reconciled with both parents, the living and the dead, but has adopted wholeheartedly the religious beliefs of neither. She is clearly grateful for the narrative and structural influences of her father’s Christianity—he taught her how to tell a powerful story—but the content and themes of her novels owe more to her mother’s reconversion to traditional Chineseness and her
subsequent openness about family history, and Tan’s own youthful process of self-
discovery.

As with Kingston, however, this does not mean that there is nothing to say about
Christianity in Tan’s stories, nor that the Christians who are in the novels will be
represented as fools. Patricia Marby Harrison goes too far in this interpretive direction, I
think, in her essay “Genocide or Redemption? Asian American Autobiography and the
Portrayal of Christianity in Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club and Joy Kogawa’s
Obasan.” Harrison structures her argument about Tan’s first novel as a rebuttal of
Frank Chin’s posited “racist” Western Christian culture and the fake-Chinese “running
dogs” who, he says, betray their own people by working in the autobiographical genre.
Harrison first claims that The Joy Luck Club, though a novel and therefore “not strictly
autobiographical,” “nonetheless falls under Chin’s criteria for ‘fake,’ ‘Christian
autobiographical’ writing because the novel presents a denial of the original Asian culture
in favor of an emerging American identity.” She goes on to make her case that, while
this is the sort of writing Chin should hate, the novel itself is actually fairly unfriendly
toward the Christian faith, and therefore, if Chin wants to criticize works like this, he
should choose other grounds than his hatred of Christianity for doing so; furthermore, if
he wants to criticize Christianity he should probably do so in a more nuanced way that
attacks, not Christianity broadly, but rather “historical acts of racism and enforced
assimilation that occurred in the name of Christianity and that in turn impacted Asian
American writing.”

Though Harrison makes many good and important points in her essay, I am not
convinced that Chin’s polemics are best answered with such careful and well-reasoned
argumentation, and I am also not sure we need to or should argue Tan into Chin’s anti-Christian camp in order to explode Chin’s ideas about autobiography. Christianity in Tan’s work is not so clearly negative a thing as it is in Kingston’s work, and even Kingston often treats the faith with deferential neutrality. Many of the Christians and Christian references in Tan reflect her warm but somewhat vague memories of her father’s faith. Tan’s mother could never integrate Baptist Christianity with her Chineseness, and neither, up to this point, can Tan. There is a gap in understanding between Tan and her Christian characters, but there is often respect and affection as well: attention, at least some, is paid.

In terms of Tan’s first novel, Harrison makes a valuable point when she faults Tan for misrepresenting the Chinese-American Christian community generally, but her anti-Christian interpretations of two key scenes are only partially convincing. In the way all the Chinese families in the story are coerced to join the local church by a sense of obligation imposed by charity—apparently by white Americans, not Chinese—Tan implies that the Chinatown community is full of easy and insincere “Rice Christian” converts, the American equivalent of the poor Chinese who were easy prey in the mainland: give them a bowl of rice, and you have a Christian.

The [Refugee Welcome Society] was composed of a group of white-haired American missionary ladies from the First Chinese Baptist Church. And because of their gifts, my parents could not refuse their invitation to join the church. Nor could they ignore the old ladies’ practical advice to improve their English through Bible study class on Wednesday nights and, later, through choir practice on Saturday mornings. This was how my parents met the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs.140

Harrison rightly corrects the false impression these descriptions might engender. In reality, the number of Chinese converts among early twentieth-century immigrants was
quite small, but these few Christians were “dedicated and steadfast and [. . .] built
indigenous groups that were independent from white churches.” There are other scenes
that portray the charity of the Chinatown church in a very negative light. At the annual
Christmas party where donated gifts are handed out to the children, the brother of one of
the main characters is given a chess set that is used and is missing pieces. The kids do not
seem to mind, but their proud mother is insulted by the cheap charity. She still feels
obligated to politely thank the church ladies—again this time apparently white
missionaries who do some work at the Chinese church—and only when the family is
home does she angrily tell them to throw the gift away.

Other scenes, however, are more positive about the Christian community in
Chinatown, particularly those that reveal its basically indigenous, not Caucasian, identity.
The funeral of China Mary is a case in point. Rose Hsu Jordan, one of the four
protagonist daughters in the novel, meets her mother at the funeral of China Mary, who is
called by the narrator Rose “a wonderful ninety-two-year-old woman who had played
godmother to every child who passed through the doors of the First Chinese Baptist
Church.” Rose’s mother nags her daughter—about her separation from her husband,
about money, about her weight—during the service so that neither Rose nor the reader
can concentrate much on the funeral. The scene, however, contains no hint of irony in its
description of the Christians. Even statements by the pastor like “I can just see her now,
wowing the angels with her Chinese cooking and gung-ho attitude,” which might seem
comical to a cynical reader without much experience in Protestant churches, are all
flavored by the context of Rose’s “wonderful” opening description of the woman. The
Christian customs are at worst quaint; they cannot be laughable when seen through
Rose’s eyes. Harrison, however, feels that “China Mary” is the victim of condescending racism: “even her Anglicized name [. . .] suggests how she has been co-opted, fetishized, and commodified by the white missionaries with whom she worked. That her book

Cooking the Chinese Way is available for sale at the funeral further mocks how she has become the token, representative Chinese Christian for this church.” Harrison seems to misunderstand the nature of the First Chinese Baptist Church, which apparently has some connections with white American missionaries, but is clearly a predominantly Chinese church of the sort that Tan’s father was pastor of. “China Mary,” whatever the reason for her nickname, is not the token Chinese at the church.

The butt of the joke in this story, and the victim of the narrator’s sarcasm, is not China Mary and not the church, but the narrator’s mother. The funeral setting serves as a neutral or positive portrait of a common Chinatown social occasion—Tan often makes use of such local color in her plots—but also as a foil to make us laugh with Rose at her mother’s vagaries:

“I can still hear her voice,” [Pastor] Wing said to the mourners. “She said God made me with all the right ingredients, so it’d be a shame if I burned in hell.”

“Already cre-mated,” my mother whispered matter-of-factly, nodding toward the altar, where a framed color photo of China Mary stood. I held my finger to my lips the way librarians do, but she didn’t get it.

And a few paragraphs on,

And when heads lifted, everyone rose to sing hymn number 335, China Mary’s favorite: “You can be an-gel, ev-ery day on earth . . .”

But my mother was not singing. She was staring at me. “Why does [your husband] send you a check?” I kept looking at the hymnal, singing: “Send-ing rays of sun-shine, full of joy from birth.”

And so she grimly answered her own question: “He is doing monkey business with someone else.”
The mother is a comic counterpoint to the Chinese saint who has passed on; the relationship with her mother has been for Rose anything but “full of joy from birth.” With the focus squarely on the mother-daughter relationship in the scene, Amy Tan is not, certainly, evangelizing or advertising the Christian faith, but China Mary is a Christian character who is clearly meant to be respected by the reader as she is by the narrative voice. The Chinese community in Tan’s fiction does include “wonderful” and sincere Christians, pillars of the community whom Tan and Rose seem to wish were their real mothers and not only Chinatown’s godmothers.

The most significant narrative about Christianity in The Joy Luck Club, one that Harrison also treats, is more ambiguous. Again telling a story about Rose Hsu Jordan and her mother, An-Mei, Tan here draws from her own experience of losing her brother and from her own mother’s loss of an already highly syncretistic Christian faith. Despite Harrison’s doubts, this narrative too is far from anti-Christian propaganda, perhaps because the narrator is still Rose, and Rose’s voice, there can be little doubt, largely echoes Tan’s own. Rose’s little brother Bing disappeared into the ocean, she tells us, when she was fourteen years old. The body was not found right away, so after a night of grief An-Mei takes Rose back to the beach in the morning, apparently to ask God to give her back her son alive. An-Mei is at the time a Christian believer who proudly carries her “small leatherette Bible” to the First Baptist Church every week. She carries the small white Bible now too, as she prays on the beach for her son’s return:

She held in her hand the white Bible. And looking out over the water, she called to God, her small voice carried up by the gulls to heaven. It began with “Dear God” and ended with “Amen,” and in between she spoke in Chinese.

“I have always believed in your blessings,” she praised God in that same tone she used for exaggerated Chinese compliments. “We knew they
would come. We did not question them. Your decisions were our
decisions. You rewarded us for our faith.
“In return we have always tried to show our deepest respect. We
went to your house. We brought you money. We sang your songs. You
gave us more blessings. And now we have misplaced one of them. We
were careless. This is true. We had so many good things, we couldn’t keep
them in our mind all the time.
“So maybe you hid him from us to teach us a lesson, to be more
careful with your gifts in the future. I have learned this. I have put it in my
memory. And now I have come to take Bing back.”

It is a beautiful prayer, and the seriousness of the scene as told from Rose’s horrified and
guilt-ridden point of view—she thinks she is responsible for Bing’s death—precludes the
possibility of ironic laughter or serious criticism of An-Mei’s theology. But Rose’s two
comments about her mother’s mixed use of language and tone suggest that the narrator
sees in this woman a rather fragile and less-than-fully-integrated Chinese Christian
identity. We have already been told that this is going to be a story of a loss of faith, so
those indications are not a surprise. An-Mei finally puts the Bible down and tries a
more traditional Chinese solution:

“All ancestor of ours once stole water from a sacred well. Now the
water is trying to steal back. We must sweeten the temper of the Coiling
Dragon who lives in the sea. And then we must make him loosen his coils
from Bing by giving him another treasure he can hide.”

My mother poured out the tea sweetened with sugar into the
teacup, and threw this into the sea. And then she opened her fist. In her
palm was a ring of watery blue sapphire, a gift from her mother, who had
died many years before. This ring, she told me, drew coveting stares from
women and made them inattentive to the children they guarded so
jealously. This would make the Coiling Dragon forgetful of Bing. She
threw the ring into the water.

Bing does not return, but An-Mei’s ensuing loss of Christian faith is significantly
softened in several passages. For one thing, the Christian God is not blamed in the text
any more than anything else: “And it made me angry that everything had failed us.” In
addition, far from the anger being directed at Christianity or the Bible, the small Bible
becomes a token of remembrance, if an ambiguously treated one. “But later, after my
mother lost her faith in God, that leatherette Bible wound up wedged under a too-short
table leg, a way for her to correct the imbalances of life. It’s been there for over twenty
years.” Certainly An-Mei’s pastor would rather she read the Bible and keep carrying it
to church with her each Sunday, but her treatment of the Bible is apparently not malicious
or bitter. The book and that old faith of hers still have some place in her life, even if it is a
deep and hidden place: “My mother pretends that Bible isn’t there. Whenever anyone
asks her what it’s doing there, she says, a little too loudly, ‘Oh, this? I forgot.’ But I know
she sees it. My mother is not the best housekeeper in the world, and after all these years
that Bible is still clean white.” Her son still has a place in her life, too, and the white
leatherette Bible is an indispensable touchstone of that family presence: “I lift the table
and slide the Bible out. I put the Bible on the table, flipping quickly through the pages,
because I know it’s there. On the page before the New Testament begins, there’s a
section called ‘Deaths,’ and that’s where she wrote ‘Bing Hsu’ lightly, in erasable
crush.” Harrison writes this of the Bible image:

This leatherette Bible embodies the role of religion in the lives of these characters as well as their attitude toward Christianity. In The Joy Luck Club religion is adopted to the extent that it is useful or profitable for the characters. An-Mei’s attitude epitomizes the external view of God as a force that distributes good luck and acts upon people, but the Christian faith is never internalized by any of the characters in Tan’s novel. Christianity is not incorporated into their world view; it exists uneasily along with the other “beliefs convenient to the circumstances” that are randomly collected from other Eastern religious traditions. Although The Joy Luck Club is a “Christian text” by Chin’s standards, Christianity is not actually a real issue for these characters.

This interpretation is understandable, particularly the last line. Christianity is not the real
issue in Tan’s writing; her attention is elsewhere. But she has nothing in common with
Chin’s rabid distrust of Chinese Christianity. There are characters in this novel, though only supporting characters, who have internalized the Christian faith. Christianity is something for Tan’s Chinese characters to consider: for some to live with in a secret and undefinable way, and for some, contrary to Harrison’s claims, to accept wholeheartedly.

Tan’s most wholeheartedly Christian character appears in her second novel, The Kitchen God’s Wife. Jimmy Louie is a tribute to Tan’s Baptist minister father and her narrator’s relationship with him reflects both affection and respect, but also some of the mystery she must feel about a parent who died when she was young and for whom the most important thing in life was a faith that was not shared by the surviving parent. Though it is awkward of critics to skip over Jimmy Louie’s Christianity, it is true that this man, as well drawn and good a character as he may be, still only qualifies as a supporting player. The narrator, Pearl, and her mother begin to plumb the mystery of his faith in a couple of scenes, but this novel, like The Joy Luck Club, is “about” other things, primarily about female empowerment and self-discovery in the escape from unhealthy male influences.

Most of the book is the story of Winnie Louie’s escape from under the thumb of a tyrannical Chinese husband in the mainland, Wen Fu, and her discovery of sanctuary and of herself in the Chinese-American soldier—later pastor—Jimmy Louie. Some critics, such as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, fear that this plot may contribute to the insulting American stereotypes of Asians: Chinese women who need a strong Westerner, villainous Chinese men. Many writers contend that the men in The Joy Luck Club also, and particularly the Chinese men, are not positive representatives of a gender or a nation, “The most worthless men this side of The Color Purple,” writes one critic. Wen Fu is
certainly as dastardly as any diabolical Chinaman from popular racist American
literature, and Wong complains of Winnie,

She may be strong and resourceful in privation—a suitable inspiration for
those grown soft from the good life—but ultimately she still needs the
validation and protection of the West (in the form of immigration, a white
husband, or, in the case of Winnie, Jimmy Louie—an American-born
Chinese who speaks perfect English, dances, wears an American uniform,
and has God on his side).160

Winnie’s daughter, Pearl, too, on the point of discovering that Wen Fu and not Jimmy
Louie is her biological father, escapes with her mother from Wen Fu’s influence—in her
case his genetic influence—and reaffirms her identity as Jimmy Louie’s daughter.

“Wait a minute. Who are you saying was my father?”
“You’re father?” she asked, blinking, as if she
had not considered
this before. “Daddy [Jimmy Louie] was your father.”
I let out a huge sigh.161

Wong is correct to point out what seems to be a somewhat contradictory strain in Tan’s
work if the novels are read, as is reasonable and as many if not most critics do, as
feminist narratives. Tan does seem to be aware of the problem that Wong points out and
tries, successfully or not, to correct for it in this novel. Jimmy Louie and his God are not
dominant in this narrative. They are in no danger of feeling to the reader like Winnie’s
validation or of overpowering her own “strength” and “resourcefulness.” He is a kind
man, a good husband, and the means by which Tan gets Winnie from China to the U.S.,
but this is all Winnie’s story. Very different from The Joy Luck Club, in which the
narratives are parceled out among multiple narrators, the central 300-plus pages of The
Kitchen God’s Wife are all Winnie’s. Significant both for its autobiographical connection
and for its effect on the plot and the strength of Winnie’s voice, Jimmy Louie is dead in
the novel’s present-day setting; he died when his daughter Pearl was still young. The
feminist plot dynamics here are similar to those of *Gone with the Wind* or, more recently, *Titanic*. The male protagonist plays a significant role in the liberation of the woman, but then leaves or dies to allow the woman room for unfettered self-determination. Some may argue that this is not very feminist at all, but Tan’s Jimmy Louie has even less lingering influence over the women in this novel than do Rhett Butler and Jack Dawson in their respective stories, for Winnie does not even cling to Jimmy’s Christian faith after he is gone.

As in the case of Tan’s mother, Christianity for Winnie is about her love for Jimmy Louie, not about a deeply held personal faith: “Although [Grand Auntie] attended the First Chinese Baptist Church for a number of years, both she and my mother stopped going right after my father died.”

Near the end of Winnie’s flashback story, when Jimmy is back in the U.S., now a Christian and trying to get Winnie out of China, Winnie is concerned that Jimmy’s newfound love for God will diminish his love for her: “I was remembering how his letters had changed over the last six months. He still called me his Little Wife. But he did not write three pages about his big love for me. It was more like two pages about his love for me, and then one page about his love for God. And a few months after that, it was one for me, two for God.” But when they are reunited, she realized she had worried needlessly: “In America, I saw your father and I had both changed, and yet we had not. Our love was the same, but he now had his love for God. He could always speak English, I still could not.”

This easy resolution of potentially serious marriage issues seems too facile and might reflect Tan’s dimly remembered and never fully understood conception of her father’s faith and her parents’ married life before he died. The novel’s inscription dedicates the book “To my mother, Daisy Tan,
and her happy memories of my father John,” pointedly not to her own memories of the man, which she may have thought too dim and somewhat beside the point in this context. There should be no question, however, that these facts contribute to an overpowering female presence in the novel, not Wong’s feared subordination to a male Western Christian perspective.

For Tan, though, it is true that her humanism, and in this novel perhaps specifically her human love for her father, trumps her feminism if it comes down to a choice. Tolerant, even positive portrayals of Chinese Christianity are not sacrificed for the sake of a clearer feminist message. An-Mei Hsu’s explicit rejection of Christianity might have made her final message of self-reliance to her daughter less complicated, and Jimmy Louie would not need to be a Christian—he would not need to be present at all in fact; Winnie could have found her own way to the U.S., for she was strong and resourceful enough—and some critics might have been happier. But Tan’s female voices are compelling enough and real enough; they are strong enough not to be cowed by men, by the U.S. or its God, by Asian stereotypes or by the critics who fight them. Tan’s women may never fully get inside the Chinese Christian identity, but that cannot be a serious criticism of them. To paraphrase Jing-Mei Woo, one of the daughters in The Joy Luck Club, they can’t, or won’t, be what they are not.165

Contemporary First-Generation Chinese-American Immigrants

Kingston and Tan rarely write about contemporary China, and when their present-day characters do cross the ocean, as do the main characters in Tan’s third novel, The Hundred Secret Senses, there is no mention of active Christian faith among mainland
Chinese. The only Christian characters of note in Tan’s mainland China are foreigners of
the pre-Liberation missionary era, some of them despicable like the Taiping era Jesus-
worshipers in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, and some unobjectionable, even somewhat
admirable, like the progressive, anti-feudal nuns employed as teachers for Pearl’s
grandmother in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. The authors Bette Bao Lord and Nien Cheng
fall into a different category from both these second-generation Chinese Americans and
from the initial first-generation Chinese-American writers like Lin Yutang and Jade
Snow Wong. These two latter-day emigrant women often write autobiographically like
the earlier travelers to America—Nien Cheng exclusively so—but they write more
extensively on life in mainland China. Further, perhaps because they are writing in the
1980s and ‘90s and have had some direct exposure to Reform Era Christian resurgence,
perhaps simply for personal reasons, we find somewhat less hesitancy and doubt about
Chinese Christianity in their writing, less conviction that there is a necessary separation
between Chinese ethnicity and Christian identity. Serious problems regarding full
assimilation do continue, however.

It is not self-evident that these two writers constitute a clear category of their own,
and we cannot confidently generalize about contemporary trends based on their work.
Each of the sections in this chapter is characterized by a tension between individual
peculiarities and an attempt to suggest a larger context that connects the writers of that
era or group. Bette Bao Lord and Nien Cheng are clearly outside the community of
Asian-American writers as defined largely by second-generation status and a concern
primarily with life in the U.S. They are distinguished from those and connected to each
other by their birth and extensive life experience in mainland China; their age also places
them one generation senior to most contemporary Asian-American writers. But they are also quite different from each other in life experience and background. In the context of this study, it is their unquestioning confidence in the real faith and real nationality of Chinese Christians that connects them, drawing them more toward the writers we will look at in the pages to come and away from those we have seen in this chapter thus far. Both have difficulty describing an integrated Chinese Christian identity, but neither seems to find the integration difficult in itself. This is perhaps because both express a faith in human character that transcends the conflicts and contradictions between Chineseness and Christianity.

In his 1985 essay, “This Is Not An Autobiography,” Frank Chin was able to list Bette Bao Lord with Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang as “the most important and influential writers in Chinese America today.” Bao Lord has lived in the U.S. for most of her life, having emigrated from Shanghai at the age of eighteen in 1946, but she returned, like Fairbanks and Tuchman in the very early years of rapprochement in 1973 to visit relatives and old friends. She returned again in 1979 and for a longer stay in 1986 with her husband, Winston Lord, who had been appointed ambassador to China by President Reagan. The couple remained in Beijing until 1989, Lord having resigned his post for personal reasons shortly before the Tiananmen incident. Bao Lord has written about her time of adjustment to American culture in a children’s book, but her novels and major nonfiction are all set in mainland China. Despite being overshadowed somewhat by Amy Tan beginning in the late 1980s, Bao Lord has released two well-reviewed books since then: *Legacies: A Chinese Mosaic* (1990) and *The Middle Heart* (1996).
Her first novel, *Spring Moon* (1981), is the most revealing and challenging in its treatment of Christianity. Bao Lord has elsewhere written autobiographically about her father’s baptism at the hands of, perhaps significantly, Chinese rather than foreign Baptists when he was at school in Ningbo and somewhat humorously, though not cynically, about her own experiments in Lutheranism in high school.\(^{170}\) *Legacies* also sympathetically relates the story of a mixed-race doctor in China whose parents had barely shared a common language but “shared what imbued their lives with true meaning—a faith in God and a mission to ease human suffering.”\(^{171}\) In *Spring Moon* it is the lack of autobiographical relevance, Bao Lord’s distance from protagonist Lustrous Jade, that is so different from the novels of Amy Tan and that allows for a Chinese Christianity to emerge that is, while not without contradiction and complexity, not impossible for the writer. Tan’s intimacy with so many of her characters and situations makes her relative distance from the Christian characters feel more significant, a statement of possibility but unreality. Bao Lord’s relatively depersonalized relationship to her stories and characters has been criticized by some who say that her historical outline has been given first priority at the cost of realistically motivated characters, but this same effect causes the Chinese Christianity described in *Spring Moon* to feel like historical fact, rather than identity crisis, and Lustrous Jade’s ideological struggles to feel like sociological analyses of a certain strain of twentieth-century Chinese thought rather than personal disillusionment or criticism.\(^{172}\)

Lustrous Jade is sent by her parents to a foreign missionary school. Spring Moon, Jade’s mother, is disturbed by the changes she sees in her daughter at graduation. Jade has begun to look like the foreign missionaries,\(^ {173}\) and she speaks and gestures during her
valedictory speech just like one of the Westerners: “The pride she felt in her daughter’s achievements was overtaken by the embarrassment of seeing Lustrous Jade exhort her elders. Her gestures were so extravagant, like those of operatic warriors, and her tone so inhospitable. Spring Moon almost wished that the valedictory were over.”

Jade’s emerging Christian faith is consistently described as identification with the foreign and alienation from her family’s traditionalism. Jade wants China to join in fighting the Great War on the side of President Wilson’s America because “He is a Christian.”

She opposes foot-binding, favors rent-reduction for peasant-farmer tenants, and fights “idol-worship” and other superstitions of the people. As this list implies, the changes brought by Christians were neither strictly doctrinal nor imperialist, and even though the eponymous Spring Moon is at the novel’s center, her daughter’s rebellion is not a simple foil against which to portray an idealized and inviolable Chineseness. Even critics most suspicious of the missionary enterprise often admit to the “pioneering work” on social issues for the material good of the Chinese people that was accomplished by the foreign missionary and taken up by the Chinese missionaries of Maoism.

Lustrous Jade’s fervent love of the Chinese people and her good motives in these controversial actions are made clear:

Certainly she had known that China was poor; the missionaries had taught her that it was so, and she had heard the tales of horror told by the girls at the Door of Hope. Yet she had never really seen until now.

At one farm they visited, a mou of land worked by two brothers named Lee, she asked Golden Virtue how old the tenants were. The adults were tens of years younger than she would have guessed. They looked beaten, despite their ready smiles, and the smallest children, clinging to their mothers’ hips, had sores on their legs and running noses.

She was troubled, too, by the many times the tenants bowed, by the way grown men pleaded for the smallest favors. Few dared speak at all, though the mistress was never unkind. The older children hid until she left.
Endlessly her thoughts chased one another. She must do something to help, must not waste any more time. [. . .] Perhaps she would not go to America, after all [. . .] perhaps she should enroll in a provincial college and be less indebted to the clan. [. . .] Finally she had made up her mind to volunteer at the hospital. How could she be a doctor if she had never seen the sick?178

Because of Jade’s love for China, the West’s betrayal of her beloved after the Great War hits her Christian faith hard. When at Versailles the allies grant Chinese land to the Japanese, Jade is furious: “‘Woodrow Wilson lied!’ Her despair was charged with anger. ‘The Allies lied! All the God-fearing Christians lied!’”179 But her former teacher, the missionary Miss Clayton, brings Jade back to church for a time, and this foreigner is so positively portrayed that she also keeps the reader from simply dismissing the missionaries as misguided or corrupt.180

But Jade’s nationalism and concern for the Chinese poor eventually lead her to question whether the Christian God is the god of the Chinese people:

She turned away and walked the few steps to the church. The candles on the altar were lit. She sat in the front pew to pray. “Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth—” She stopped and began again. “Our Father—” The words choked her. God did not know her coolie. Poor yellow bastard. Just a Chinese.

The door opened and closed, letting in a gust of cool night air. She shivered, listening to the footsteps that approached her and then stopped across the aisle.

“Our Father, Who art in heaven . . .” a man murmured.
 Turning, she stared at him.
 “Forgive us our trespasses . . .” he intoned.
 And of course it would be so, she thought. God would grant forgiveness to this Christian, this foreigner. Lustrous Jade rose and left the man praying.181

She walks out of the church and into the arms of the growing Communist Party that seems to share her concerns about and hopes for China. During the Cultural Revolution Lustrous Jade is betrayed by the Party, as so many were, and accused of being
counterrevolutionary, but she dies a true believer in Marxism, holding to her new faith in spite of disappointment.

The novel ends with Spring Moon going to the graves of the ancestors and apparently affirming a traditional definition of Chineseness, echoing both Taoist and Confucian tenets:

“There is a season for sun, another for shadow. A season to sing, another to be silent. And, in all the seasons, parting and reunion.

“In yielding we are like the water, by nature placid, conforming to the hollow of the smallest hand; in time, shaping even the mountains to its will.

“Thus we keep duty and honor. We cherish clan and civilization.

“We are Chinese.”

But the Christian faith is never fully denounced by Jade even in her anger and is certainly not dismissed by the novel as a whole. This ending is not as simple as Buck’s equation of Communism and Christianity as equally impotent and incompatible with an imagined umbrella of Chineseness. Both faiths are susceptible to human corruption, and Chinese believers in each are in danger of having their patriotism questioned—though for very different reasons—but Jade is taken seriously in both her faiths. Socially progressive Christianity comes off better in the end than paranoid Marxism, but the key to the novel lies in a humanism that transcends Christianity, Marxism, or Spring Moon’s Chineseness.

Spring Moon argues with Lustrous Jade about her loss of respect for her elders and ancestors:

A third time her mother demanded, “Answer me. When filial piety is gone, what is left?”

The injustice welled up, choking her. It could be swallowed no longer. Deliberately, she began, “When filial piety is gone, what is left is”—she paused, taking aim, using the very words her mother had once used in a hansom cab, long ago—“what is left is a ‘person of character’!”
Spring Moon disagrees, but because of Jade’s own strength of character in the novel and the martyrdom she dies, Jade’s answer stands. Spring Moon’s final prayer to the ancestors, then, certainly affirms to some degree that Chinese virtue of filial piety, but there can be no doubt that when she says, “We are Chinese,” the pronoun opens Chineseness up to all the family whose history we have just read, as well as to the believing Chinese Christian and to the sincere Chinese Communist who also “keep duty and honor” and who “cherish clan and civilization” in their own very real way. This is not a family decimated by a closed definition of Chineseness until only a remnant is left at the end. The epilogue’s description of the fates of other family members shows this is rather a family split apart by different paths to the same Chineseness and finally brought together in the name of “duty and honor [. . .] clan and civilization.” Chinese Christianity may not be easy—Miss Clayton tells Jade, “Did you think, Margaret [Jade’s English name], that being a Christian was easy? In the life of every believer, there is testing. Not once, but many times”\textsuperscript{184}—but the difficulties in this novel are not real inherent incompatibility, but only apparent contradiction based on historical contingencies. Lustrous Jade’s Christianity is overly dependent on faith in the character of individual Christians, but it is as real and as compatible with her being a Chinese “person of character” as is her later Communist faith.

Nien Cheng’s life story is very different from that of Bette Bao Lord, but her Cultural Revolution memoir is, like Bao Lord’s novel, confident in its Christian elements without admitting to a compromised Chineseness. Unlike Jade Snow Wong’s father, who saw an East/West, Chinese way/Christian way choice to be made and made it, Cheng,
like Bao Lord, seems to believe Chinese can have it all, that one’s humanity is a larger vessel and that Chineseness and Christianity can both fit and blend within the person.

*Life and Death in Shanghai* begins with Nien Cheng’s arrest as the Cultural Revolution gapes wide in 1966. We follow her through six-and-a-half years of senseless interrogations and painful depredations and then through the 1970s reforms as she searches for some reason behind her suffering and for the truth about her daughter’s death. The detective work that Cheng’s agile mind cannot help but constantly engage in is what moves the narrative along at times, but the greatest drama and Cheng’s greatest achievement is the related but larger theme of how she maintains her clarity of mind and her values in the madhouse of Cultural Revolution China. Everything is up for grabs, but, as Judith Shapiro puts it, Cheng’s “sense of law and justice and her humanitarian, Christian ethics remain unshaken.” It is hard to imagine what Frank Chin would say to Nien Cheng. Chin, writing about the Christian roots of autobiography says, “Confession [. . .] is by nature an expression of self-contempt, a humiliating declaration of betrayal of your self.” *Life and Death in Shanghai* is autobiography, but it is the story of a woman who refuses to confess for six-and-a-half years, who will not make false confession no matter what before Chinese authorities gone mad. Along with her hope of seeing her daughter again, Cheng’s Christian faith is the other most obvious factor in helping her keep her human dignity, and, far from being contemptuous of self, this story is tinged rather “by a touch of self-righteousness.” What Chin is liable to say is that Nien Cheng is completely Westernized and barely even sees herself as Chinese, and this is a charge to which she leaves herself open, though I think the truth of the matter lies elsewhere.
Nien Cheng’s faith is everywhere plain and unapologetically expressed in the novel. We first learn of it when she describes her “devout Buddhist” maid’s secret trip to the temple to pray for Cheng’s daughter: “Thinking that I would disapprove of these temple visits because I am a Christian, she generally slipped out of the house early and returned quietly, hoping I would not notice her absence. I pretended to know nothing about it and never mentioned it to her.” As the trouble begins, Cheng “invoke[s] the guidance of God in a special prayer,” and when first arriving at the prison she credits her faith in God as her reason for hope: “I believed in a just and merciful God, and I thought he would lead me out of the abyss.” It takes God almost seven years to lead her out of that darkness, but somehow her confidence never falters. Cheng is not evangelical in her writing, but her faith is mentioned several times over the course of those prison years. In one of the more vivid scenes, Cheng in her loneliness watches a spider spinning a web in her cell:

I had just watched an architectural feat by an extremely skilled artist, and my mind was full of questions. Who had taught the spider how to make a web? Could it really have acquired the skill through evolution, or did God create the spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species? How big was the brain of such a tiny creature? Did it act simply by instinct, or had it somehow learned to store the knowledge of web making? Perhaps one day I would ask an entomologist. For the moment, I knew I had just witnessed something that was extraordinarily beautiful and uplifting. Whether God had made the spider or not, I thanked Him for what I had just seen. A miracle of life had been shown me. It helped me to see that God was in control. Mao Zedong and his Revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. I felt a renewal of hope and confidence.

On Christmas Eve, Cheng hears a fellow inmate sing a carol and is comforted again:

While I was waiting in the bitter cold, suddenly, from somewhere upstairs, I heard a young soprano voice singing, at first tentatively and then boldly, the Chinese version of “Silent Night.” The prison walls resounded with her song as her clear and melodious voice floated in and out of the dark
corridors. I was enraptured and deeply moved as I listened to her. I knew from the way she rendered the song that she was a professional singer who had incurred the displeasure of the Maoists. No concert I had attended at Christmas in any year meant more to me than that moment when I sat in my icy cell listening to “Silent Night” sung by another prisoner whom I could not see. As soon as she was confident that the guards were not there to stop her, the girl sang beautifully without any trace of nervousness. The prison became very quiet. All the inmates listened to her with bated breath.191

We have no trouble believing Nien Cheng to be a sincere Christian believer, but is she Chinese?

Nien Cheng is wealthy, privileged, and foreign-educated. She worked for a foreign company, Shell Oil, and maintains a relatively luxurious lifestyle complete with servants, even through the political campaigns of the late 1950s and early ‘60s, right up to the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Even to readers only somewhat knowledgeable about Chinese Communist history, the surprise is not what happens to Cheng, but why it did not happen sooner. The argument can easily be made that Cheng does not represent China very well at all. Like Jade Snow Wong’s father, it seems, Cheng has given up her own heritage for a Western Christian heritage. After her release, Cheng is speaking with a construction worker who is helping her with some work in her apartment. This practical man has obtained some of the materials “through the back door.” When Cheng shows some confusion about and resistance to this new semi-legal way of doing business, the man asks her a revealing question:

   “Do you know why you were locked up?”
   “They accused me of being a spy for the imperialists.”
   “No, you were locked up because you don’t understand China. I think you had better learn quickly. You have so many old-fashioned ideas about what’s legal and what’s illegal. And you worry unnecessarily.”192
Later, when she is receiving mysterious visits from strangers pretending to be her late daughter’s friends, but whom she suspects to be government agents, Cheng puts a note on her door stating that only visitors with appointments will be admitted. When the note is torn down and Cheng reacts angrily, a friend advises her, “Don’t react when something happens. Don’t get angry. Look at that notice you put down there outside your door. Nobody in China does a thing like that. A man’s home may be his castle in England, but it isn’t the case in China.”

Perhaps most damning in regard to Cheng’s Chinese identity is what sounds like her final admission of disloyalty to China as she leaves the country: “I felt sad because I was leaving forever the country of my birth. It was a break so final that it was shattering. God knows how hard I tried to remain true to my country. But I failed utterly through no fault of my own.” The marriage of the divine will and the fact of her leaving, an marriage to which she has resorted earlier and more explicitly as well, seems a clear indication that this “Chinese Christian” is more the latter than the former.

Nien Cheng might proudly confess her Christian loyalties, perhaps even the primacy of those loyalties, but surely would vehemently deny the charge of fake Chineseness. Her epilogue clearly distinguishes the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong from the Chinese people:

When Mao Zedong used the masses (the Red Guards and the Revolutionaries) to destroy his opponents in the Party leadership, he forced the Chinese people to witness and to take part in the ugly drama of a power struggle between himself and the so-called capitalist-roaders. The prolonged struggle and the denunciations of one leader after another enabled the Chinese people to stumble upon the truth that the emperor had no clothes.

Just before she leaves Shanghai, Cheng reaffirms her fundamental Chineseness:

In spite of all that had happened, I was sad to leave China, never to return. All Chinese have this feeling of attachment to our native country. No
matter how far we travel or how long we are absent, eventually we want to return to die in China. “The fallen leaves return to the root,” we call it. But I had decided already that I would never come back. I would die elsewhere, in some country that would accept me.¹⁹⁷

This statement, like her feelings, is ambivalent, but here and in the final line of the book—“through no fault of my own”—Cheng makes it clear that a contract has been broken, but not by her. She has lost her homeland, but not her Chinese identity—the “we” above makes that plain enough. If she is struggling with a Chinese Christian identity it is only because of a phenomenon that we have described before and will see more of in the chapters that follow. She is struggling against the cant of the CCP that claims to represent the Chinese people and to hold interpretive power over the phrase “Chinese identity.” To some degree or other, every Chinese person must deal with this powerful nationalist claim. Religious believers and political dissidents must construct highly compromised or alternative definitions of Chineseness. Cheng’s story of “pride, dignity, sanity, and faith”¹⁹⁸ describes one such compelling, if lonely, sort of Chineseness.

**Living White Men on Contemporary Chinese Christianity**

Randy Alcorn and Tom Clancy, two American writers who have recently published fiction dealing to a great extent with the state of Christianity in China today, are supremely confident of the possibility of Chinese Christianity. As we might expect, they spend little or no time agonizing over matters of identity and are far more concerned that Chinese Christians, who are viewed as a given and as largely monolithic, are able to worship and proselytize freely and without threat of persecution. Unlike the travel writers, Alcorn and Clancy have little first-hand experience with China—Alcorn apologetically admits in his acknowledgements to only a one-week trip—and the
background for their narratives is dependent on the sorts of political and missionary texts we looked at in chapters two and three. These texts again reveal the confluence of religion (particularly conservative evangelical Christianity), U.S. nationalism, and the underground church in China.

Randy Alcorn’s *Safely Home* represents a segment of the publishing industry that has grown in prominence over the past several years: the Evangelical Christian novel. Writers like Frank Peretti (*This Present Darkness*), but particularly the apocalyptic *Left Behind* series by Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins, have brought Christian fiction to more visible locations in bookstores and in the public square. While not perhaps having the same crossover appeal as recent end-times novels, *Safely Home* has been well reviewed in Christian news sources and won a Gold Medallion Book Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association in 2002. The novel’s plot is fairly simple: an American businessman on a trip to China makes a slow pilgrimage toward born-again Christian belief as his Chinese friend—a former college classmate in the U.S. and now a house-church leader—marches toward martyrdom at the hands of the Chinese Communists. The novel is honest and explicit in its didacticism. Such books are almost always clear about the message that drives them, and the occasional gospel message, ostensibly preached by one character to another but obviously directed at the fence-sitting reader, is de rigueur. The agenda of *Safely Home* adds to all this the desire to focus the reader’s awareness on the struggles Christians face in China. An endnote from the cover artist directly states that literary quality was of secondary concern when the project was started: “What started as an attempt to educate, challenge, and motivate those who knew little about the plight
of the persecuted has turned into a literary masterpiece that cannot—and by God’s grace, will not—go ignored.”\textsuperscript{199}

The book is inspirational and sometimes quite moving, but it is probably not fair to call it a “literary masterpiece.” The novel suffers from the same awkward dialogue and stilted expression as much popular literature, Christian or otherwise. Alcorn’s admitted lack of expertise in the Chinese language, but simultaneous desire to give his setting marks of authenticity, leads to frequent errors and distracting intra-dialogue translation. The following passage has both problems:

> “You must be tired,” Quan said. “Let me help with your bags. Ming has prepared something for you.”
> “It is not much,” she said. “\textit{Liang cai—huangua} [sic, should be \textit{huanggua}]. \textit{xi hongshi}.”
> “A cold dish is fine—tomatoes and cucumbers are perfect,” Ben said.\textsuperscript{200}

All the Chinese characters insist on calling the main character, Ben Fielding, by his full name, apparently by analogy to the common Chinese practice of using full Chinese names instead of just a surname or given name. This is actually not something that Chinese normally do with foreign names, however, and the error is especially awkward in the mouth of Ben’s U.S.-educated friend Li Quan.

If Alcorn has not written a “literary masterpiece,” he has succeeded more fully in achieving his primary goal of educating his readers about the Church in China, though his views lean toward house-church Christianity. Alcorn gets the facts mostly correct—one can learn almost as much here as in Aikman’s non-fiction \textit{Jesus in Beijing}—and he is somewhat fair in his description of religious freedom and the official church in China:

> “I need to ask you something, Quan. Okay, I know once there was plenty of persecution. I understand why you don’t trust the government. But do you think you’re [. . .] reading into things a bit because of the past?
On one of my trips they gave us a tour of the Religious Affairs Bureau. The bureau offered to take us to a church service in Shanghai. I went. They introduced us to the pastor. He talked to us freely. They worship openly. I heard them sing. They had Bibles. The were even selling Bibles at the church!"

“They submit to restrictions many of us cannot accept.”

“But I’ve heard of areas where even the unregistered churches aren’t harassed that much.”

“I know of villages and cities where no Christians are in jail. But in other cities dozens of Christians are in jail. Often they’re beaten and humiliated. If someone says to you, ‘Religious freedom in China is like this,’ don’t believe him. That is like saying, ‘The weather in America is like this—always sunny or always snowing.’ It depends on what part of the country you are in, and what season. In China the sun is always shining somewhere. Somewhere else the snow is falling. But the government is capable of magic—they can take you to places where it is usually snowing and show you a glimpse of sunlight so that you can go back and say there is no snow in China. You can write your column or say from your pulpit that you saw no persecution, only freedom. You are telling the truth—but a truth that misleads.”

“But they actually showed us Bibles printed by the government. I saw them with my own eyes.”

“Yes, it is true. Bibles can be bought at such churches. But eighty percent of all Chinese Christians are in house churches. There are not nearly enough Bibles even for those in registered churches, much less house churches.”

The book is full of such passages whereby Alcorn tries, without too many awkward contortions, to answer typical American questions through dialogue. We hear both sides here, but naïve Ben is speaking for the government and saintly Li Quan for the underground. There is no question about where Alcorn believes the living Church in China to be located. Li Quan’s claim that “eighty percent of all Chinese Christians are in house churches” follows the higher underground missionary estimates of 50 to 100 million Chinese Christians in total. The plot, full of secret meetings, government spies, and even Christians in disguise as PLA soldiers, supports my claim that there is a natural affinity between certain generic narrative conventions and certain brands of American Evangelical Christianity. A scene in which Li Quan as a “political prisoner” is found to
be working as slave labor in an American-run factory also points up the natural connections between these Christian narratives and other U.S.-nationalist/Chinese-dissenter narratives of the “evil CCP.”

One final passage that deserves mention here is a paragraph that does not relate directly to Chinese Christianity, but does indirectly through the theories we discussed in chapter one. In the introduction I argued for the importance, even centrality, of narrative to our lives and to all the sorts of texts we produce. I argued that this idea is present in both secular and religious literary theory. Alcorn brings a version of it to Evangelical Christianity in this description of Chairman Mao in hell:

He missed the sound of laughter. There was no laughter here, nor could there be, for laughter cannot exist without joy or hope. An awful realization gripped him. There was no history here. No story line. No opening scene, no developing plot, no climax, no resolution. No character development. No travel, no movement. Only a setting of constant nothingness, going nowhere. Excruciating, eternal boredom. Nothing to distract him from the torment of the eternal now.

A narrative concept of history is here wedded to the mind of God. In the presence of God, true existence, given meaning through narrative structures, continues. Being outside the presence of God, that annihilation, is imagined as an absence of narrative structuring and, therefore, of life itself.

Tom Clancy is well known to American audiences, and his is arguably the most influential voice out of all those described in this chapter. His political thrillers no doubt reach a very different audience than that which reads Amy Tan—she and Bette Bao Lord are his only real competition in sales numbers. Clancy’s is largely male and politically conservative; his actual cultural influence, therefore, is a difficult thing to measure, since his genre fiction is more likely to confirm the already held beliefs of a select, if large,
audience, than to revolutionize society by crossing over demographic lines as Pearl Buck did. However vast or limited his influence, one recent novel by Clancy, the 2000 Jack Ryan novel, The Bear and the Dragon, cannot be passed over here without mention, and it is a mixed bag for what it may do to American perceptions of Chinese Christianity. On the one hand, Chinese Christians are portrayed as heroic and seem to have as much agency as Li Quan or as “Jesus-boy” Han-Yu-Lan in the children’s story; on the other hand, the Chinese Christian Church is portrayed simplistically and with little reference to present realities, and Christian characters are mostly used as pawns in the author’s hawkish chess game, while China in general is described in outdated, sometimes even racist, ways.

The Bear and the Dragon is Clancy’s first novel to deal extensively with China, and in it he makes the CCP’s persecution of Christians the flashpoint for World War III. Jack Ryan, former CIA spook and recurring Clancy hero, is now President Jack Ryan. He has decided to undo the work of Nixon and Kissinger and to re-recognize Taiwan as the real China. Beijing has greedy eyes for newly discovered oil and gold in Siberia and is trying to destabilize Russian politics by assassinating Moscow’s most powerful bureaucrat. The moment of crisis comes when the new Papal Nuncio in Beijing and a Chinese Baptist pastor are accidentally killed in front of CNN cameras as they try to prevent the government-mandated partial-birth abortion about to be performed on a Chinese Christian woman.

Clancy’s China novel suggests that there is a very real strain of American thought that is still fiercely anti-Communist and looking for a 1989-style popular uprising in China, rather than, as most Chinese are themselves hoping for, slow reform. After
Beijing’s plot to invade Russia fails, Clancy imagines just such a coup as hordes of Chinese rush past dumbfounded guards straight into CCP headquarters and there find a faction rising that will be much more reasonable than Li Peng was in 1989:

“For myself, I think we ought all to give thanks to Heaven that we may be able to put an end to this madness. Let us make this happen quickly. For now, I will meet with these young people to see what other things are of interest to them. You, Comrade Major, will conduct the three prisoners to a place of confinement. Qian, will you remain with me and speak to the students as well?”

“Yes, Fang,” the Finance Minister said. “I will be pleased to.”

“So, young man,” Fang said to the one who’d seemed to act like a leader. “What is it you wish to discuss?”

The shattered dream of 1989 is finally fulfilled in Clancy’s fantasy, and the atheist leader even acknowledges “Heaven” as a hint that the persecution that started this whole mess will be on the reform agenda.

The plot and Clancy’s telling of it are all undeniably entertaining, but the portrayal of the Chinese leadership is Cold War racist, and the portrayal of Christianity in China is unrecognizable to anyone who has been to China or read the first three chapters of this study. Clancy is usually careful to separate the good Chinese people from the almost wholly unrepentant evil of the Communist Party, but it is hard to come away from this book with a love for the Chinese. The numerous “tongue-in-cheek” references to “our heathen Chinese friends” and “fuckin’ barbarians” perhaps represent how our pols really speak behind closed doors, but even if those are “authentic” touches, Clancy’s China information is clearly out of date. He anachronistically describes all women as frumpy Mao-suit dressers, as if he is still imagining photos he saw in the late ‘70s or early ‘80s. A spy seduces a Chinese secretary with this line: “You should dress differently. Your clothing is not flattering. Women should dress more attractively. In
Japan there is much variety in clothing, and you can dress Eastern or Western as the spirit moves you. Ever since the 1980s there has been “much variety in clothing” in Beijing and little need for Western spies to explain international fashion to the population. Jack Ryan, who speaks for Clancy by his own account, constantly reiterates the old “inscrutable Chinese” clichés, calling them “Klingons” and “aliens from outer space”: “Jesus, Scott, how do we predict what they’re going to do?” These sorts of comments and attitudes are continuous over the thousand-plus pages of action and leave a bad taste in the mouth even of readers who acknowledge the evils perpetrated by the CCP. The atmosphere created is one of generalized racism, of national demonization, in which not even the idealistic revolutionary students or the martyred Baptist pastor can stand out as an antidote.

The Christians in China are given personal charisma and are praised by Clancy’s Western heroes when they sacrifice their lives for a good cause. However, their agency and control over events also seems illusory and not fully grounded in a compelling reality; they are present in the novel primarily to serve as victims to evil Chineseness and thereby to move the plot toward crisis. Despite the care Clancy often takes to describe military hardware or the history of the Cold War Soviet Union, he gives the reader no background on the contemporary Chinese Christian situation. There is no mention of an official church. An incident as timely as Falungong persecution is mentioned, but no explanation is given for the imagined Vatican rapprochement with Beijing. (The Vatican in the real world still gives diplomatic recognition to Taiwan.) The character of the Catholic ambassador, furthermore, is dropped into Beijing with apparently no one he needs to see and no important appointments to keep. He is thus grateful for the friendly
visit of the Baptist minister—with whom he will die—and laments with him over the scarcity of Christians in China.\textsuperscript{209} The reader is given the impression that Beijing is a Christian ghost town rather than, what it actually is, a city with priests and bishops of its own. Beijing has several Catholic churches with thousands of communicants, and a new Papal Nuncio would be world news and would be inundated by the business of the local Church and local politics. Clancy has either not done his research—and he has admitted in the past to doing less research than readers might expect—or he is simplifying for the sake of clarity, perhaps because these characters exist primarily to be killed off.\textsuperscript{210}

Again the links being made between genre, politics, and underground missionaries are apparent, but in this case, more than in the Project Pearl story, the omissions seem either sloppy or dishonest. Clancy’s respect for clergy (and opposition to abortion) is foregrounded, but his interest in telling an exciting story and in advocating for a certain kind of political change in China outweighs his interest in educating the reader about Christianity in China. As with Amy Tan, it is hard to fault a writer for not having different interests than he or she has, but particularly in the case of Clancy the reinforcement of racist and nationalist stereotypes among a large fan base seems irresponsible. He had the opportunity to give a fuller and more humane portrait of Chinese Christianity that would have included significant strength and true agency. His Chinese Christian martyr does provide a representative of the “suffering Church” in China and does perhaps add something small to Americans’ sense of the existence of Chinese Christianity, but this lonely and token Christian martyr ironically seems more likely to stoke the fires of racial hatred.
Conclusion: Ha Jin

Ha Jin (the pen name of Jin Xuefei) represents something original in American literature, possibly the next stage in the American audience’s opening up to China. Ha Jin’s published handful of novels, story collections, and poetry have won numerous literary prizes, including the National Book Award for *Waiting*, in the past decade or so since he began publishing in English. The most recent immigrant among the Chinese Americans discussed here, Ha Jin was in one of the early groups of students to study in the U.S. in the 1980s; he felt that he could not return to China after 1989. He says he would like to write more about his U.S. experience, but so far he has written exclusively about his birthplace, and he has given us stories of the Cultural Revolution of a sort that we have never seen before.

The American reader is accustomed to reading reflections on and the memories of persecution in 1960s and 1970s China, and we have seen that age of Cultural Revolution described in many of the works discussed above. This sort of therapeutic confessional literature, called Scar or Wound Literature (伤痕文学), was prevalent in China in the late ’70s and early ’80s, at the very beginning of the Reform Era, but it faded from bookshelves there long before we in the West tired of it. Ha Jin’s Cultural Revolution reflects that “beyondness” that the Chinese literary scene has been in for two decades. His Cultural Revolution is more gentle, full of ironic distance, and told from the perspective often of PLA soldiers or Party members who had little or no contact with Red Guards and struggle sessions. The sometimes successful, sometimes star-crossed course of love in a time of ideology; the mostly comic, sometimes deadly serious, rites of initiation that soldiers require of each other—these are the subjects Ha Jin chooses, far
from the big cultural intellectual centers where professors were tortured and writers
driven to suicide.

*Waiting* is Ha Jin’s most famous novel so far, a story of life postponed by
bureaucracy and personal weakness. The paralysis of the protagonist Lin Kong is beyond
Joycean as he tries for seventeen years to divorce his small-town wife so that he can
consummate his relationship with Manna, a young nurse with whom he sometimes thinks
he has fallen in love. In 1967 the couple take a first shy walk together and engage in this
repressed flirtation of a conversation:

Unlike most people, Lin and Manna had not yet joined either of the
organizations, although she was interested in the one called the Red
Union.

“Don’t join,” he told her.
She was taken aback and asked, “Why?”
“None of them really understands Mao Tse-Tung Thought. They
just waste their time arguing and fighting. So many people want to be a
commander of some sort. We shouldn’t join up.”
“But don’t you want to take part in the Cultural Revolution?”
“You don’t have to fight with others to be an active revolutionary,
do you?”

She seemed impressed by his candid words and agreed not to
become involved with the Red Union. In fact Lin was also surprised by
what he had said. Under other circumstances, he wouldn’t dare give such
advice that might get himself into trouble, but with Manna, the words had
just flowed out of his mouth.

On their way back, she said to him as if embarrassed, “Can I ask
you something I can’t figure out by myself?”
“Sure, anything you think I know.”
“What’s an angel?”

He was amazed by the question. “Well, I’m not sure. An angel is
someone who carries out God’s missions, I guess. It’s a Christian idea,
superstitious stuff.”

“Do you know what an angel looks like?”
“I saw a picture once. It’s like a chubby baby with three pairs of
wings, like a sweet child.”
“I see.”

“We were talking about a child? Why did you ask?”
She raised her eyes and gazed at him for a moment, then answered,
“An old man once said I looked like an angel.”
“Really? Why did he say that?”
“I’ve no idea. It happened when I was eight. A group of girls in our school performed a dance at an arts center for some heroes of the Korea War. We were all dressed like ducks, wearing white hats and feathers around our waists. When the dance was over, I left the stage for the ladies’ room and ran into an old couple at the side entrance to the hall. They both looked shaky with age. The small old man stopped me at the gate and made the sign of a cross over me, saying, ‘You look like an angel, child.’ For some reason my heart started kicking, although I knew he meant no harm. Some policemen rushed over and dragged the old couple away, while they were shouting, ‘Believe in Jesus! Believe in the Lord!’ I ran off to change my clothes without going to the bathroom because I was afraid of running into the police. Later I tried to find out what an angel was. I checked the word in some dictionaries, but none of them carried it. I dared not ask anybody. You are the only person that I’ve ever asked. Now I kind of see what the old man meant, but I was never a chubby child. Why did he call me that?” She said the last sentence as if to herself.
“You must have looked very happy and innocent.”
“No, I was never happy in my childhood. I envied those kids who had parents, and even hated some of them. By the way, Lin, don’t tell anybody about this angel thing, all right?”
“Sure, I won’t.”
He peered at her face. The innocent look in her eyes convinced him that her angel story was true.211

This is Ha Jin’s only reference to Christianity in this novel, and, I think, in all his novels so far, and it is significant. Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, and most of the other writers we have discussed here struggle with the issue of authenticity when they write about mainland China. Ha Jin, for obvious reasons, has particular strength in the area of authenticity both for who he is and for his stylistic gifts. It is appropriate to end with him, as the American readership increasingly looks toward mainland China and increasingly allows it to speak for itself. We will see in the chapter to come that Chinese fiction’s approach to Christianity is very different from that of Amy Tan or Pearl Buck or any of the writers here in the U.S. Ha Jin and this singular passage probably come as close as American readers have seen to Christianity as it appears in Chinese literature.
The scene above is typical Ha Jin, highly sensual for its enforced chastity, sweetly comical in the infantilization imposed on adults. The story Manna shares is intimate, dangerous, and unselfconsciously innocent even as it seems to be self-complimentary. The couple trade minor secrets, establish the beginnings of a mutual trust, and Manna becomes that innocent angel in Lin’s eyes. This describes much of the difference between Christianity in American literature and in Chinese literature. The burden of Christian history weighs heavily on Western literature. Christianity in Chinese literature is transgressive and therefore exciting, as well as a matter for unselfconscious curiosity. Chinese writers are not always clear about how they feel or what they should do with Christianity, but as with the doctor’s first date, it is interesting to see where their stories lead.
Notes


4 Huntley 102.


10 See chapters one and five.


14 Thompson xxiii.


19 Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography” 124, 110.


24 The John Day Company 315.

25 W. P. Nairne and Arthur P. Shepherd, Hero Tales from Mission Lands (New York: George H. Doran, 1925) 221.

26 Nairne 228.

27 Huntley 29.


29 Sui Sin Far 466.

30 Huntley 22.


32 Conn 28.

33 Conn 124.

34 Conn xvii-xviii.

35 Conn 67, 81, 150.

36 Conn 149.

37 Conn 127.


39 Buck 124.

40 Buck 125.

41 Conn 150.

42 Schlesinger, Jr., in Fairbank, The Missionary Enterprise 336-73.


46 Kuo 40.

47 Kuo 41.

48 Kuo 38.

49 Kuo 37-38.

50 Kuo 126.

51 Kuo 233.

52 Kuo 368.


56 Lin 117-18.

57 Lin 243.

58 Lin 305.


62 Han 84.

63 Han 85.


65 Wong 5.

66 Wong 246.

67 Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography” 123.


70 Tuchman ix.

71 Tuchman 4-6.

72 Tuchman 40.

73 Tuchman 3.

74 Tuchman 3.
75 Tuchman 47.

76 Tuchman 69.


79 Theroux 97.

80 Theroux 97.

81 Salzman, “He Hated Sightseeing” 17-18.


83 Theroux 350.

84 Theroux 353.

85 Theroux 352.

86 Theroux 446.

87 Theroux 446.


89 Stevens 55.

90 Stevens 53-54.

91 Stevens 57.
92 Stevens 57.
93 Stevens 58.
94 Stevens 57.
95 Stevens 53,
96 Stevens 53.
97 Stevens 58.


100 Hessler 220-21.
101 Hessler 224.
102 Hessler 225.
103 Hessler 229.
104 Hessler 231.
105 Hessler 229.
106 Hessler 221.
107 Hessler 391.
108 Hessler 392.

109 Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin, eds., Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston (Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 1998) 55.
110 Huntley 15; Bloom, Modern Critical Views; Bloom, Modern Critical Interpretations.

111 Skenazy 17.


113 “Amy Tan,” Contemporary Literary Criticism, ed. Dedria Bryfonski, vol. 12 (Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 1980). (All four articles by Blackburn, Greenspan, Johnson, and Hall focus on “mother-daughter” themes.)

114 Malini Johar Schueller, “Theorizing Ethnicity and Subjectivity: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey and Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club,” in Bloom, Modern Critical Views 4.


116 Tan, The Joy Luck Club 140.


118 Schueller, in Bloom, Modern Critical Views 3.


122 Maxine Hong Kingston, To Be the Poet (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002) 87-88.

124 Jody Hoy, “To Be Able to See the Tao, 1986,” in Skenazy 55.


127 Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 75-78.


130 Kingston, *China Men* 203.


133 Huntley 15.

134 Huntley 31.

135 Huntley 5.


137 Harrison 145-68.

138 Harrison 146, 147.

139 Harrison 147.


141 Harrison 155.

142 Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 92-94.


Harrison 154.

Huntley 97-98.


Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 129.


Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 139.


Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 140.

Harrison 157.


Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 144.

Chin, preface, *Aiiieeeee!*

Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography,” 110.


Lord, *Legacies* 96, 185-87.


Lord, *Spring Moon* 306.

Lord, *Spring Moon* 313.


Lord, *Spring Moon* 351.


184 Lord, *Spring Moon* 354.

185 Shapiro, “Surviving the Hurricane” 5.

186 Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography” 121.


189 Cheng 62, 130.

190 Cheng 143.

191 Cheng 172.


193 Cheng 456.

194 Cheng 535.

195 Cheng 382.

196 Cheng 539.

197 Cheng 533.


200 Alcorn 57.

201 Alcorn 73.
202 Alcorn 218-20.

203 Alcorn 330.


205 Clancy 474, 49.

206 Clancy 103, 453.


208 Clancy 163.

209 Clancy 162.

210 Garson 75.

In chapter three we saw that contemporary American literature’s capacity to integrate Chineseness and Christianity has serious limitations among its successes. We did witness something of the slow but real integration of Chineseness itself into the American literary scene, but the integration of Chineseness into American literature and popular culture has not, for the most part, meant a great deal for the recognition or understanding of Chinese Christianity in the U.S. This Western ignorance of and refusal to deal with contemporary Chinese literature about Christianity is not difficult to explain: in the U.S. the natural tendency is to presume that the two societies and their meta-narrative worldviews are running on parallel modern-to-postmodern tracks; Americans imagine that the “death of God” had the same meaning for and effect on China as it did in the West; their completely natural—perhaps unavoidable—tendency, therefore, is to seek out and translate and buy and read only that Chinese literature which best suits their own tastes as contemporary American readers, readers who have reached the Western Postmodern via the Western Modern. This means to inevitably miss parts of the “real China,” if Americans judge China’s history and literature according to U.S. standards and preconceptions and only slowly pick up and adjust to that which is truly foreign to those notions. W. J. F. Jenner argues convincingly that translators and other scholars have no choice but to select works that are not necessarily representative of Chinese literature in general but that, while being “real” Chinese fiction written for Chinese audiences, yet appeal to Anglophone readers: “until an interest in modern Chinese writing has been planted and allowed to grow, there will be little hope of getting Anglophone readers to
wrestle with literary conventions very different from those they are used to.”¹ One of the aspects of Chinese literature that Anglophone readers are not yet “used to” is the very non-Western and non-postmodern ways Chinese writers sometimes speak about God at the end of the twentieth century.

Chinese Christian subjects are some of the “real China” that Western readers of Chinese literature, slowly adjusting their notions of authentic Chineseness, have missed up to this point. Historians have studied the resurgence of Christianity in China, thanks largely to John King Fairbank and his protégés, but literary scholarship in the West largely missed the Christian movement in modern Chinese literature (1911-1949) and almost entirely missed its resurgence in the literature of the contemporary Reform Era (1979 to the present). This chapter will hopefully complicate the contemporary American scholarship on Chinese literature, just as the writers discussed below are contributing to what Chinese scholars already call “the most complicated twenty years since the birth of the modern novel in China.”² This work will hopefully lead to more translations of and more critical attention to the themes and writers discussed herein. We cannot fully understand contemporary Chinese literature or contemporary Chinese Christianity without them.

We will begin with a survey of recent Chinese literary history with our focus squarely on literature related to the Christian faith, considering China’s Modern Era (1911-1949) at some length.³ These years marked the advent of the first widespread consideration of Christian claims by China’s intellectual elite. This is also the era covered in the only major study in English of Christianity in Chinese literature, *Double-Edged Sword: Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction* by Lewis S. Robinson,⁴ which will
provide a framework for our consideration of Reform Era literature. After preparing this background, we will spend the bulk of the chapter on seven writers of the contemporary Reform Era: Li Ping (礼平), Zhang Xiaotian (张笑天), Feng Jicai (冯骥才), Mo Yan (莫言), Wang Anyi (王安忆), Shi Tiesheng (史铁生), and Bei Cun (北村). These writers are here organized along a spectrum moving from strong nationalist themes, combined with Christian curiosity, in Li Ping, to strong Christian themes, with diluted or only implicit nationalist concerns, in Bei Cun. Perhaps not coincidentally, this listing of the seven contemporary writers largely follows chronological order as the Christian motifs and messages grow more prominent.

Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian are representative of very early Reform Era writing that deals both tentatively and excitedly with the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and with the writer’s own reemerging freedom of speech. Both address new religious alternatives with a directness that sometimes resembles the most awkwardly preachy voices in American religious fiction, but in their very different cultural context they read more exultantly than such American writing. Both of these early Reform Era writers finally return to advocate a secure and patriotic nationalism, but not before the potentially positive role of religion in society has been acknowledged. However, Feng Jicai at first seems a throwback to anti-Christian nationalist propaganda. His fantastic blend of martial arts adventure and historical reality uses imperialist Christians as stereotypical genre villains, but he is finally and mysteriously neither polemical, like the most anti-Christian modern writer we will look at (Xiao Qian, see below), nor as dismissive in his nationalism as Li Ping or Zhang Xiaotian. Still, like the latter two writers, Feng’s vision of “Chineseness” can have no truck with foreign religion. Mo Yan, a novelist well known
in the U.S. for his novel Red Sorghum (红高梁家族), has in one of his more recent
novels, Big Breasts & Wide Hips (Howard Goldblatt’s translation of 丰乳肥臀), made
use of a particularly unattractive and hypocritical American clergyman as a central
career. A more full and complex creation than Feng Jicai’s evil Catholic priest, Mo
Yan’s degraded Pastor Malloy is also not a contemporary Christian character, but is
drawn, like Feng’s characters, from the shameful imperialist history of a century ago. Mo
Yan’s use of this character and of a curiously ambiguous Christian image in Red
Sorghum are even more complicated than Feng’s use of Christianity; Mo Yan’s work is
perhaps most usefully read as a kind of allegory that has little interest in seriously
criticizing the depredations of the nineteenth-century missionary movement. Just as
nationalists like the Modern Era’s Chen Duxiu (see below) and Reform Era’s Li Ping
want to make practical use of Christianity for the country’s sake, Mo Yan is making
artistic—and perhaps also a kind of patriotic—use of the religion.

Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian create characters who consider and reject Christianity
in favor of Chinese nationalism; Feng Jicai and Mo Yan never consider faith seriously in
their novels, but make some artistic use of it. Our fifth subject, Wang Anyi, goes a step
further than the cautious earlier writers. Her first-person narrator in one autobiographical
story, “A Psalm for Utopia” (“乌托邦诗篇”), explores Christianity as a serious option for
herself. She finally rejects it, but her spiritual pilgrimage is an extremely thoughtful
consideration of the value of and difficulties of religious faith, and she does not retreat to
a facile patriotic notion of Chineseness when she is done. Our final two writers, Shi
Tiesheng and Bei Cun, have both accepted a faith of some sort and allowed it to
transform their writing and themselves: Shi Tiesheng’s is a somewhat nebulous blend of
faiths that yet draws heavily upon Christian conceptions of a creator God and universal
love; Bei Cun, after serving as a leader in the Chinese avant-garde literary New Wave of
the late 1980s, became an unambiguous and unapologetic convert to Christianity. These
two writers are Chinese through and through, and both are highly regarded by China’s
literary establishment, yet they strive in their work toward themes that they and some
Chinese critics would call universalizing and that seem to dwarf most considerations of
birthplace or political loyalty. These seven contemporary writers suggest that Chinese
intellectuals today, like some in the previous Modern Era, see the possibility of
integrating national and religious loyalties. This chapter and the final chapter will
demonstrate how some writers use narrative to achieve this nationalistic/religious
“individuation” as Robinson, via Jung, describes it, but we will also see that many writers
past and present find these loyalties to be in competition with each other still today.

Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, among the contemporary writers we will look
at, only Feng Jicai and Mo Yan—who both portray the evils of nineteenth-century
missionary imperialism and do not speak clearly to Chinese Christianity today—have
seen much of their work translated into English. Their appeal in the U.S. is not difficult to
understand. Both of them write highly entertaining historical novels with broad humor
and heroic action, story elements that “travel” well; Mo Yan has the added boost of some
film adaptations of his work having reached an international audience. Chinese novels
that deal with contemporary settings and that discuss “Western” religion seriously, by
contrast, are not an easy sell. Beyond the content, the style of several of these works is
not what American readers are accustomed to, a problem Jenner also addresses in his
analysis of the literary translation market. Li Ping, for example, still writes somewhat in the vein of the Socialist patriotic writing he grew up with. Bei Cun has more hope of sounding familiar to American audiences—and some of his pre-conversion avant-garde stories have been translated—but his current style of religious storytelling, under the influence of writers like Kafka and Dostoevsky, is probably not what the average reader expects or wants from contemporary Chinese fiction. Apart from these reasons, the five less-translated writers and their works probably also suffer from some bias on the part of the U.S. literary establishment, and a general and innocent lack of interest in Chinese Christianity among U.S. scholars of Chinese literature. We cannot fault these scholars for having the interests they have; there is, after all, much more to contemporary Chinese literature than these names I have mentioned and the concerns of this chapter. It is interesting to note, however, that China’s literary circles are not so disinterested in Christianity as are their American counterparts. This international disconnect between audiences both popular and scholarly could benefit from a rapprochement, and my work here, I hope, will facilitate that conversation.

Christianity in Pre-Modern and Modern Chinese Literature

Serving as literary evidence that the early Jesuit missionary labors, and specifically their appeal to China’s scholar-official class, were not in vain, high forms of literature written by Chinese Christians appear in the mainland long before the twentieth century, but only a very few. Before the Jesuits, the Nestorians famously left a record of the arrival and reception of their “Luminous Religion” (景教) in China inscribed on an eighth-century stone stele in Xi’an, then the capital of the Tang Dynasty. This document
is of immense interest to students of Chinese history and religion—particularly for its Daoist- and Buddhist-tinged descriptions of the Christian faith—less so to students of Chinese literature. Though the Nestorian document is Chinese in style and medium and though the cosmopolitan Tang did not insist on the foreign/Chinese distinction with the same rigor as do modern and contemporary China, the stele text was almost certainly composed by foreigners.⁶

Centuries later, a Jesuit convert from the early Qing and one of the first ordained Chinese Catholic priests, Wu Li (呉歷, 1632-1718), served as a pioneer of Chinese Christian poetry. Making use of traditional Chinese forms such as the qu (曲), or aria, a sung lyric poem written to fit one of a catalogue of well-known tunes, Wu Li was one of the first Chinese Christian writers and one of only a handful that we know to have worked prior to the twentieth century. The following poem in the qu form was written to the tune know as “Happily Flitting Oriole” (tune names are still well-known today, but the tunes themselves have been lost to history) and translated by Jonathan Chaves:

Late in Han  
God’s Son came down from Heaven  
to save us people  
and turn us towards the good.  
His grace goes wide!  
Taking flesh through the virginity  
of the Holy Mother,  
in a stable He was born.  
Joseph too came to present Him in the temple:  
there to offer praise was  
Simeon.  
They say He can  
save our souls from their destructiveness  
and sweep away the devil’s wantonness.⁷
More work remains to be done on the pre-modern Christian literature. Wu Li, more famous as a painter than as a poet, is not included in the voluminous and authoritative *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, nor indeed is any Christian literature. Wu Li’s translated poetry has been included, however, in Columbia’s *Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* thanks to the work Jonathan Chaves has done on the painter/poet.

There can be no doubt that this small early group of Chinese Christian writers was far from the mainstream and had little or no recognizable impact on the larger flow of Chinese history and culture. Their general lack of recognition in recent decades, in China and the U.S., might be attributable in part to their exclusion from consideration alongside the canonical writers in Western reference materials like the *Indiana Companion*, but we cannot lay much blame on the West in this case. The Christian reach has always been short in China until, perhaps, the present day, because of limited resources, geographical realities, pre-modern technologies, and cultural inertia. The mainstream in China was ignorant of Christianity or virulently set against it long before the invasions of the Protestant powers in the nineteenth century. Apart from the exceptional Jesuit poet or two, Chinese literature concerning Christianity before the twentieth century primarily consisted of reasoned diatribes, or more often outrageous fictions, that denounced and demonized the heterodox intruders. The charges of heterodoxy were particularly intense in the century following the negative result of the Catholic rites controversy (see chapter three). The hateful propaganda, often including stories of cannibalism and child sacrifice—many of the same fiery accusations that had been made against Buddhists at certain low points in that religion’s history in China—only found fuel in the general
nineteenth-century anti-foreign resentments and the clashes between missionaries and local residents over power and land. Paul Cohen, who has written extensively on pre-modern Chinese anti-foreignism, remarks of the nineteenth-century scene, “Even when Christianity escaped the active hostility of the government, it was always subject to the disapprobation of the Chinese author—official and nonofficial alike.”10 Cohen describes in detail one of the most widely known anti-Christian works of the nineteenth century, “辟邪纪实” (“A Record of Facts to Expose Heterodoxy”), a blend of semi-accurate descriptions of Christian practice and stories of depraved sexual ritual “calculated to repel most Chinese.”11

If the influence of Wu Li and his kind seems to have been negligible, the more mainstream anti-Christian narratives of pre-modern and early modern China (mid-to-late Qing) continued to resound throughout the twentieth century. In chapter two we discussed the strong Communist distrust of the Vatican and we read part of a document that treated the Catholic Church like a spymaster, accusing her of actively and clandestinely working to undermine the Chinese government. That document was from the 1980s; Tony Lambert tells us that the situation was even more extreme immediately following Communist Liberation:

In 1951 the Communists launched ferocious propaganda campaigns in Nanjing, Wuhan and Canton, accusing the sisters in Catholic orphanages of murdering many of the Chinese orphans. Foreign missionary priests were put on trial as spies, and the Legion of Mary was banned as a “reactionary Fascist secret society.” The People’s Daily accused the church of being a “terrorist organization.”12 We will hear echoes of these anti-Christian propaganda themes in Feng Jicai’s 1981 novel 神灯前传 (Part One of the Story of the Divine Lamp). There the same stories will
be placed in a nineteenth-century setting, but it is clear from government documents, and from more recent propaganda directed against groups like Falungong, that these old narratives do not pertain so simply and exclusively to the past.

China’s Modern Era in literature (现代文学) is normally defined conveniently as the nearly forty-year period between revolutions: the Republican Revolution of 1911 under Sun Yat-sen and the Communist Liberation of China in 1949 under Mao Zedong. A unique, at the time, era of literary experimentation and openness to Western culture, China has seen its like only in today’s post-Mao Reform Era. Contemporary Chinese literature (当代文学) is often viewed as a continuation of China’s modern experience, which was interrupted by thirty years of Marxist ideology and enforced Socialist Realism in the arts. If pre-modern China’s mainstream confidently dismissed Christianity and used traditional Chinese standards and texts to do so, that confidence, which once allowed emperors to take the Jesuits’ technology as tribute and reject their doctrine as impertinence, was shaken by the events of the late Qing. Forced to admit technological inferiority on the battlefield and eager to maintain some control over the invasion by modernity and the West and thereby to protect something of a great and ancient culture, modern China sought ways both to be open and to remain Chinese. Chineseness traditionally included, not so much the arrogant isolationism of the “Middle Kingdom” that caricatures sometimes present, but certainly an understandable disdain for foreigners with pretensions to a competing history or culture. This older form of Chinese nationalism, forced to confront certain humiliating realities, became both more practical and more strident in the modern era. On the practical side, Chinese intellectuals entered into projects of reform: in education, in government, and in literature. The problem of
how China should change was often articulated in terms of essence, or *ti* (体), and surface practicality, or *yong* (用); how do we maintain our Chineseness at the base of our identity (our *ti*), while changing to keep our nation, in practical useful terms (the *yong* in the equation), at the level of power and prosperity enjoyed by imperialist foreign nations? Nationalist rhetoric, however, also flared up in a stridently defensive mode, which was incorporated to powerful effect in the defiant and utopian Marxism of the following era and which is still a touchstone for Chinese today. Perry Link describes the former practical nationalism felt by Chinese intellectuals as *youhuan yishi* (忧患意识), a “worrying mentality,” a sense that China’s future is “up to them.” The flip side of this assumed burden of responsibility—the strident latter form of Chinese nationalism—Link describes, however politely and hesitantly, as a national problem, a naïve conviction of the self-evident homogeneity and superiority of “the Chinese people.”

If this latter nationalism has been and still is being utilized, in sincerity or cynicism, by the CCP to manufacture a doctrine of Chinese unity, it was at least not invented by the Communists. It has its roots in history beyond the scope of this research, a flowering in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and near-religious influence even over many Chinese who have no love for the mainland government. Cynical or not, before the CCP came to use nationalism as a tool, the Chinese felt it sincerely themselves. It was a real phenomenon and the dominant feature of the Chinese identity ever since the Opium Wars, at least of the vocal minority of intellectuals and writers and probably to a lesser degree of the masses of Chinese people as well, particularly those littoral-based Chinese who had had some experience with the upheavals of the late Qing.
Ernesto Laclau describes this anti-Western identity politics of nationality, which could also easily be applied to some versions of the anti-Communist American nationalism in chapter two: “an identity’s constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles.” There is an astounding, almost stultifying sense of unity we get from reading modern Chinese fiction, a unity completely natural and unassuming, and completely different from the sense of top-down unity in the Chinese press today. Everyone, or at least everyone who was writing anything in the first half of the twentieth century, simply happened to agree that China must become stronger, that China must escape the cannibalism of ancient tradition and cycles of submission to Western powers, and the writers happened to take these themes as their primary concern in almost everything they wrote.

What made such monumental unity possible was two-fold. First, the bitter shared experience of nearly all littoral and many inland Chinese under the yoke of imperialism brought them together. Premier Zhou Enlai would speak of this factor in a 1957 speech that was used again in the 1980s to defend China’s policies toward minority nationalities; it also applies to and appeals to a pre-Communist unity represented by the scholar-elite writers of the late-Qing and the Republican eras. “In short,” Premier Zhou concluded his talk, “the Chinese nation as a whole has long been a nation suffering external imperialist oppression; among our various nationalities, they have shared weal and woe and cemented a militant friendship in the revolutionary wars, culminating in the liberation of this big family of nationalities.” Second, this unity of thought among intellectuals was possible because of, ironically, the very traditional Chinese intellectual culture that the reformers were so eager to rid themselves of. Yu-ming Shaw bases his study of Chinese
intellectual culture and makes several sweeping generalizations about modern intellectual
trends on profiles of only eight modern Chinese intellectuals. He explains his
presumptiveness with these telling words:

The Chinese intelligentsia has a traditional cohesiveness as a social group
and a tendency to rely upon their intellectual leaders for leadership (as the
seventy-two disciples always looked to Confucius for enlightenment,
many twentieth century Chinese intellectuals also looked to their masters
in the university circles of Peking and Shanghai for intellectual
guidance).19

It is this supposed monolith of Chinese nationalism, this unanimity of purpose (if not
always of method) that is the central fact of the Modern Era in China.

What this unity meant for modern Chinese literature was that its cultural
peculiarities tended to cut it off from the worldwide literary market; twentieth-century
Chinese literature has never made major inroads into world literature, particularly in
Anglophone regions. The persistent desire among Chinese writers to stay “on message,”
and the consistency of that message, has led many critics to complain of a lack of artistry
in China’s modern fiction. Translator and critic Michael S. Duke writes,

From the perspective of my implied readers, the primary stumbling blocks
on the road to international acceptance of serious Chinese fiction are the
interrelated problems of the writers’ excessive attempts to comment on
and influence Chinese social reality and their concomitant lack of concern
for excellence of artistic form. With notable exceptions, writers of serious
modern Chinese fiction have been more concerned with getting their
immediate thematic message across than with creating polished literary
works of lasting artistic significance.20

C. T. Hsia puts it this way: “the intrusive presence of utilitarian ideals” in these writers’
works “precludes the disinterested search for excellence.”21 Latter-day Chinese literature
as a whole, not to mention Chinese literature about Christianity, has not been embraced
outside of its own borders.
It does not help, probably, that so much of that literature is prickly about, or downright unfriendly toward, foreign nations and foreign faiths, but the twentieth century also witnessed the first serious consideration of Christianity by Chinese intellectuals. The mainstream of Chinese intellectual thought in the modern era continued to be necessarily anti-foreign and anti-missionary in so far as those entities were inextricable from foreign imperialism, the antonym of Chinese nationalism. However, to the extent that some form of “true Christianity” could be distilled out of the impure mixture of religion and imperialism, the Modern Era gave “Western” religion its first positive widespread consideration by China’s intellectual elite. Several influential writers, treating the matter in the ti yong tradition, took the teachings of Christ seriously as representing values that could revitalize China and that could also be used as effective weapons against the hypocrisies of the foreigners. Very few of these writers actively embraced the foreign religion and all its doctrines, but the Chinese adoption of Christian ideals, in a way that suggested those ideals could belong as much if not more to the victimized Chinese as to the hypocritical imperialists, Lewis Robinson calls “a unique contribution of twentieth-century Chinese fiction in the evolution of modern Chinese literature.”22

Robinson is the author of the only major research in English on Christianity in Chinese literature, Double-Edged Sword: Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction. As noted above, his major work, accomplished in the early 1980s when the Reform Era literary scene was just taking shape, was limited to mainland writers of the pre-’49 era and only Taiwanese and Hong Kong writers since 1949. For clarity’s sake, Robinson organized modern Chinese literature according to three periods, which in general represent three different intellectual responses to Christianity: 1) the early “May Fourth”
movement writers, a group of radical literary reformers named after the 1919 nationalist movement, who were generally open to a humanistic approach to Christianity; 2) the satirists of the 1930s, who were largely more suspicious and caustic about the “foreign” faith; and 3) the war-era writers, who re-appraised Christianity, Robinson suspects, “in the light of the war relief work of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries during the years 1937 to 1945.” Robinson makes good use of this framework even as he is clearly aware of the limitations of this strict chronological approach: for example, some of Lu Xun’s anti-Christian writings were composed before 1930, and the 1920s were ablaze with anti-religion movements; and the most Christian stories of the lot, those of Xu Dishan, were mostly written in the 1930s. Donald Treadgold further contradicts the claim of a widespread “serious reappraisal” of Christianity by intellectuals during the war years: “By about 1927 the [religion] question could be regarded as settled [against Christianity] among most Chinese intellectuals.” In other words, long before the war, the door of opportunity for “serious reappraisal” was shut. Yu-ming Shaw, in an essay on the intellectual response to Christianity, quotes Treadgold and seconds what he says by expressing his suspicion that Christianity has been a non-issue for most Chinese intellectuals from 1927 up to the present.

To supplement his somewhat arbitrary chronological delineations, Robinson spends a great deal of time with the issue of nationalism and the interaction between national and spiritual faiths: “The tension between Christian faith and Chinese nationalism is a thematic concern in the fiction of many Chinese authors writing during the period between 1919 and 1945.” There is a consistent pattern underneath all the variations of Christian portrayals in fiction described by Robinson that supersedes and
permeates any timeline we might invent for the period, and this pattern is based on this very tension that Robinson studies. The central question concerning Christianity in this period is not “How did each writer respond to Christianity?” nor is it even “How did China as a whole respond to Christianity?” In most cases, the writer’s character and his nationalism did not shift in response to contact with Christianity. Rather, the Chinese conception of Christianity, if it was to be conceived of at all, had to shift to accommodate Chinese nationalism. Therefore, the central question of modern China concerning Christianity is “How did Christianity respond to the nationalism of modern China and survive to become a real and important, if relatively small, part of contemporary Chinese culture?”

Where Christianity remained a foreign artifact, it could only be rejected. All too often in the 1920s and ‘30s, says Wang Benzhao (王本朝), Christianity “got bundled up with racial and colonial conflicts.” “At that time what many saw of Christianity was only the worldly level—the colonialism, hegemonism, and hypocrisy of the Church and the Christians themselves.”  

This sort of Christianity could have no commerce with Chineseness and, besides, could not be considered “true Christianity” by any reasonable observer, not to mention, we should hope, by Christian believers. A second sort of Christianity, one whose values are seen as potentially useful to China’s future, but many of whose key doctrines are elided in favor of humanistic utility, would have trouble meeting orthodox definitions of Christianity, but could find favor among many, East and West, who profess a more diffuse interpretation of religious doctrine. Furthermore, this sort of religion could certainly jibe with modern Chinese nationalism. Mainland critic Ma Jia (马佳) describes how a group of writers, a significant tributary to the mainstream, saw
this sort of Christianity as the hope of China’s future: “On the one hand they fervently
needed Christianity’s ultimate values; on the other hand they did all they could to dodge
or oppose its material forms and certain of its doctrines.”28 Only in rare situations with a
handful of writers did Chinese Modernism approach a third option, a successful
integration of nationalist and Christian orthodoxies.

If we take eleven of the major writers covered by Robinson in *Double-Edged
Sword* and place them on a simple spectrum of their response to Christianity as it appears
in their writing, the scale would look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Response to Christianity as Evidenced in Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Qian</td>
<td>Most Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu Yepin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Xun</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Lao She</td>
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<td>Ba Jin</td>
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<td>Chen Duxiu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mao Dun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guo Mo Ruo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yu Dafu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bing Xin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xu Dishan</td>
<td>Most Positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is something like the scale Robinson sets up with his three-part chronology. Xiao
Qian (萧乾), Hu Yepin (胡也频), and Lu Xun (鲁迅) all relentlessly satirize Christianity
and particularly the missionary church in China. Lao She (老舍) and Ba Jin (巴金) were
more accepting of Christianity in general—Lao She was even baptized—but in their
writings they too emphasize the hypocrisies of foreign Christians rather than the sincerity
of Chinese Christians. Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), Mao Dun (茅盾), Guo Moruo (郭沫若),
and Yu Dafu (郁达夫) all write about the possibility of humanist Christian values
reversing China’s decrepitude. Only Xu Dishan (许地山) and the poet Bing Xin (冰心) are easily cited as examples of “Christian writers” who successfully coordinate their Chineseness and their Christian faith, and even these two examples are not free of controversy.

If we shift this spectrum to reflect what I have argued is the more salient question that Robinson constantly works with, but does not take as his organizing principle—i.e., not the writers’ feelings about Christianity, but how the writers’ fluid conceptions of Christianity respond to a relatively fixed concept of Chinese nationalism—the spectrum would look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Response of Christianity to Nationalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Qian</td>
<td>Christianity becomes Western; imperialistic; compatible with “Chinese-ness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu Yepin</td>
<td>. . . becomes secular humanist philosophy; acceptable to nationalists, but orthodoxy is compromised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Xun</td>
<td>. . . is fully internalized, individual as well as orthodox, fully nationalized, made Chinese and distinct from the West.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao She</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ba Jin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chen Duxiu</td>
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<td>Mao Dun</td>
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<td>Guo Mo Ruo</td>
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<td>Bing Xin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xu Dishan</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The problem with the first schema is that it purports to compare intellectual responses to a single homogenous referent, “Christianity.” When we look at the Christianity in Xiao Qian’s stories and in Xu Dishan’s (as we will immediately below), however, we find the Christianities we are comparing are more disparate than the proverbial apples and oranges. The second schema allows us to see the reasons for the vastly different responses. When Xiao Qian and Xu Dishan speak about Christianity, it is patently obvious they are not talking about the same fruit. It is the very definitions of Christianity,
not any supposedly true objective opinions of people about a fixed object, that shift as we slide up and down this scale. Were Hu Yepin and Chen Duxiu to discuss religion, they would have first to come up with a common ground, a language they could agree upon. The language that all eleven of these writers can agree upon, the constant factor in what would otherwise be a baseless comparison of scattered views and definitions of a Western concept, is the language of Chinese nationalism. When confronted with the idea of Christianity, each of these writers feels the tension between “the demands of Chinese nationalism and Christian faith,” both totalizing concepts that seem to demand that we give up everything for a cause. How can we reconcile the two? Can we reconcile the two? This chapter describes several such attempts and refusals by China’s twentieth-century writers.

Before we move to Reform Era fiction, let us take a closer look at three of these modern Chinese writers, a sampling from each area of the modern spectrum: Xiao Qian at the anti-Christian extreme, Chen Duxiu in the compromised middle, and Xu Dishan as the major modern Christian writer.

Xiao Qian, from one point of view, is clearly the most “anti-Christian” writer of the lot and is so nominated by Robinson. On the other hand, Robinson himself, and several mainland critics too, are quick to qualify their descriptions of the extremity of his distemper. Modern China’s reaction to Christianity is so complex and so distinct from Western Christian history because to a great many Chinese, Western Christianity and Western anti-Christian thought were simultaneous revelations. The Union Bible (the most complete, accurate, and vernacular translation when it was published in 1919 and still in widespread use among Chinese Protestants today) and the works of Nietzsche
appeared in China at almost the same time. In addition to this confusion, many Chinese, like Xiao Qian, encountered an equally befuddling contradiction between the good that Christianity claimed to be about and the evil they witnessed in its followers, both Chinese and Western.

Even an apparently ardent modern opponent of Christianity like Xiao Qian—which he seems to be, based on his fiction—has a mixed personal reaction to the religion. Late in life Xiao Qian professed a fondness for the beauty of Christianity, particularly its hymnody and other aesthetic aspects; he told Robinson in 1981, “I might as well tell you that I am a devout lover of church music, Xmas carols, the Messiah, and the hymns. I always play these when I need some repose. I’m fond of religious architecture too. I love to sit in an empty cathedral, smell the incense and gaze at the painted glass. I love many passages from the Bible, especially I Corinthians, chapter 13.” He did not personally experience much of that beauty and love as a child, however, in his interactions with hypocritical Chinese “rice Christians” and authoritarian and unsympathetic missionary employers and teachers. The cruelty, not the beauty, is what found its way into his early fiction and later Communist-era essays. Ma Jia describes the angry anti-religious tone of the stories with reference to the overall atmosphere of Republican-era China: “The sentimentalized colors of these stories are laid on very thick and clearly carry traces of the spirit of the age and are controlled by the limits of a specific historical environment.” Xiao Qian himself told Robinson, it seems almost apologetically, that “every writer is affected by his own environment, especially in his early works.” Many of his early works were semi-autobiographical stories against, if not Christianity in general, then Christianity as he saw it incarnated in the Christians around him.
“Cactus Flower,” reprinted often in the mainland in both English and Chinese, will serve as a fair representation of Xiao Qian’s anti-Christian output. Bonnie McDougall introduces the story in a 1984 Beijing edition:

Of particular interest to Western readers is the story “Cactus Flower,” which reveals the destructive influence of missionary Christianity on Chinese family and national life in the early twentieth century. Xiao Qian was perhaps the first Chinese writer to deal with the effects of the Christian church in China, and several of his early stories are on this topic.36

In this story, young Qichang (Xiao Qian’s stand-in) is caught up in some of the nationalist student movements of the 1930s, but at first he is rejected by his classmates and branded a spy because he and his mother work for the foreign rector of the missionary school. Qichang’s mother obtained these jobs for them both with some difficulty; their livelihood and Qichang’s free education depend upon the “kindness” of these strangers, these American Christians. Torn between the capitulation of his mother before the West and the submission she demands of him, and the pressure from his peers and from within himself to be “truly Chinese,” he cannot reconcile the poles; he first participates in the anti-imperialism demonstrations secretly, but must finally confront his mother and the rector together. “Let him hit me!” he shouts as the rector grows angry and his mother tries to protect him. “Just let him dare! There’s been a revolution in China now. The foreign devils won’t dare bully us any longer!”37 He thus loses both of their jobs, but he gains self-respect, and at the end of the story he walks proudly into a meeting of the other students, proclaiming, “You shouldn’t call me a spy any more. I don’t clean the old man’s floor now, and my mother doesn’t work there either.”38

Xiao Qian’s story “The Conversion” (“皈依”) ends with the hero, a common janitor named Ching Lung, forcibly extricating his sister Niu-niu from the grip of the
missionaries with whom she thinks she has found true peace and with whom he thinks
she has found dangerous “opium.” Ching Lung remonstrates with Niu-niu at home and
finally also with the “foreign-devils” publicly as he drags his sister down the meeting-
place aisle toward the door. As he takes this final drastic and heroic action, he hears the
daily shouts of the Chinese students “ring in his ears: ‘Down with the Imperialists! Away
with the foreigners!” As if there were any need to make the zero-sum game between
Chineseness and Christianity more clear, some editions of the story end with a postscript
that includes these words: “I have never actually seen a man like her older brother, Ching
Lung—therein lies the tragedy of present-day China.”

As a matter of private taste, Xiao Qian has found himself capable of separating
some positive aspects of Christianity out from its Western missionary roots, and
Robinson and Ma Jia agree that “his anger is clearly focused upon foreign and Chinese
Christian hypocrites rather than upon Christianity per se,” but in his fiction Xiao Qian
can find no way for his Chinese characters to accept Christianity as a faith of their own,
and he sees no need to apologize for his “historically accurate” stories and no need to
balance the vision with a more complex portrayal of either the student nationalists or the
Christians. “Westerner or Chinese, genuinely decent Christians do not exist in his
stories.” For all their simplicity, however, these stories make evident the complex role
that Christianity plays both in a single writer’s life—a man who can at once find repose
only in church music, but still not give an inch to Christianity in his writings—and also in
relation to the nationalism of modern and contemporary China. Christianity is readily
deployed even today as a touchstone for the defensive “anti-” nature of Chinese
nationalism, the powerful trend in modern Chinese patriotism (and to a lesser degree, I
think, in U.S. patriotism as well) that requires something to oppose, in order to itself understand what Chineseness means. Xiao Qian’s characters depend on this touchstone to shape their identities: Qichang becomes the most “truly Chinese” student in the story—volunteering to take the flag home when the others’ enthusiasm wanes—only because he is able to (forced to) define himself in contradistinction to the foreign Christian rector. Ching Lung becomes a true Chinese man—of a sort that Xiao Qian doubts really exists—only when he asserts his identity, and his sister’s for her, in defiance of the missionary establishment.

Critics have chided Xiao Qian for his lack of subtlety and balance. Robinson says his works are too often “outrageous” satires rather than “realistic” ones, full of “stereotyped caricatures.”\textsuperscript{44} Ma Jia says his cultural and historical limitations “affect the stories’ aesthetic value.”\textsuperscript{45} But C. T. Hsia, Jenner, and Duke have already opined that aesthetics are a weakness in nearly every modern Chinese literary production. This does not seem to have done much to diminish the continuing influence of such work, nor do Chinese audiences generally seem to be as sensible of this “failing” in their twentieth-century literature, a fact that we shall see can work in the favor of Christian writers like Xu Dishan and Bei Cun as well as of those who attack Christianity like Xiao Qian.

Chen Duxiu, in the middle of our spectrum of modern literature about Christianity, is not famous for writing fiction, but as one of the most important and prominent intellectuals of the day, his positive treatment of Christianity is useful here. One of the patrons of the nationalist New Youth and May Fourth movements and at the center of the literary renaissance that accompanied them, Chen Duxiu agreed with Xiao Qian that much of the foreign Christianity that was visible in China was a betrayal of
Unlike the pre-modern intellectuals, who had had neither the means nor much interest in criticizing Christianity based on the teachings of Christ, Chen, the consummate Chinese Modern, had the advantages of the availability of and facility with Western texts as well as an intense nationalist interest in the restoration of China’s greatness. Unlike Xiao Qian, who privately appreciated elements of Christianity but ended his public stories with unmitigated divorce between that faith and the Chinese “faith,” Chen was willing and able to appropriate Christianity for the Chinese cause. He consequently offered the Chinese people a secularized Christianity that “first separated Christian teachings from the Christian Church” and then “separated out the supernatural parts of Christian doctrine, i.e., the absolute faith in God and in the divinity of Christ.” Chen saw the true values of Christianity to be embodied in Christ’s human character, not some divine nature. Christ’s universal love for mankind and sympathy for the oppressed were the true spirit of Christianity and represented, in Robinson’s words, an “ideology for national renewal.” In “Christianity and the Chinese People,” Chen writes that this Christian spirit “dominates the heights of Chinese culture; it has been the morality and justice of China since the Three Dynasties [i.e., since the dawn of Chinese history]. It likewise dominates the heights of Western culture; it is the beauty of the Greeks and the faith and love of the Christian.” Chen Duxiu eventually settled on Communism—in many respects itself a secularized Christianity—as the nation’s best hope, but this and his other essays on Christianity are highly significant for Chinese Christianity, for better or worse.

Though an expurgated version of the faith, Chen’s Christianity was at least clearly centered on Christ and admiring of the values he embodied, while it remained fully
compatible with the new Chinese nationalism. This fact and the concurrent connections made between Christianity and Communism as China’s twin hopes have contributed to the complicated church-state relationship we find today. Some early official church leaders like Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong, 吳耀宗)—the founder of the Three Self Patriotic Movement in 1950-51, the mentor of current leader K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun, 丁光訓), and in good part the reason why the purity and independence of the official church is so often questioned to the present day—were educated in the days of Chen and “believed that they could retain their Christian faith while accepting the Communist party as the means for translating their Christian ideals into reality.”²⁵⁰ The beginnings of what many consider the excessive compromise of Christian truths to fit with Chinese realities begins, on the Protestant side of things, with Chen Duxiu and other intellectuals of his ilk. On the other hand, Chen’s affirmation of Christian values as both universal and as consonant with a concept of true Chineseness should not be undervalued. We can see the fruit of this reconciliation in Bette Bao Lord’s and Nien Cheng’s ideas of the true honorable Chinese “character” which finds no contradiction between love of God and love of country. We also perhaps see its work in the Christian revival in the mainland today among many who see no contradiction between their Chineseness and their Christianity and who have also added back in those supernatural elements of the faith that Chen rejected as superfluous.

There is some question as to whether or not Xu Dishan insisted upon supernatural Christian claims, but there is no doubt that he went a step further than Chen in proclaiming a faith more like traditional Christianity and on creating fictional Chinese characters who fully embodied at least Chen’s idea of Christianity, if not something more
orthodox. In “The Web-Mending Toiling Spider” (or “The Vain Labors of a Spider,” “織网劳蛛” in Chinese), a story C. T. Hsia calls a “parable of religious patience,” a saintly Chinese Christian changes the world around her through the patient exercise of charity; like a spider she tirelessly mends the webs broken by man’s inhumanity. Shang-jie (尚洁) is our idealized Christian heroine whose long-suffering and forgiving attitude changes the lives of many people, including her suspicious and abusive husband. She is rejected by her local church congregation because her ministry to poor men initiates vicious rumors of infidelity, and when she receives help from one of the foreign pastors, he is fired from his post as well. This pastor is every bit as kind and patient as our heroine. Both of them continue to survive by working at menial tasks, and they still find time to preach the Gospel and to lead many to Christ. The beauty of Shang-jie’s spirit and the further intervention of the pastor friend finally effect a reconciliation with her husband, who also becomes a Christian.

Xu Dishan was a student and teacher of world religions, and he is often described as combining Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity in his stories and as himself having followed all three schools simultaneously. “Spider” does reflect a sort of Daoist passivity in a passage like this one, in which Shang-jie reflects on her husband’s leaving: “For love? To leave me for love? It is only natural, since love is a sharp ax employed more often in hewing down one’s fortunes than in mending them. He has already set his course of action; so why should I waste time to look for him? I never make up my mind beforehand; I submit to events as they come.” As in Christianity, however, this
passivity of patience is finally indistinguishable from active charity, and charges of
syncretism do not bear themselves out with any solidity.

Despite these alleged syncretistic tendencies and Xu’s own self-professed
emphasis on the “moral conduct” of Christ rather than his “original essence,” the
boldness and independence with which this and other of his stories explicitly display the
transformative power of Christianity is startling. A Chinese Christian saint, though
uncanonized, is the central moral agent of the story. Her exercise of explicitly confessed
Christian virtues attracts many others to the faith. If this is perhaps not a strictly creedal
Christianity, Xu makes no issue of doctrine as Chen Duxiu does, so there is finally no
way to distinguish in the story between what Shang-jie teaches and what the foreign
missionaries were preaching. In fact, one of those very foreign missionaries is shown to
be nearly equal in virtue to our Chinese protagonist, and this in a story that was
published, as Robinson points out, “during the height of the Anti-Christian Movement.”
The story does also portray the pettiness and hypocrisy of other church members, but this
does not challenge its representation of the truth of the protagonists’ faith and its
universality for people both East and West.

All critics seem to be in agreement that “The Web-Mending Toiling Spider” and
some other of Xu’s stories suffer aesthetically due to the presence of impossibly good
saints like Shang-jie, as much as Xiao Qian’s stories suffered for the opposite cause. But
even C. T. Hsia, who is so critical of the majority of modern Chinese fiction, says that
Xu’s posthumously published long story “Yu Guan” (“玉官”) “came as a powerful
surprise and compels a new appraisal of his achievement.” In terms of its compelling
realism, “Yu Guan” has the advantage of a main character who is not a living saint; we
witness Yu Guan’s pilgrimage from unbelief to a false, self-centered “belief” to Christian belief and active virtue, and at no point on the journey does she lose our sympathy for being either despicable or too holy.

“Yu Guan” is also more suggestive than “Spider” in terms of the integration of Chineseness and Christianity. Shang-jie is both Christian and Chinese, but apart from possibly the influence of Chinese Taoism on her thought, she is given few if any distinctive characteristics that would mark her as specifically Chinese racially or culturally; she is rather simply the embodiment of patience and goodness, a Christian saint who stands to some degree above and apart from the nation in which she lives. Yu Guan, on the other hand, remains, in Hsia’s words, “stubbornly Chinese,” and “an excellent specimen of Chinese womanhood.”57 "Yu Guan” is the story of the fortunes of the eponymous widow. At the beginning, she is driven by selfishness, particularly the need to feel important and to be publicly recognized as a virtuous widow. She pins all her hopes on her son, who she hopes will one day become an important official and erect “a small tablet, if not an arch, in honor of her widowhood.”58 When she goes to work for some foreign missionaries she falls under the influence of the faith and becomes a “Bible woman,” that is, one of a group of itinerant Chinese woman evangelists. She “maintains a ‘gut feeling’ that the Christian message is basically a good one”59 even though she can see the hypocrisy of many Christians and even though she herself is one of those hypocrites for years. “Outwardly she had to pretend that she practiced what she preached: she had to oppose idolatry and ancestor worship, as well as the concept of reincarnation, dismissing such practices and beliefs as superstition”; she herself will not get rid of her own ancestral tablets after she “converts” for fear that it will “bring bad luck to her
She works hard and says all the right things, but she is proud and concerned more about her reputation and her son’s destiny to honor her than she is about the faith. After a complicated series of events—“For once the author has the conviction of his romance material,” Hsia says, and the accumulation of “coincidences and mistaken identities” would do Dickens proud—Yu Guan’s son rejects his missionary upbringing and his mother who only ever saw in him a widow’s arch. Yu Guan is brought to a point of crisis and then undergoes her true conversion. She becomes a sincere Christian, gives up her selfish dreams, and comes far closer to the ideal Christian virtue of selflessness.

There are several points in the story that testify to Yu Guan’s and Xu Dishan’s capacity to hold Chineseness and Christianity together in one human soul and that describe the sort of faith this Chinese Christianity should be. On her Bible-woman travels, Yu Guan always carries a copy of the Book of Changes (Yi Jing or I Ching, 易经 in Chinese) along with her Bible. This does not change after her transformation; the fact is mentioned again at the very end of the story. Robinson explains, “[Xu’s] insightful message here is that being a true Christian does not require a denunciation of one’s own cultural heritage and an adaptation to Western culture. Indeed, [Yu Guan] hasn’t a Western bone in her body.” Similarly, Yu Guan’s continuing regard for ancestral rituals attracts other characters to what was previously a strange foreign faith. The obstacle to Yu Guan’s conversion in the story is never any aspect of her true Chineseness, but rather her hypocrisy and her unhealthy self-centered regard for traditional Confucian virtues, virtues which are not bad in themselves. It is only at the end of the story, when she has finally abandoned her pursuit of these honors, that she finds honor. The villagers she has served want to celebrate her forty years of missionary service, but she “was not
concerned about personal glory anymore.” When Yu Guan refuses to let them construct a widow’s arch, they instead “unanimously decided to build a bridge right outside the city [in her honor]. There was a genuine need for a new bridge, because the only bridge over the brook, a wooden one, was in very bad condition.” This turn of events Robinson compares to “the biblical paradox of losing one’s life in order to gain it” and the entire process of her struggle to form a Chinese Christian identity he helpfully compares to Jung’s “individuation process.” Yu Guan does not concede her Chinese cultural identity and instead learns to embody Christian virtues that benefit the nation practically through individual believers and that do not contradict but coincide with traditional Chinese values. The bridge constructed in Yu Guan’s name is a potent, if perhaps unintentional, metaphor.

Unlike the case of Chen Duxiu, no bridge is set up in Xu’s work between Christianity and Communism. Robinson quotes a key mainland literature journal from the 1960s that called Xu’s “escape into the world of religion” one of his only mistakes, but which tried to salvage some of his other writings by claiming that he was on the verge of a “Communist awakening” when he died in 1941. The late writing (1940-41) and posthumous publication of “Yu Guan” has to be ignored by such theorists. If the story is honest about the imperfections of Christians, it is even more honest about the violent abuses of some Communists, at whose hands Yu Guan suffers, this at a time when Edgar Snow and others were publishing rather glowing portraits of the CCP as youthful, idealistic, and as yet untainted by worldly corruption. Chen Duxiu and Xiao Qian have been officially useful in the years since Liberation, but the Christian writing of Xu Dishan has been mostly forgotten by the public, though not by certain mainland scholars.
writing about Christianity in literature. My university students in Beijing were unfailingly surprised and skeptical when I told them that Xu Dishan was a Christian; they know him only from a famous parabolic essay about peanuts that all schoolchildren read.

Robinson tells us, what we hardly need anyone to tell us, that “Christianity became obsolete in revolutionary China and thus disappeared as a topic of fiction.” This is not entirely accurate, but near enough. Mainland critic Wang Benzhao has unearthed a couple of early Mao-era poems that use Christian imagery as objects of satire and a story by Wang Meng (王蒙) that takes Catholics as its villains, a stock character in much propaganda and genre entertainments of the day. Clearly serious personal consideration of the Christian faith of the sort achieved by Xu Dishan became impossible during the thirty years of Maoist orthodoxy from 1949 to 1979. The best it seemed Chinese Christians could hope for—and this was one reason that compromise was supported by many—was an emasculated Christianity of the Chen Duxiu and Y. T. Wu variety, completely subordinated to Communist ideology even to the extent of denying many doctrines and helping to persecute fellow Christians who were less complicit. George Patterson quotes the director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Ho Zhenxiang, as stating in 1954,

> The positive values of patriotism should take the place of negative religious propaganda. We Communists can accept as reasonable certain parts of the Bible, which Christians use, but we must also pay attention to the doctrines that they preach. If we infuse those doctrines with our Marxist-Leninist thought, then they will have positive influence and can serve our cause.

The Communists continue the rhetoric of nationalistic opposition, and despite Ho’s stated desire to abandon “negative religious propaganda,” the reality was that the New China
was erasing many of the cultural gains of openness, and the depiction of Christianity in the arts was reverting back to pre-modern standard caricatures:

Protestant Christianity in China, under the new management by Y. T. Wu, was reformed to be hostile to the U.S., the West, and the global Christian missionary movement as a whole. From the beginning of the 1950s, Chinese propaganda movies relentlessly depicted foreign—and particularly American—missionaries as unscrupulous vultures picking away at the economy, the national integrity, and the cultural heritage of China.\(^72\)

The bad news for a China just emerging from this prison in the late 1970s was that literally it had lost considerable time and perhaps would need to repeat some of the work of the Moderns before another Xu Dishan could emerge. The good news was that, much like the work of Chen Duxiu, the Communists succeeded in indigenizing Christianity without at the same time convincing everyone of the anti-orthodox conditions on which the CCP tolerated Christianity. The CCP forcibly removed the “stench of foreign imperialism” from Christianity without succeeding in removing all of its supernatural elements, or at least the possibility that those elements might be retained or reintroduced by Chinese Christians and Chinese clergy as soon as they felt it safe to do so. China was readily convinced that the first separation effected by Chen Duxiu—that between Christianity and Christians, particularly hypocritical Christians—was as it should be. By kicking out the foreigners, the CCP had effected literally and thoroughly what Chen had only considered on paper. The second separation—that between Christianity and Christian doctrine—has proved more difficult to realize, no doubt in part because the first separation itself implies the existence of a true and unwavering Christianity underneath the false and bending humans who attempt to practice it.
The CCP thus opened the door and paved the way smooth for the late-twentieth-century revival of religious interest that does not struggle as fiercely with the ghosts of Chinese nationalism as the Moderns once did. Therefore, though the quarter-century of the Reform Era is similar in many ways—almost a catch-up repetition of the quarter-century Modern Era—and though the seven contemporary authors can be placed on a spectrum much like the eleven modern writers above, we cannot dip our toes in the same river twice, and the more things stay the same, the more they change. When Feng Jicai and Mo Yan write about the evils of the missionary past, the sense of “past” is very strong. Both novelists turn the past into something fantastic that the modern writers, for whom the missionary question was present reality, could not have imagined. The evil Christians in Feng Jicai and Mo Yan have little that ties their doctrine to their actions, little, that is, that ties their villainy to Christianity as a whole. And when the Reform Era produces another Xu Dishan by the name of Bei Cun, his Christian characters struggle more with internal demons than with foreign devils. Nationalism is still the mainstream in Reform Era China, but some dilution is in evidence when compared to the Modern Era, and the formerly clear opposition between Christianity and Chineseness is not so clear as it once was.

**Li Ping (礼平) and Zhang Xiaotian (张笑天) Dip Their Toes**

The opposition between Christianity and Chineseness was still fairly distinct, however, in the late 1970s and early ‘80s, as writers cautiously tested the waters of reform. Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian both flirt with Christianity in their early Reform Era novels, but throw it off readily when they must make a choice between the foreign
Church and the Motherland. Lewis Robinson mentions, both in Double-Edged Sword and in a later essay in Bible in Modern China, these two writers as a good starting place for other scholars to carry his research theme into the 1980s and ‘90s. Both Li Ping’s When Fade Away the Colors of Dusk (晚霞消失的时候) and Zhang Xiaotian’s A Private Session Made Public (公开的内参) are part of the earliest literary movements of the Reform Era: the short-lived Scar (or Wound) Literature school (伤痕文学) that served as a literature of catharsis after the horrors of the “ten years of chaos,” “a paramount example of writers’ efforts to recount and recant the heresy of the Cultural Revolution”, and the New Realism (新写实主义) that would replace the false utopias of Socialist Realism. Once the heresies of the Cultural Revolution were rejected, what orthodoxy was to take their place? In form, Socialist Realism was replaced by a “plain old realism” (called “New Realism”) very similar both to the “social realism” of many of China’s modern writers discussed above and to that of their early-twentieth-century Western models such as Ibsen and Chekhov. A Chinese Avant-garde would not appear until the late 1980s. In thought, as in style, these two writers again did not stray far from shore. The world was all before them after the collapse of the Gang of Four, and the excitement of contact with reemerging religious ideas is palpable in their writing. Nevertheless, with the mistakes of the past thirty years all safely scapegoated onto the “Far Left” extremists who had allegedly wrested control from mainstream CCP moderates, Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian both finally settle for a safe Chinese nationalism and sublimate all their love of fresh things into an old-style nationalist fervor that the CCP can accept.
Both writers seem to be sincere believers in the Chinese Communist cause, but we should remember that artistic caution was not without foundation in the early years of “Reform and Opening Up.” The Party leadership itself being an amalgamation of factions, signals about the extent of reforms and artistic freedoms were mixed throughout the 1980s. 1980 and ’81 saw a new push for ideological consensus as the Chinese leadership “began to perceive a disruptive Western impact upon Chinese thought and behavior.” A 1981 film script by Bai Hua, “Unrequited Love,” became the primary target of the nervous government. Michel Oksenberg and Richard Bush describe how “The film’s sympathetic portrayal of a Chinese intellectual victimized during the Maoist era epitomized for the more orthodox party officials the damaging effects of cultural freedom.” Li Ping’s When Fade Away the Colors of Dusk was also published in 1981, and for all the conservatism of its conclusions that sound like orthodox nationalism to Western readers, it too was considered controversial at the time and was hotly criticized. From Robinson’s introduction to Li Ping and the accounts of the controversy surrounding his novel, the Western reader might expect the work to be both well-known and daringly positive in its appraisal of Christianity. In fact the novel is neither widely read today nor is it nearly a Christian tract. Little of the early ‘80s Scar Literature, in fact, is still read in China today. As much as we Americans have loved to read about the Cultural Revolution throughout the 1980s and ‘90s and still do today, the genre faded quickly in China itself—partly because of official pressure, but also apparently through popular election, both of which saw little point in dwelling overlong on the recent horrors—and was replaced by what the Chinese public and most scholars considered to be more exciting literary innovations.
Nevertheless, Li Ping’s and Zhang Xiaotian’s books, both lacking in long-term influence, still make for fascinating reading today, particularly in light of the concerns of this research. They represent something of the mindset of the earliest days of the new era, and both of them treat Christianity quite seriously and at some length. The writers seem at once almost sensually thrilled by the prospect of talking about religions that were until recently forbidden, and also chastely unwilling to do anything more than talk about it. The novels come across as both excited and cautious, toes dipped in water to check the temperature. Both writers appear hesitant to have their characters fully explore or completely commit to something after an era in which deep commitments were betrayed and in the beginnings of a new era when it still seemed unwise to stray too far from that which betrayed them. In early contemporary Chinese literature, religious narratives are still subsumed under official nationalistic concerns. China comes first, religion of whatever kind a distant second.

Li Ping’s When Fade Away the Colors of Dusk is a love story in a mold common to many Chinese romances. An innocent youthful infatuation gives way to the harder realities of adulthood (often due to the weakness of the man), and finally some modicum of innocence and happiness is restored (often due to the good influence of the virtuous woman). For comparative reference, we can see this pattern play out in the sentimental faiths of two recent and very popular Chinese films: Zhang Yimou’s The Road Home (我的父亲母亲) and Yang Yazhou’s Steal Happiness (没事偷着乐). In Dusk, after a chance meeting in a park, our two foreordained but star-crossed teenage lovers, Kelang (克郎) and Nanshan (南珊), carry on an intense philosophical discussion with the stirrings of youthful passion in the background. They part that day without knowing
much about each other, but we know these two will meet again. The fall in *Dusk*, the interruption in the incipient romance, takes place already in their second of four chance meetings. It comes about in the form of the Cultural Revolution as Kelang, the male lead and our first-person narrator, leads his band of Red Guards on a raid of a home belonging to an old man with a questionable political background. The victim of the kangaroo court turns out to be Nanshan’s grandfather. This second meeting of Kelang and Nanshan is inauspicious, but there is a restoration of sorts at the end of the story. The unlucky pair meet again after the Cultural Revolution, engage in another conversation that mirrors the one they had years before when they first met, and finally go their separate ways in a kind of friendship.

The plot of innocent youthful devotion is pleasant and keeps us reading through several philosophical discussions that, without any sexual tension behind them, would certainly have seemed more arid than they do already to a contemporary Western reader. But in the end, when the love story does not really take off and rather devolves into talk instead of passionate embraces, we realize it is the heated philosophical discussions, as much or more than the tepid romance, which are at the center of the novel for Chinese readers. Though the melancholy romance of “what might have been” was no doubt powerful to Chinese audiences who felt that they had lost time and opportunities in recent years, the ideas and the freedom to converse itself have almost equal erotic appeal, and it was the ideas, not the romance, that many critics saw as dangerous.

In 1981 in the People’s Republic of China, these ideas even more than the standard love plot, are what interest the writer and probably most of his readers. The love story is window dressing for a Scar Literature story of recounting and, almost, recanting.
Li Ping recounts the recent horrors of baseless political persecution and searches for answers through his characters’ conversations. In the first conversation between Nanshan and Kelang, they argue about the place of violence in human history, Kelang predictably arguing that “文明和野蛮就象人和影子一样分不开” (“Civilization and barbarism are just like man and his shadow; they can’t be separated”) and Nanshan contending that we should try to be and can be nobler creatures. Where does evil come from? What good does it do, if any? Where do we as a people go from here? These are precisely the questions everyone was asking during the first ten years of the Reform Era, a decade that Jing Wang calls “nearly ten years of national outburst of utopia fever and fascination with cultural roots.” What in our roots brought us to this place? Can we still find a utopia after the loss of utopia?

Curiously, Li Ping at one point in the novel looks for answers beyond what are traditionally considered China’s cultural roots; about halfway through the novel he raises the possibility of Christianity serving as a solution to China’s problems. In the third scene of the four-scene novel (the scene immediately following the home’s violation by the Red Guards under Kelang and before the final reconciliation), Nanshan and her brother are being “sent down to the countryside” (下乡), as many youth were during the Cultural Revolution, to learn the true revolutionary spirit from the peasants. Nanshan is taking leave of her grandparents before the train goes, and Kelang, happening upon them coincidentally, is eavesdropping on the conversation. Nanshan, quite without warning, launches into a speech in which she professes a newfound belief in “Jehovah” (yehehua, 耶和华). With youthful openness and a fervor which would be awkward in any but a
religious novel in America, she thanks God for making her what she is today, for giving her strength in these troubled times. She claims to believe that her life and destiny are in His hands; she is looking forward to meeting him face-to-face so she can bow and show her respect. She says she has been reading the Bible and believes what it says. Nanshan is young still—maybe 17—in this scene, and although the opening scene with Kelang had showed her to be thoughtful and serious, perhaps superior to Kelang in intellect (certainly in virtue), this astonishing drama is played out not without a little condescension. Li Ping distances himself from Nanshan’s faith through Kelang’s narrative control and also through Nanshan’s grandparents, who lovingly tell her, “但是, 孩子, 这一切并不存在” (“Yes, dear, but all that stuff doesn’t exist”); Nanshan seems to defer obediently to their objections: “是的, 这一切并不存在” (“Yes, of course. All that doesn’t exist”).

Still, Western readers, faced with such a bold confession of faith by a serious and virtuous young character, might naturally expect Nanshan’s faith to be reaffirmed in the fourth and final scene of the novel. This is surely what would happen in an American Christian novel about China and in any missionary story. In such stories the subject of Christianity in that foreign land is only ever raised in order for it to be shown as a light in the darkness and to shine out in the end as the answer, the moral center of the story. Kelang, however, listens discreetly and politely to all this, but his negative reaction colors the scene. Interestingly, though in his interior monologue he calls religion “荒谬” (“nonsense”) and “古老” (“old”) and implies that belief is for the weak, he does not criticize it as “foreign.” At first we still expect this to be merely the prelude to Kelang’s own conversion. It is not yet clear, especially after the Red Guard scene, that our narrator
is the normative voice, and the conversion of the Communist would be the crowning
glory of any good Christian story about China and would make the story worthy of the
harsh criticism it received.

In the fourth scene, however, the reconciliation meeting between Kelang and
Nanshan at Mount Tai (泰山) twelve years later, it becomes clear that Kelang’s faith, not
Nanshan’s, is at the center of the plot. Chinese novels about Christianity, we discover,
can be very different from Western Christian novels about the faith. The Christian faith is
not finally going to emerge as the moral center of this story. More than a decade has
passed between the train scene and the couple’s final chance meeting, and we discover
that Nanshan, still an admirable person, a if not the moral center, has all but lost her faith.
She speaks as if she were never serious about Christianity in the first place. In what does
she believe now? In China. When Kelang asks her about her youthful Christian speech,
she replies with these words:

“在信仰问题上, 我们中华民族自己有着更好的传统. 十几个世纪以来, 西方的各种 宗教象浪潮一样冲刷过我们的国土. 印度的, 希腊的, 犹太的, 罗马的, 还有阿拉伯的和拜占庭的. 但却始终未能征服我们这个民族的心.”

[“As for the question of faith, we Chinese have our own, and a better,
tradition. For several centuries now the various religions of the West have
crashed against our shores like waves. Indian, Greek, Hebrew, Roman,
Arabic, and Byzantine religions have all tried to plant their flag on our
soil. But never have they conquered the hearts of our people.”]

Shades of Thompson’s assessment of the religious history of China. Robinson says,

“Christianity is depicted in the story as a viable alternative” for Nanshan. In the end,
“viable” seems too strong a word. What happened to the fervent new Christian believer?
We are never told, but it is clear that one faith has been replaced by another.
Li’s answers turn out to be more tentative and less adventurous than a Western reader might expect, but we should not expect much more from the novels of the early years, particularly when we remember that Li was criticized even for going as far as he did. In Dusk, though we witness first-hand the remorse of a Red Guard, and though we are given a positive picture of a former member of the Guomindang (KMT, the Nationalist Party, enemies of the Communists), the story stops far short of criticizing the Communist Party. The Red Guard excesses are just that, excesses and exceptions, mistakes of misguided youthful patriotism that can be criticized gently and then forgiven. Kelang’s parents and Nanshan’s grandfather are all steadfast Communists and patriots; we even learn that it was Kelang’s father, through inspiring actions and Marxist proselytizing, who converted Nanshan’s grandfather from his Nationalist heresies in the revolutionary days of their youth. The way forward in this novel is the way back and is the way the Party describes in chapter two above: the Reform Era is founded on a recovery of the solid—only temporarily lost—values of the revolution. There is finally nothing politically very controversial about Dusk, not when compared to the writings of dissident celebrities like Wei Jingsheng and Wang Dan. Dusk may have been somewhat bold in its day, but it would be unlikely to find an audience in the West for its cautious romance and more-cautious reform.

However, what is bold in Li Ping’s work and politically dangerous for its time is the way in which he brings alternative voices from outside the Communist Party into the conversation about China’s future. Voices that had been repressed are now given a new audience. Li Ping does not embrace Christianity or any outside philosophy wholeheartedly, but he does imply that these other tongues may have a place in the new
China and that the Chinese people are not to be essentialized or seen as facilely monolithic in their faith. This is true particularly at the end of the novel, in the fourth scene. Though it is here that Nanshan renounces her youthful Christian experiment and joins spiritually in solidarity with Kelang’s secular nationalistic spirit, Li Ping does in this scene keep China’s door open to foreign voices, including Christianity. Li Ping fashions a conversation among four characters who meet after the Cultural Revolution is ended: Kelang, who, though repentant of his Red Guard excesses, is still a Communist and now a noble member of the People’s Liberation Army; Nanshan, who at first we think might or might not still be a Christian as she claimed to be the last time we saw her; a Chinese Buddhist monk; and a Spanish soldier/tourist who is apparently Christian in background, though probably not practicing. China had at this time only recently been reopened to foreign tourism, and renewed religious freedom had just been reaffirmed in the rewritten constitution. Li Ping seems to be self-consciously painting a picture of the diversity of the New China, not unlike the government propaganda posters that line up all the various members of the much-touted “fifty-six nationalities of China.” China’s new diversity is praised and everyone is given a voice in this scene.

They all, however, speak finally through our narrator, Kelang, the voice of the Party (the imperfect but repentant Party), the leader of the masses. They all speak their part, but it is finally our narrator who relays their words and provides a summary statement from the moral center. Kelang looks at the three people before him and thinks,
[As for a common pursuit of truth, as for a common love of justice, a common reverence for human civilization, and a common sense of responsibility for the future, deep in their hearts they were all really the same.]

We might say that they all, in their diversity, yet form a United Front with the Party at the head. Religions, and even likeminded foreign friends, are present, but subordinated to the apparently fair and neutral CCP; their beliefs are submitted to the language of Communist propaganda, “共同” (gongtong) serving as a refrain in the passage. (The word means “shared” or “common” and is an oft-used phrase in CCP literature, as in the slogan, “共同对敌” (gongtong duidi), “join forces to oppose the enemy.”) We are left with the sense that everyone will be allowed to speak and thrive under the banner of the New China, but that the Party is unmistakably in control of the meta-narrative. The novel was apparently bold for its day, but this message is yet fully consistent with the Party line as described in chapter two.

The final four-way conversation takes place on Mount Tai, a sacred mountain in Chinese tradition, standing in sight of the Yellow River, the waters of which are considered the birthplace of Chinese civilization. One by one throughout the chapter, the four characters, whatever else they believe, look over this vista and proclaim the glory of the Chinese people, of Chineseness. Ian Buruma quotes a Chinese patriot living in America who published the following lines in a Hong Kong magazine in the early 1980s; the sentiment, religious in its expression, is the same as that which we hear from Li Ping’s characters:

“‘China’ is a cultural entity which flows incessantly, like the Yellow River, from its source all the way to the present time, and from here to a boundless future. This is the basic and unshakable belief in the mind of every Chinese. It is also the strongest basis for Chinese nationalism. No
matter which government is in power, people will not reject China, for there is always hope for a better future a hundred or more years from now.” This same man described the Chinese people, wherever they may be, in Beijing, or Toronto, Hong Kong, or Amsterdam, as “an almost sacred and thus unassailable entity.”

The Buddhist monk in Dusk’s four-voice ending does disagree with Kelang about the limits of scientific naturalism, but they are both united in their praise of the river flowing below them, both acknowledging their common ancestry, which is their deepest and most fundamental connection and goes beyond the monk’s Buddhism. Yet this heritage does not go beyond Kelang’s Marxism, for Marxism is treated not as a religious faith or belief, but as simple fact or a recognition of the facts. Such Marxist enlightenment is seen as the best and most practical method for the Chinese people to be united again as they should be. Marxism therefore has a special place different from any religious beliefs. Marxist fervor cannot be replaced by a love of China; the Party is China, so love of the Party is love of China. Li Ping for all his liberality does not betray these fundamental assumptions, though a broader Chineseness is ostensibly emphasized. In perhaps the most awkward narrative moment in the final chapter, the Spanish soldier—when asked earlier who created the world answered, “当然是上帝” (“God, of course”)—gets in on the patriotic act and declaims a gushing eulogy for China. He almost sounds as if he is converting to Chinese nationalism, as if he might join Kelang to fight for China instead of Spain:

“了不起的中国人! 自从踏上你们的国土, 我就为你们这个民族的优美性格惊叹, 而现在, 我终於信服了你们的伟大祖先所遗留给你们的天然禀赋!”

[“Oh, you marvelous Chinese people! From the moment I set foot on your soil I have been amazed by the exquisite character of this people. Now I
am at last fully convinced of the natural gifts that your great ancestors have left to you.”]

Chinese syntax can sound flowery and exaggerated when translated into English, but there is no mistaking the Spaniard’s sincerity. We are reminded of the propaganda machines that still delight in finding foreigners to speak good words for the Party. Letters from Canadians and other Westerners decrying U.S. hegemony and praising the glories of China have appeared several times in recent years in the English-language official paper, the China Daily.

Thus even more explicit than the leadership of the Communist Party in this story (which is clear, but is also largely implicit in the first-person narrative voice) is the predominance of Chinese nationalism, in line with the major Chinese national narratives of the past 150 years. Religion is a significant topic of discussion for these people, but their loyalty to any religion is finally subordinated to a love for China and a loyalty to Chinese culture. Christianity and Buddhism are apparently included largely from excitement about the newly found freedom to consider alternatives, as well as from a perceived need to put these new alternatives into perspective, to see where they fit in the New China. And where they fit for Li Ping seems clear in this story, as it does in government documents: religious adherents can have a very real place in the New China as long as the New China comes first.

Just as we saw in Chen Duxiu—though there the subversion is at first humanistic, and Marxist only later—and just as we see in contemporary CCP theorizing about the place of religion in China today, nationality and patriotism are put first. Christianity and other religions have a merely utilitarian role to play under the guidance of the Party. Religion is not true, but it can be tolerated for a time, and it can even be useful. If religion
was useful to the capitalists to keep their workers under control, it can also serve a purpose under Socialism. The Buddhist monk at the end of the novel argues that religion has nothing to do with facts or proofs (a significant retreat that many Christians might be less ready to make), but that it can help us solve the contradictions in life and fill in the blanks where natural science is limited. After hearing all this, Kelang has to admit to himself,

是的。从外表看，那信仰是毫无根据的，似乎完全是受了一系列古老故事的欺骗。但是，那些并不真实的说教，却可以在精神上发挥一种奇妙的作用。[It’s true. Looking at the surface, that faith has absolutely no foundation; it’s like being fooled by a bunch of old stories. However, even those religious teachings which are not true can combine with the human spirit to effect a kind of wonderful usefulness.]

Li Ping apparently does not intend to be cynical here, but we get a taste of the same patronizing attitude that we hear in China’s government documents, as well as a frightening repetition of the very exploitation of religion that Marxism accuses capitalism of prosecuting. We are reminded of Moses, the tame raven in Orwell’s Animal Farm. He is always filling the animals’ heads with nonsense about an animal heaven called Sugarcandy Mountain to which they will go when they die. He flees the farm soon after the animals’ revolution against Jones—Moses’s religion is obviously that of the humans, used to keep the animals content and working hard, and he is not popular with the new pig leaders—but Moses returns toward the end of the novel with the same religious message. This time he is not chased away: “A thing that was difficult to determine was the attitude of the pigs toward Moses. They all declared contemptuously that his stories about Sugarcandy Mountain were lies, and yet they allowed him to remain on the farm,
not working, with an allowance of a gill of beer a day." Religion is put to work by the Marxists as it supposedly was by the capitalists, only this time the use is justified for the sake of socialism, a nobler cause than mere greed.

On almost the last page of Li Ping’s novel, Nanshan closes with an account of cultural history that is clearly drawn from the same well as the historical meta-narrative of Document 19. Religion is in the middle of history, she says; it is a stage we eventually grow out of, a stage to which we cannot return. She could be hinting here at her own personal pilgrimage of which we see only a small piece. She went through a religious phase in her youth, but she has matured. She makes this personal narrative into a larger narrative for the future of all China, and all the world.

Zhang Xiaotian published A Closed Session Made Public just one year after Li Ping’s novel, and the novels are strikingly similar in some of their structures and particularly in the attitudes they take toward Christianity. Though it does not have a first-person narrator as did Dusk, in Closed Session the limited omniscient narrator is always looking through the eyes of a male character who is not unlike the author himself and who serves as the guide, both expositional and moral. In this case the protagonist is the writer of a Party newspaper advice column who is going “undercover” on a college campus to study sexual attitudes among young people in the new “Reform and Opening Up” era (改革开放, gaike kaifang). This is not Scar Literature in the sense that Dusk with its Red Guard scene is; Dusk is looking back specifically at the tragedies of the past, searching for the good that can come out of evil and seeking a way through into the future of a new era. Although some scars of the past will not heal and some things can never be as they were, still faith in China is rediscovered, and there is an overarching
optimism about the long-term, which is very much in line with the Marxism of the day. In *Closed Session* there is very little looking back, but at times the outrages of the Cultural Revolution reverberate through the novel’s present and into the future. The focus in this novel is on the rapidly changing mores of the post-Mao era, and Zhang expresses a fascinating and a powerful ambivalence about the changes. One hears such sentiments often, especially from the older generations, still today. I have heard Chinese friends, who have no other reason to look back on the Cultural Revolution with fondness, lament the increase in crime and immorality since the early 1980s. “It was safer then,” they will say.

*Closed Session* is about sexual morality in the New China, and as Li Ping does with the four-way conversation at the end of his novel, Zhang Xiaotian chooses three representative characters to describe China’s state of affairs. The three women are college roommates whom our journalist protagonist, Lu Qinfang (陆琴方), is interviewing for his article on the new Chinese sexual revolution, if there is one: Kang Wusi (康五四) is the college president’s daughter, who has had her heart broken and is determined ever after to live a man-less existence, despite the attentiveness of a brilliant classmate, Jin Haiquan (金海泉); Xu Qing (徐晴), the most traditional and romantic of the roommates, has a fiancé who has recently been crippled in an accident, and she must face pressure from others and herself to determine how much of her love now is only pity and therefore impure; and Ge Yilan (戈一兰) is the most jaded and sexually frank of the roommates, whose openness both attracts and terrifies our reporter hero. There is some attempt to balance the voices and the three stories, but *Closed Session* certainly slants toward
criticism of Ge Yilan, even as it makes use of the temptation plot to keep us reading. A sequel to *Closed Session*, published not long after the original, focuses on Xu Qing’s problems as her idealistic notions of true love are called into question. Kang Wusi, who represents a kind of sadder-but-wiser middle road, comes out of both original and sequel the happiest of the three.

Among the three women, Kang Wusi is the moral center and the true representative of China for Zhang. Her name means “May Fourth,” after the modern patriotic movement of 1919. Like twentieth-century China, Wusi has seen tragedy and come out stronger for it. Like China, she has a strong moral foundation, and though she was led astray by a scoundrel in her youth, she eventually meets one of the good men in Jin Haiquan, and they find themselves well-matched (班配, banpei) physically and intellectually. It is interesting to note that the villain who had seduced and deserted Wusi before our story begins turns out to be a man named An Lulu (安路路), a poet whom Qinfang coincidentally met on the train in the first scene. He is revealed to be one of the so-called “Misty Poets” (朦胧诗人) of the early ‘80s. Zhang Xiaotian is a relatively conservative, old-school writer, a group notoriously opposed to some of the literary innovations of the ‘80s, and the Misty Poets were considered by the old school to be decadent and low men. They represent part of the “fall” that Zhang’s China (Wusi) must pass through before returning to reason, realism, and science (Jin Haiquan). Qinfang’s identification with Wusi is further established in that her tragic seduction is paired up with his own sexual temptation. Ge Yilan with her obvious and experimental sensuality is very attractive to Qinfang; she almost tempts him away from his marriage. Her motive,
however, is not true love, but greed, and the plot of the original story ends with a twist involving a tape recorder which both reveals and foils Yilan’s evil plot and saves our hero from scandal and disgrace.

This seems to be Zhang’s lesson for China in the early 1980s, expressed through these twin plots. The great freedoms of “opening up” may look appealing, but they are dangerous underneath, one step away from license and licentiousness. Furthermore, as is theorized in the sequel, in which the demonized Yilan is blessedly re-humanized, the rush toward extreme freedom is simply a knee-jerk reaction to the evils of the “Ten Years of Turmoil.” This lust for “freedom” is in fact, as the story of Yilan’s tragic Cultural Revolution childhood makes plain, born out of that evil and is therefore simply a continuation of the same evil.

Xu Qing’s vibrant idealism also looks great at first blush, but she does not have enough experience with reality to sustain her choices. Her disabled husband (they have wed in the intervening years between original and sequel) feels emasculated and full of self-doubt and eventually becomes pathologically jealous and suspicious, leading Xu Qing to retreat back to the big city when an opportunity for further education comes along. Her naïve and youthful idealism is a mistake similar to the abuses of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution and is like all the convulsions of the past thirty years in the young and inexperienced New China. The author’s ideas fall nicely in line with the new Reform Era Marxist pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping’s administration and the moderate anti-radicalism that has characterized CCP policy and most social attitudes for the past 20-plus years. Wending (稳定), or stability, has been the catchword since the fall of the Gang of Four. The time for armed and violent revolution is past.
Curiously, it is Kang Wusi, the healthiest of the girls and the one whom Zhang seems to view as the future of China, who has tendencies toward Christianity. Her pilgrimage began, it is revealed in flashback, during the Cultural Revolution on the commune where she was assigned. An elderly philosophy professor was living there as well and became a kind of mentor and model to Wusi, as well as a patient in her care, for he was sickly and weak. The professor was extremely respectable, moral, and upright, and would not betray his beliefs, nor follow Wusi’s counsel by stealing food from the storehouse in a time of want, as literally everyone else in the commune was doing. He eventually died for these principles. Though the professor did not speak of Christianity while he lived, he talked to Wusi about the evils of corruption and shame and of life having always about it a kind of yueshu (约束), a restraint or binding to a law or promise.

After the old man died, Wusi found a Bible under his pillow and kept it. After some reading, she came to the conclusion, based on what she had seen of Communism and of this man who many thought was crazy, “If the tenets contained in this book were not accepted by people, how can we even talk about ‘Communist morality’?” This is quite a bold statement, implying that Christian morals could form a foundation that would support Communism, or at least that any true Communism must look very much like Christianity in these respects.

The chapter heading for this part of the narrative refers to the old Marxist formulation of religion as the “opiate of the spirit,” and the reference is not even half ironic, but the objective journalist seems willing to take Wusi’s faith, limited as it is, seriously enough. Though Qinfang is not as tempted to convert to Christianity as he is to
leave his wife for Yilan, Wusi is given a voice in her interviews with him to speak boldly about the Bible, glorying—maybe gloating—in the fact that it is no longer a forbidden topic: “真的信又怎么样? 不是说信仰自由吗? 何况圣经又不能算禁书”94 (“What if I do really believe? So what? Don’t we have freedom of religion now? In any case, the Bible is no longer a banned book, is it?”). There is a hint here of that same rebelling for the sake of rebelling, or for revenge against a society that wronged her, that is Yilan’s error, but Wusi says more still, and more of substance. She answers the reporter’s Party-line questions by saying the world would be a better place if we followed the moral guidelines of the Bible; she talks of the cleansing comfort of faith, the sense of having guilt washed away; she says she has not been baptized nor been to a church, but makes it sound like she has had contact with Christians in some other setting. The reference is somewhat vague,95 but extremely interesting to anyone with an interest in house-church history in contemporary China; even in Beijing there were only one or two official churches open in 1980-81 when this book was published.

Wusi is allowed to be a strong character, and to speak about the Bible boldly. As in Li Ping there is an almost palpable excitement in the pages, a released repression. That which could not be talked about is now spoken freely. Again we have the sense that Christianity is not an integral part of the story, but that these writers cannot help themselves from making these topics—religion, sexuality—part of their writing now that they have the opportunity. Wusi is allowed to be a strong character, but Christianity is finally put back into its utilitarian toolbox and she backs off. Qinfang, our virtuous protagonist, is Zhang’s response to Wusi’s bold charges about the need for Christian morality, and the religious theme collapses easily into orthodox Chinese Communist
nationalism. The Communist narrators in both Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian are clearly models for Party members to follow, scarcely different from their Socialist Realist forebears. They are tolerant and restrained in their criticisms of religion, but firm in their lack of faith. Qinfang is the Communist who can remain upright and resist temptation without reliance on religion. This humanism is a key assumption of Communism—humans do not need help from the divine to be good—and the secular faith is upheld in the novel. Qinfang is allowed to close the “opiate” chapter with his materialist psychological interpretation of Wusi’s experiment in faith: she has a need that the God-concept will finally prove unable to fulfill, and she should wake up and face the truths of life.96

In the sequel, Wusi is even more outwardly religious than before. She has started going to church regularly, but her faith has become more cynical than it was. Now she says all the proper Marxist things: she believes religion is created by people, born out of our human need and weakness and fear and later manipulated by evil people to exploit the poor. There is no sense that she believes Christianity is alethic truth. She explicitly calls religion a “tool,” a good tool maybe, but still just a tool. She also considers it a kind of study, a hobby, a way to renew herself and a pursuit of curiosity that will keep herself and her marriage from getting dull. There is no serious discussion about Christian doctrine, about its truth or falsehood, and we get the sense that this new Wusi is Zhang’s ideal “Christian,” the one who is just about ready to make the jump to “realism,” and is ready to conflate Christianity and “culture” (in the sense of Christianity becoming merely part and parcel of human culture), judging it according to the standards and practices of historical materialism.
It is important to note the religious gender gap in these two stories. Faith is portrayed as a woman’s choice in both Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian, as it normally was in Xu Dishan’s fiction as well. The male voices in these two novels never waver for an instant. The need for religion and the draw toward it are seen as particularly feminine experiences. Robinson marks this in his brief introduction to the writers: “It seems as if the ‘new realism’ is not ready for a male embracing the religion, thus reinforcing a certain stereotype that women have a more natural inclination toward such spiritual matters (naturally, Marxist critics see this as a weakness).”

This stereotype has been spread through stories like Zhang’s, but certainly it does not begin here and perhaps simply announces a reality of Chinese culture, for the stereotype seems to be mirrored in actual circumstances. At least among the official churches in China, I never witnessed a single congregation in which the male membership came close to outnumbering the female. Aikman is skeptical that the disparity is so large, but the number he heard over and over from house church and official church alike was female membership standing at 80% compared to the men’s 20%. The examples of religious male writers and their religious male characters in Shi Tiesheng and Bei Cun below (and the couple in Ha Jin’s *Waiting*) tentatively suggest a change in the wind, or at least the waning of the stereotype.

A related topic brought up by Zhang’s *Closed Session* and perhaps worthy of future research is the connection that is made in Wusi’s mind between Christianity and chastity. The reader feels that Qinfang is somewhat justified when he dismisses Wusi’s religious crisis, because the narrative ties this crisis so closely to her emotional reaction to being jilted by the poet. Qinfang constantly equates Wusi’s interest in Christianity with
her rejection of men and her desire to live a nunnish existence, and he seems to be correct in this assessment. Christianity is all about restraint for Wusi, and almost only about restraint. She translates the old philosopher’s moral *yueshu* into a purely sexual context. The chapter in which Wusi finally gives in to her feelings for her classmate is called—ironically, considering that Christianity normally equates “God” with “love”—“上帝约束不了爱情” ("God Cannot Restrain Love"). Apart from nationalist and religious loyalties being in conflict in this novel, we see evidence here of an apparent misreading of mainstream Christianity, as if romantic love were not under God’s purview or were somehow opposed to his will.

However, this “misreading” may be directly related to the Chinese context and may not be so much a misunderstanding of Chinese Christianity as a premature dismissal of a significant aspect of it. The phenomenon of female Christian chastity is not new in China, nor is it necessarily always a deviation from Christian orthodoxy. Robert Entenmann has researched an order of Chinese Catholic women called the Institute of Christian Virgins, which “originated among Chinese women, living with their families, who chose to lead lives of celibacy and religious dedication in eighteenth-century Sichuan.” An indigenous movement sometimes under the control of the Church, sometimes in tension with it, this group and others like it survived well into the twentieth century. It is not uncommon to hear Christians even today talk about (usually elderly) “virgins” who were not nuns, but who dedicated their lives to working for the Church. The Christian virgin movement can easily be seen as an early Christian advocacy of Chinese women’s liberation and empowerment. The Institute and the generalized phenomenon of “Christian virgins” at least problematizes the facile conclusion that that
female dominance of Chinese Christianity is a sign of that gender’s weakness and that
Wusi’s conception of Christian chastity can be dismissed as schoolgirl romanticism.

Feng Jicai (冯骥才) and Self-Conscious Anti-Christian Nationalism

The shifted sameness in the literary portrayal of Christianity from the Modern Era
to the Reform Era is evident in the writing of Feng Jicai. Much more complex and subtle
in his maneuverings than Li Ping or Zhang Xiaotian, Feng Jicai on the surface appears as
bluntly anti-Christian as a modern like Xiao Qian. As in Xiao Qian, whose fiction sits
atop the modern spectrum of anti-Christian nationalism, Feng Jicai’s Christian characters
are mostly despicable, but also like Xiao Qian, Feng is not himself so adamantly anti-
foreign as his stories might suggest. Despite these similarities, Feng’s stories are not
generically comparable to the autobiographical protests of Xiao Qian. The differences in
Reform Era genre are part of what makes its literature more than a redundant recovery of
the modern opening movement and makes Feng’s stories more than simple anti-Christian
protests.

Feng Jicai is a tall athletic man, and something of a celebrity in his hometown of
Tianjin; he is larger-than-life, like many of the heroes in his historical novels.
Persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, he began to write for a small audience (“God
and myself”) in those dark years. His writing career began formally with stories that
can be readily categorized as belonging to the “Scar” or “Wound Literature” genre of the
early Reform Era, but he became famous in the early-to-mid-‘80s for his fantastic
historical fiction. Set mostly in the late Qing and early Republican Eras, these stories and
novels made good use of Tianjin’s rich and raucous local folklore to create a blend of
history and genre entertainment. More serious in tone and theme than most of the popular martial arts novels that were reemerging (武侠小说), Feng yet uses many of the conventions of that genre.

These hybrid narratives can be helpfully seen in the context of the “Root Searching” (寻根) movement that was the major literary trend of the first decade of the Reform Era. We will recall Jing Wang’s description of the 1980s as “nearly ten years of national outburst of utopia fever and fascination with cultural roots.” After the dystopic cultural vacuum of the Cultural Revolution in which all things traditional were subject to destruction, contemporary Chinese writers were left facing the same questions the Modernists had faced. What is Chineseness? Which aspects of our culture or national character got us into this mess? To which can we appeal to avoid similar mistakes and take China into the future and onto the world stage? Using a ploy of chronological misdirection common among artists in China today, if Feng addresses today’s questions he does so mainly in the past tense. Through historical fiction he links these two moments of crisis: his late-nineteenth-century settings and the late-twentieth-century world of his readers. For example, in Feng’s novel about Republican Era foot-binding, The Three-Inch Golden Lotus (三寸金莲), David Wakefield sees direct links to Cultural Revolution concerns:

What Feng is doing is linking the Cultural Revolution to the more extended process of revolutionary transformation that has spanned the entire twentieth century in China; he is thus calling the entire process into question. His descriptions of the sloganeering and the painful excesses of the anti-foot-binding movement of the 1920s [...] are quite reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution excesses. Innocent people, such as Fragrant Lotus and her family, are sucked into the swirling vortex of change, and they become its victims.
Unlike much scar literature that places blame for China’s national trauma on simpleminded Red Guards or power-hungry national leaders, Feng’s work intimates a deeper cause. […] He often encourages Chinese writers to delve into the “souls” of the Chinese people for it is clear that, for Feng, the cause of the Cultural Revolution lies not with misguided youth or egocentric leadership but rather with values deeply held by all Chinese people. Why, as epitomized by foot binding and the Cultural Revolution, do we do such terrible things to ourselves? Why does our misery endure so long? Why must any change always be so chaotic and painful? 105

The two novellas I want to look at more carefully here were published a few years earlier than the 1986 Golden Lotus and seem politically safer. Like his first published work, The Boxers (1977), Part One of the Story of the Divine Lamp (神灯前转) and The Divine Whip (神鞭, or The Miraculous Pigtails in Yang’s translation) deal with anti-foreign anti-imperialist movements and seem more confined to the past and more “politically correct” than later bolder works like Golden Lotus. Even here, however, the Chinese people are not let off the hook by an artful scapegoating of the foreigners. The burden for opposing the invaders and caring for China still lies heavily upon Chinese shoulders and requires something more than the superstitions of the anti-foreign Boxers or the mass strength of a Chinese mob. Both of these latter agents are morally suspect forces in Feng’s stories. Rather, he appeals to more fundamental Chinese values and individual characters who have the strength to preserve such values as the hope for China, past and present.

Part One of the Story of the Divine Lamp seems to fall in line with the political correctness of the day. 106 In its central portrayal of an evil Catholic priest, the novel is clearly related to the anti-Catholic propaganda we have already discussed: the stories of cannibalism and child sacrifice that go back at least to the eighteenth century, and the espionage stories that continue forward at least to the 1983 document we looked at in
chapter two (‘‘There is much factual evidence that the Vatican has never given up its plotting to control the Chinese Catholic Church [. . .]’’). Such evil Catholic characters were common in Communist spy/political-adventure movies and show up too in pre-Reform Era fiction like Wang Meng’s 青春万岁 (Qingchun Wansui or Long Live Youth!). The character of the evil priest is familiar to Feng’s audience, and although the novel is set a century earlier than its writing, such characters reflect and probably fuel some lingering Chinese distrust of the Catholic Church. The Tianjin foreign priest in Divine Lamp is nothing less than a mob boss with evil Chinese Catholic lackeys. This diabolical cabal persecutes to their graves the good people who oppose it, including the father of a girl who will become our heroine. This avenging angel exacts swift justice on the evildoers against the backdrop of a real historical “missionary incident” (jiao an, 教案) that took place in 1870.

The Tianjin church is burned to the ground in Feng’s novel, just as it actually was in 1870, after some local Chinese parents were led to believe their children had been kidnapped by the French Catholic priests and nuns in order to be used as sacrifices to the Church’s dark alchemical practices. An enraged populace stormed the compound in reality and in the novel, and, upon finding some of the missing children there, they killed many Catholics and set fire to several Catholic churches. Such rumors as those about the stolen children were a staple of anti-foreign propaganda, as we have seen. Needless to say, the stories about using children’s eyeballs to turn lead into gold or to burn off the dross of the priests’ souls were not true. The presence of dozens of local children, many of them sick and dying and some of them actually the alleged kidnap victims, was
explained by the fact that the churches had been paying money to anyone who would bring them orphans and unwanted children. Such a program obviously provided people with an incentive against abandonment or abortion, but it seems to have also led to more than one case of mercenary kidnapping by unscrupulous people clever enough to see a business opportunity and also, perhaps, to see where blame for their crime would finally be laid. Feng clearly delights in local history and folklore, and he will frequently spend paragraphs in describing Tianjin customs, special vocabulary, or half-forgotten historical details. When he describes the famous missionary incident, however, while he does not claim the alchemy rumors to be true, he also chooses not to explain what the children were actually doing on the church grounds. This is a strange omission, considering the fact that the reader will naturally wonder at the appearance of so many sick children and, without authorial gloss, be left without an alternative to simply assuming the fundamental truth of the rumors.

The priest character, though not involved in the 1870 episode just described or the “kidnapping” of children, is described in ways that likewise seem to display a strong anti-Christian bias in the story. He all but gives the order—he must at least keep up his hypocritical appearances—that sends several men, including the father of our heroine, to their deaths at the hands of his henchmen. The Chinese “running dogs” who follow after the priest (and plot to supplant him) are typical local gangster types, mob leaders and their men who have seen the power of the church and understood that it surpasses even that of the local government. They join the Church and become “Christians” to take advantage of the foreigners’ influence and protection from Chinese law. This was another genuine problem in many of the nineteenth-century churches, Protestant and Catholic.
Because many priests and pastors were willing to advocate for their parishioners in legal disputes, sometimes even calling on the diplomatic and military powers of their home countries to support them, the Church had the potential in this way to become a sanctuary for criminal converts of convenience. In Feng’s version, however, as with his description of the orphan incident, the Church is not even partly innocent or well-intentioned or naïve in these matters. The priest in this case is one of the gang himself, drunk with power, scornful of the Chinese, no more than a mob boss, the leader of a mafia family called Christianity.

Feng begins his story with this description, in the omniscient narrator’s voice, of the corrupt power of the Church:

神是人治服人的法宝. 在外国人梦想征服中华民族的时代, 用的也是同样一种法宝, 那就是基督, 圣母和天主.109

[God is a magical weapon by which people control other people. When foreigners dreamed in those days of conquering the Chinese people, what they used was this very magical weapon: Christ, the Holy Mother, and the Lord of Heaven.]

Christianity here is clearly not a transcendent ideal, but something again merely utilitarian; it is a tool, a weapon to be used in a power struggle. All this sounds like nothing if not the most traditional of anti-Christian Chinese nationalism, no different from the viewpoint of Xiao Qian, Chairman Mao, or the earlier Reform Era writers, and a step back, certainly, from the serious consideration of Christian values undertaken by Chen Duxiu. Christians are reduced to the old caricatures of evil that resonate with the basest anti-religious propaganda of both Imperial China and Communist China.

Divine Lamp in particular is clearly not helpful to the Christian Church in contemporary China, but there are several reasons why Feng’s work is not easy to
dismiss as anti-Christian polemic or—like Xiao Qian’s work—as artistically compromised by extreme anti-Christian content. There is a sense of self-consciousness and play in Feng’s genre. The black-hearted villains and vengeful martial-arts experts inhabit a pseudo-history that, while it does not erase the ties to the real historical incidents, tends to mitigate the anti-foreign flavor. We feel that these characters are types being deployed to act out an old drama, the pleasure of which is to be found in recalling a vivid but clearly fictional bygone China, rather than in exercising old grudges.

The victory of the heroine in Divine Lamp is a victory over evil, Chinese and foreign, and the mobs of Chinese who attack the churches are not glorified. Like the mobs in Golden Lotus, all mobs in Feng’s stories recollect the Cultural Revolution mobs at whose hands the writer once suffered. In Divine Lamp Feng does not go out of his way to defend the Church against calumny, but this is largely attributable to the political atmosphere in which the novella was published and the genre’s requirements for clear good/evil categories. Here, but even more in later stories, Feng’s criticism is always balanced to include many Chinese characters as well as Western Imperialism; and his heroes, while always “true Chinese,” are people of good virtue and independent character who follow neither after foreigners nor after Chinese of low character.

Already in 1984, Feng’s novella Divine Whip seems to be moving away from party-line politics, and by 1986 he had published Golden Lotus, which Wakeman calls his “most daring work to date.” In Divine Whip, published three years after Divine Lamp, foreigners are strange and sometimes evil, and Chinese who associate with them are not respectable people, but foreign religion is not treated so harshly, nor Chinese abuse of foreign religious so leniently, as in the earlier novel. This story is set in 1900,
the summer of the Boxer Rebellion, which was generally anti-foreign, but also specifically anti-Christian (many more Chinese Christians were killed by the Boxers than were foreigners). Eventually supported by the Empress Dowager Cixi, the Boxers are still sometimes held up as models of Chinese nationalistic anti-imperialism by the Chinese government today. Feng, however, portrays the Boxers as less-than-entirely honorable. The narrator does excuse somewhat the Boxer frustration as understandable, considering the abuses of power the Chinese had experienced at the hands of the foreigners, but the cult members are also exposed by Feng, in his “revealing secrets of history” mode, as being con artists in their claims that they were immune to foreign bullets and as having impure and unpatriotic motives. Though the hero of this story joins the Boxers in their fight, he lives to regret his decision, and he finally returns to a lonely existence, passing his martial skills on to a single member of the next generation.

Chinese strength finally, according to Feng Jicai in both these novels, is to be found neither in “sniffing after foreign farts,” as the Chinese saying goes, nor in mindless mob opposition to foreign things. Chinese strength is to be found in family and tradition. Loyalty to family, the passing on of wisdom—these are the values with which Feng imbues his larger-than-life heroes. This emphasis on tradition is best symbolized by the main character in Divine Whip, whose weapon is the long Qing Dynasty queue on the top of his head which he swings around like a whip. Feng’s concept of Chinese tradition is more complex than any one traditional Chinese form, and he is by no means advocating a return to China’s imperial hairstyles. Just as in Golden Lotus he does not preach against foot-binding, but surprisingly describes the cruelties perpetrated by both the pro-foot-binding and anti-foot-binding communities in the early twentieth century, Feng is letting
these outward Chinese forms point to a positive Chinese traditionalism of which these forms are a (sometimes perverted) manifestation.

The hero in *Divine Whip*, like Samson in the Bible story, learns in the end that his “divine” power is not actually located in his hair. His strength is rather founded on a deeper kind of Chineseness than any outward form like a braid. After he loses his hair—early Republican Era mobs cut off the queues of many men to announce the defeat of the Manchu Qing Dynasty—he is still able to transfer his superhuman skill into skill with a pistol. The novel ends with a fantastic gunslinging scene that marries the American Western and China’s martial-arts fiction. Feng is still a spokesman for maintaining Chineseness over foreignness, but his idea of Chineseness is more liberal and individualistic than Xiao Qian’s insistently anti-foreign fiction: Chineseness may mean rejecting certain autochthonous movements and may mean embracing some modern technology or a Western literary genre. The novel also ends with a reminder that the hero’s skills and values must and will be passed on to a young Chinese disciple.

Feng Jicai has spent time in the U.S., and he enjoys scandalizing his readers with statements such as, “The Cultural Revolution could not have happened in the United States because Americans just would not act that way.” He is anti-imperialist, but clearly not particularly anti-foreign nor anti-religion. His stories at times seem as scornful of Christianity as Xiao Qian’s, but where Xiao Qian’s diatribes weakened his impact by compromising realism, Feng Jicai seeks out a compromised realism. Though his evil foreign Christians may serve as racist touchstones for some readers, overall his work is more balanced and rich than any modern anti-Christian fiction and offers more of a challenge to traditional Chinese beliefs than to foreign or Chinese Christianity.
Mo Yan (莫言) and Nationalist Allegory

Among the contemporary authors discussed in this chapter, Mo Yan is the most widely read in the U.S. Introduced to the West through Zhang Yimou’s popular art-house adaptation and Howard Goldblatt’s follow-up translation of his first novel, *Red Sorghum* (红高粱家族), Mo Yan’s short stories have also been anthologized in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* and in Goldblatt’s *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused: Fiction from Today’s China*.112 *Red Sorghum* (1987)113 was published in China at what is now considered both the climax and tail-end of the Root Searching movement and the cusp of the Avant-garde (先锋), and Mo Yan has straddled the two schools for years. China’s avant-garde literature lends itself to the short story form, with its emphasis on the play of language and the throwing off of the traditional “burden” of Chinese intellectual literature.114 The process of root-searching often takes longer, and tends toward the longer literary forms, to communicate themes of the national journey and the serious weight of the national questions which continue to weigh on the earnest Chinese writers. Despite his forays into and identification with the Avant-garde in many works of short fiction that emerged in the late 1980s, Mo Yan’s major work has been in the longer historical novel form, and most of his novels still take up the pressing national dilemmas of the Root-Searchers.

Henry Zhao describes “the fictional search for a solution” by the “Roots-Seekers” (his translation of 寻根) as “an unconscious manifestation of their frustration with the apparent impotence or infertility of Chinese culture.”115 In *Red Sorghum* this frustration
is scarcely unconscious; Mo Yan wears his *ubi sunt* discontent with the China of the present on his sleeve and looks back to the mythical heroes of his hometown for a promise of Chinese renewal. “The unrestrained celebration of passion” of those old days is what he glorifies; “sex and violence often figure in his fiction as metaphors to reinvigorate the frayed nerves of the Chinese race.”

At the end of *Red Sorghum*, scientifically spawned hybrid plants take the place of the real sorghum of the past and become the metaphor for China’s loss of that older authentic and bloody passion:

我反复讴歌赞美的，红得像血海一样的红高梁已被革命的洪水冲激得荡然无存。替代它们的是这中矮，茎粗，叶子密集，通体沾满白色粉霜，穗子相狗尾巴一羊长的杂种高粱了。它们产量高，味道苦涩，造成了无数人便秘。那时候故乡人除了支部书记以上的干部外，所有的百姓都面如锈铁。

我痛恨杂种高粱。

杂种高粱好像永远都不会成熟。它永远半闭着那些灰绿色的眼睛。我站在二奶奶坟墓前，看着这些丑陋的杂种，七长八短的占据了红高粱的地盘。它们空有高粱的名称，但没有高粱挺拔的杆；它们空有高粱的名称，但没有高粱辉煌的颜色。它们正确少的，是高粱的灵魂和风度。它们用它们晦暗不清，模棱两可的狭长脸庞污染着高密东北乡纯净的空气。

在杂种高粱的包围中，我感到失望。

我站在杂种高粱的严密阵营中，思念着不复存在的瑰丽情景：八月深秋，天高气爽，遍野高梁红成光洋的血海。如果秋水泛滥，高梁地成了一片汪洋，暗红色的高梁头颅擎在浑浊的黄水里，顽强地向苍天呼吁。如果太阳出来，照耀浩淼大水，天地间便充斥这异常丰富，异常壮丽的色彩。

这就是我向往的，永远会向往着的人的极境和美的极境。

但是我被杂种高粱包围着。它们蛇一样的叶片缠绕着我的身体。它们遍体流渖的暗绿色毒素毒害着我的思想。我在难以摆脱的羁绊中气喘吁吁。我为摆脱不了这种痛苦而沉浸到悲伤的绝底。
[The sorghum that looked like a sea of blood, whose praises I have sung over and over, has been drowned in a raging flood of revolution and no longer exists, replaced by short-stalked, thick-stemmed, broad-leafed plants covered by a white powder and topped by beards as long as dogs’ tails. High-yield, with a bitter astringent taste, it is the source of rampant constipation. With the exception of cadres above the rank of branch secretary, all the villagers’ faces are the color of rusty iron.

How I loathe hybrid sorghum.

Hybrid sorghum never seems to ripen. Its gray-green eyes seem never to be fully opened. I stand in front of Second Grandma’s grave and look out at those ugly bastards that occupy the domain of the red sorghum. They assume the name of sorghum, but are bereft of tall straight stalks; they assume the name of sorghum, but are devoid of the dazzling sorghum color. Lacking the soul and bearing of sorghum, they pollute the pure air of Northeast Gaomi Township with their dark, gloomy, ambiguous faces.

Being surrounded by hybrid sorghum instills in me a powerful sense of loss.

As I stand amid the dense hybrid sorghum, I think of surpassingly beautiful scenes that will never again appear: In the deep autumn of the eighth month, under a high, magnificently clear sky, the land is covered by sorghum that forms a glittering sea of blood. If the autumn rains are heavy, the fields turn into a swampy sea, the red tips of sorghum rising above the muddy yellow water, appealing stubbornly to the blue sky above. When the sun comes out, the surface of the sea shimmers, and heaven and earth are painted with extraordinarily rich, extraordinarily majestic colors.

That is the epitome of mankind and the beauty for which I yearn, for which I shall always yearn.

Surrounded by hybrid sorghum, whose snakelike leaves entwine themselves around my body, whose pervasive green poisons my thoughts, I am in shackles from which I cannot break free; I gasp and groan, and because I cannot free myself from my suffering I sink to the depths of despair.]^{118}

When asked “where one might find the enviably brave and shame-free men and women of his Red Sorghum,” Mo Yan’s response was reminiscent of Xiao Qian’s postscript to “The Conversion”: “They are nowhere to be found in China today, but they once existed, and will live in this land again.”^{119}

Henry Zhao and others have criticized this brand of Root Searching as “romantic escapism” and “self-delusion,”^{120} but overall Mo Yan’s continuing output has earned him
respect from both East and West and seems destined to survive the end of the Root
Searching movement and to maintain an audience for the foreseeable future. His most
recent novel to be translated into English, Big Breasts & Wide Hips (丰乳肥臀, 1995,
trans. 2004), 121 won critical acclaim and the Dajia Award for literature in his homeland. It
is these two novels, Red Sorghum and Big Breasts & Wide Hips, that we will look at
briefly here. In the midst of Mo Yan’s grand mythologizing of Chinese history in each of
these works, he makes use of a single Christian image and a single “Christian” character
respectively which speak to his conception of the place of Christianity among China’s
roots. As in Feng Jicai’s historical entertainments, the allusion to Christianity in Big
Breasts seems almost simplistically critical, but in the allegorized past of Mo Yan’s
novels, the matter is again more complicated.

In Red Sorghum the Christian image, even on the surface, is not simple to
comprehend. It is an image of crucifixion, of martyrdom, explicitly linked to the
crucifixion of Christ. The cross has been commonly used and understood as an image of
self-sacrifice since the Modern Era in Chinese literature. Sacrificing oneself (犧牲) for a
cause was one of the great Christian virtues that sympathetic writers like Chen Duxiu
believed Christ had modeled for the Chinese people and that could be borrowed for the
cause of Chinese nationalism. In Red Sorghum the crucifixion reference stands alone,
however, out of place in a fictionalized 1930s township that seems to have had no contact
with Christians, and the death of the character in the scene is not clearly a sacrifice or
martyrdom for a cause. The single direct mention of the Christian deity stands alone in a
crowd of allusions to traditional Confucian morality, ancestor worship, Buddhism,
Taoism, and folk religions. Unlike almost all the major characters in the novel who move
freely through time and between chapters in flashback and flashforward, the figure who occasions the use of this Christian allusion is isolated within chapter five, the final chapter of the “Family Saga,” as the book is subtitled in the Chinese original. He is introduced on the second page of the chapter as “Old Geng” (老耿) and dies near the end of the chapter as “Eighteen Stabs Geng” (耿十八刀).\textsuperscript{122} His story, unusual for this novel, is told in relatively straightforward chronological fashion, and he is not mentioned again after his death.

It is this death scene that makes the reader sit up and take notice. After unsuccessfully searching for someone who will help him get his rations reinstated, the old man strips himself down in a fit of madness, rolls around in the snow, and grabs onto the bars of a freezing metal gate. It is there that he is found the next morning:

胸前钢笔很多的小伙子凌晨起来扫雪, 偶尔抬头瞥铁栅门时，
不由得大惊失色。他看到，昨天晚上那个自称耿十八刀的老头赤身裸体的把在大门上，好像受难的耶稣。老头的面色青紫，肢体舒展，瞪着大眼盯着公社大门。乍一看，谁也不敢相信他是个冻饿而死的老孤独人。

青年人特意数了数老人身上的伤疤，果然是十八块，一块不多，
一块不少。\textsuperscript{123}

[The young man with the pens in his pocket came out early the next morning to shovel snow. When he casually raised his head and glanced at the gate, his face paled with fright. What he saw was the old man from last night who’d called himself Eighteen Stabs Geng, stark naked, his hands stuck to the gate, like the crucified Jesus. His face had turned purple, his limbs were spread out, his staring eyes were fixed on the commune compound; hard to believe he was a lonely old man who had died of starvation. The young man made a careful count of the scars on his body. There were eighteen, all right, no more, no less.\textsuperscript{124}]

The description of his pose in death as being “like the crucified Jesus” seems minor and offhanded, merely a reference to the outstretched arms. Contemporary Chinese literature,
however, is generally not so offhanded in its allusions to Christianity, and Mo Yan is so clearly fixated on describing a vibrant and bloody Chinese utopia that the sudden appearance of the “foreign Western” religion in this context is jarring.

We are tempted to try to fit this description neatly into the rest of the novel’s structure of Chinese history and of Christianity’s place in that history. The full novel is divided into five chapters whose theme and overall movement is that of decay, a loss of the glory of China’s past and her entrance into the dilapidated present, which contains but the barest shadow of the color and vibrancy of those other days.

Mo Yan’s narrator makes this statement at the very beginning of the novel and returns to a clear restatement of this theme in the final pages, with his contrast of the hybrid sorghum with the true red sorghum of days gone by: “这就是我向往着的, 永远会向往着的人的极境和美的极境” (“That is the epitome of mankind and the beauty for which I yearn, for which I shall always yearn”). Even though the majority of the narrative takes place in these halcyon bygone days of the 1930s, Mo Yan uses a non-chronological ordering of these tales to describe the gradual fall through the slow decay in the content of these stories. In other words, though the stories are all about the glorious past, Mo Yan anticipates the decrepit present by stacking the worst parts of the past toward the end of
the novel. By the time we have reached chapter five, the chapter in which Old Geng and the lone Christian allusion are isolated, the fall is nearly complete.

The theme of China’s fall from paradise is reflected in the five chapter titles, as well as in their content. We begin with chapter one, “Red Sorghum” (“红高粱”), the symbol of that “for which I shall always yearn,” and descend to chapter five, “Strange Death” (“奇死”). More significantly, this decline is reflected not only in the word “death,” but also in the episode to which the words “strange death” allude. The most apparent reference here is not to Old Geng’s death, but to the strange death of Second Grandma, whose passing is linked directly to this transition from the glorious past of chapter one to the dead present of chapter five. We see this link in at least three ways in the final numbered section of chapter five. First, the narrator directly connects her death to the present and the future:

"Her eerie, supernatural death had awakened in the souls of Northeast Gaomi Township a mysterious emotion that germinated, grew, and became strong, flowing slowly through the memories of village elders like a sweet scarlet syrup that fortified us and made us capable of facing the world of the future.""128

Second, while this change of the soul sounds positive in this passage and might even be necessary for the town’s survival in the “the world of the future,” we soon find it is only a necessary evil. This “strange death” and “sweet scarlet syrup” make the people of the village like the hybrid sorghum, causing them to speak not the strong words of old, but the words of others, as Second Grandma did when she was possessed:
Third, her death is linked with this loss and change, in that the narrator goes to her grave at the end of the book, apparently in hopes of crossing the bridge backward to the past. Instead, in his imagination Second Grandma rises from the grave and speaks in her own voice of the incommensurability of the gap between present and past: “‘并非我生的孙子, 照照你的尊容吧!’” (“‘You’re no grandson of mine. Look at yourself!’”). This chapter five is the chapter in which “Passion,” Second Grandma’s name and one of the adjectives used to describe Mo Yan’s glorious China of the past, finally dies her “strange death.”

The regression of the species that Mo Yan complains of is also reflected in the novel’s dog imagery, which again culminates in the key final chapter. We move from the early easy victories over the packs of wild dogs that live near the village and the characterization of the animals as “Jap dogs!” (“日本狗”) to the middle chapter three, “Dog Ways” (“狗道”), in which the dogs become personified as powerful and clever warriors themselves who nearly defeat their human enemies. Finally, the degradation of the humans is complete by this final chapter of the novel, in which the Jiao-Gao soldiers become dogs themselves by wearing furs and barking to take the Japanese by surprise. This transformation into animal is supposed to be used to human advantage, but it is all to no avail, for though there is violence and death throughout the novel, it is only in this final chapter that the Japanese are shown in triumph and the loss of paradise becomes final. It is in this chapter that the Japanese destroy the village of Saltwater Gap
and rape and kill Second Grandma and Little Auntie respectively. It is in this chapter that man becomes dog and all humanity is lost.

What does it mean that Mo Yan chooses this chapter, the lowest circle in his descent into hell, to relate Old Geng’s death and compare it to that of Christ? The scene still lends itself to multiple meanings. We could make the claim that this allusion belongs in chapter five because Christianity has no place in the paradise of China’s legendary bygone days of yore. Christianity, a “foreign” religion, is placed appropriately here at the end, in this rotten “present,” when China has been taken over by Japan and by hybrid sorghum and by the big city. The Christian allusion is further separated from that past China, and further attached to the era of the present-day narrator, by its very nature, by that which distinguishes it from the other religious references in the novel: it is not Chinese. All of the other religions mentioned by the narrator, from the relatively mainstream Buddhism and Taoism, to the folk religions and superstitions, are an integral part of the plot and of the characters’ lives. It is the characters themselves who mention these beliefs, or it is the clergy of these faiths who are themselves the characters. The Christian allusions are different and are foreign to the novel. Christianity is the only religion in the story that exists solely in the mind and voice of the narrator. The other religions penetrate the story and are part of it, as it were; Christianity is laid on top of the story from some other time or place, from the present, from the city where the narrator writes.

我害怕自己的嘴巴也重复着别人从别人的书本上抄过来的语言，我害怕自己成为一本畅销的“读者文摘.”

[I have begun to utter only the words that others have spoken, themselves repeating the words of still others. Have I no voice of my own?]
This is the cry of the narrator in his final monologue. Christianity is perhaps one of the voices that is not his own, one of these voices that Second Grandma speaks with that is not her own, that does not belong to this place and time.

However, the crucifixion allusion occurring, as it does, in connection with the death of a pitiable old Chinese man argues against an anti-Christian over-reading and seems to admit of a more neutral and innocent interpretation. Could not this image of the death of Christ be an image of the final nail being hammered into the coffin of Mo Yan’s beloved China of legend? By this reading Christ’s death is brought alongside the death of China in sympathy, and, as is common in Chinese literature since the Modern Era, is drained of doctrinal and historical significance and freed from its ties to imperialism. Christ’s martyrdom is used to emphasize the sacrifice of the common Chinese people on the cross of China’s suffering and possibly to add symbolic weight to the “strange death” theme of the chapter. This is one of the most common uses Chinese writers make of Christian imagery. As Wang Benzhao describes it, such writers “do not establish the significance of Christianity in the lives of people or society,” but merely make use of the religion “to make somewhat farfetched comparisons and from which to draw object lessons.”

If the Christian image in Red Sorghum is minor and ambiguous, the Christian character in Big Breasts &Wide Hips is major and perhaps less complicated. Pastor Malloy is a cad, a dissolute “Christian” missionary who fathers bastard children and otherwise squanders his life in China. He is also a protagonist of sorts, the patriarch of a large family whose history is followed from 1900 through the entirety of the twentieth century. Nothing like the clarified evil of Feng Jicai’s Catholic priest, Pastor Malloy
rather invites comparison to Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* patriarch, Aureliano Buendia. Most contemporary writers in China owe a debt to that novel, and Mo Yan’s mythologized histories of China have often drawn the comparison. As with Márquez’s patriarch, there is a greatness to many of Mo Yan’s men—Granddad in *Red Sorghum* and Pastor Malloy here—that has nothing to do with their conformity to traditional, much less Christian, moral standards. On the contrary, as passion, sex, and violence are part of the positive value system of Mo Yan’s fictional China, there is practically an inverse relation between the stature of his characters and their traditional moral goodness. Pastor Malloy, then, is in no way particularly admirable—a Western missionary in the early twentieth century acting like Mo Yan’s passionate Chinese men certainly does not have the same cultural meaning as those Chinese heroes—but there is at least an absence of judgment against this character, if perhaps there is not the praise of him we hear of the Chinese heroes of *Red Sorghum*. And just as Márquez invites us to reread his nation’s history through the heightened mythology of a single family, so does Mo Yan invite a reinterpretation of modern Chinese history through the near-allegorical mythology of the Shangguan family. As the title suggests, *Big Breasts & Wide Hips* is primarily concerned with strong Chinese women, here represented by the figure of Mother, the matriarch to Malloy’s father Abraham. This allegorical reading of Malloy is the key to Mo Yan’s vision of the place of Christianity in Chinese history and supports somewhat the first anti-Christian reading of the Christ allusion in *Red Sorghum*.

As does Márquez, Mo Yan often uses broad caricature and giants of characters, unrealistic demigods or villains, to make equally large and broad points about his
homeland. In *Red Sorghum* Mo Yan is bemoaning the gray loss of vitality in contemporary Chinese culture by evoking the pre-1949 past of bloodthirsty and lustful heroes, and seductive and independently powerful heroines. *Ubi sunt?* he is asking. Where are those heroes of bygone days? Why are we so decrepit now? Can we recover the vitality that China once had? If we look at this later novel through the same allegorical lenses, Pastor Malloy with his nine children—nine is an imperial number in Chinese numerology, a perfect and complete figure—becomes the father of contemporary China; China today is the bastard child of China and the West, Mo Yan suggests. Malloy represents the earnest yet hypocritical mess that Christian missions and imperialism were in the 19th century. As such, this individual character’s sorry version of faith is not an important criticism of contemporary Christianity nor of specific Christian doctrine, but rather at worst a criticism of some of the mistakes of missions in China in the nineteenth century. More likely the focus is firmly on China, on describing the dilemma of Chinese modernity. We are reminded of his dislike of hybrids in *Red Sorghum* and suspect that he, like Feng Jicai, is still looking for the pure Chinese *ti* within all the Western *yong* of the past century.

**Wang Anyi (王安忆) Takes a Swim**

One of the CCP’s guiding principles of the post-Mao Reform and Opening Up has been “*neibu wending, waibu kaifang*” (内部稳定外部开放): “Stability within China, openness without.” The government is sincere about opening up to the world, that is, but will not permit that openness to degenerate into social disorder within China’s borders. These twin principles, this cautious progressivism, can be seen in the first two
contemporary novels above by Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian, with an emphasis on the “wending.” If those two works exemplify the “neibu wending” concern and therefore accept the existence and usefulness of Christianity without, however, taking seriously many of its fundamental claims, Wang Anyi leans heavily toward the “waibu kaifang” side of things. She finally rejects Christianity more personally and more completely, perhaps, than the utilitarian conclusions of the other novels, but only after carefully considering the faith on its own terms. Furthermore, when she leaves Christianity she does not retreat into the facile nationalism of the earlier writers, but rejects many of the Root Searching conventions that began her career and that dominate the work of the previous four writers.

The early 1980s saw Wang Anyi’s rise with fairly safe “mildly innovative, subtly critical fiction.” She became famous with much more daring work in 1986 and 1987 with a trilogy of novellas including Little Bao Village, “an instant classic of the search-for-roots writing.” She took female sexuality as her theme in these and several other works, and treated the subject more adventurously than had conservative Zhang Xiaotian with his psychologically scarred vamp who finally gets her just deserts. Wang’s stories do not consistently condemn extramarital desire and, though not “feminist” by contemporary Western standards, she even permits her women to find some degree of satisfaction and individuation, through sexual exploration and through other life journeys as well. Often controversial with authorities since the mid-1980s, Wang Anyi in one long story, “乌托邦诗篇” (“A Psalm for Utopia,” 1991), describes part of her own life journey, taking Christianity as a potential path for herself and for Chinese generally.
Significantly different in its tone toward Christianity than the works of Li or Zhang, Wang’s novella benefits no doubt from the decade of distance between its 1991 publication and that earlier Reform Era writing. This story germinated in the exuberance and disappointment of the late ‘80s, rather than the cautious optimism of the late ‘70s. Apart from her gender and her own personal writing style, Wang Anyi’s Shanghai heritage also plays a role in shaping her “kaifang” difference from the earlier “wending” male writers. Not coincidentally, Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian both set their novels in Beijing, and those authors and their characters are sucked in by the political gravity of the capital. Coastal, westward-looking Shanghai and its writers have historically been more freewheeling and have had a smaller stake in Party-line politics; Wang Anyi’s “A Psalm for Utopia” radiates outward.

The story is an extended meditation on Chinese identity, on neibu and waibu, on the possibility or impossibility of building bridges—to Taiwan, to the U.S., between individuals. In one scene, the narrator and a Chinese friend attend a football game in the U.S.; in the midst of a roaring crowd, she experiences intense loneliness and alienation from the humans around her.

[[My friend’s loud cheering] was immediately folded up into the waves of wind and the shouts of the people and was gone. I suddenly realized how terribly alone we two Chinese people were in the midst of this sea of joy. We were entirely without help or support. We had no way of understanding the happiness of the people around us; between that happiness and ourselves lay a great distance, the very breadth of the heavens.]
Wang frequently uses biblical imagery to describe these intimations of spiritual, but also particularly national, isolation. In “Psalm,” a multilingual party for a German writer becomes a desperate and ultimately failed human attempt to approach something like “pre-Babel” communion. A temporary home becomes a short-lived refuge from loneliness: “我们所居住的公寓八楼，就像洪水中的方舟。我们停留在我们短暂的旅居中，互相悉心照顾，呵护” (“The eighth floor where we lived was like the ark in the flood. Those of us who stopped there in our transience looked out for each other, cared”). At first, in foreign lands, memories of home are a comfort and tonic to this sense of isolation; she is alone, but in a peculiarly Chinese way, and the Chinese around her can at least understand her isolation from them. Somewhere in her foreign travels, however, she loses even the home she thought to return to. When she arrives back in the mainland, she discovers that she cannot “write China” anymore; “我看见中国忽然变成了一个陌生人，我对它毫不认识，我束手无措” (“I saw that China had turned into a stranger; I didn’t recognize anything about it and my grasping hand always returned to me empty”).

After a career that began with Root Searching, in this novella Wang offers both a rejection of that movement and its culmination, a search for Chineseness that looks mainly outside China, a pilgrimage through the world and through personal memory. In form, the story is a meditation rather than a straightforward narrative. Ban Wang describes Wang Anyi’s Reality and Fiction as “less a continuous coherent narrative than a mélange of unconnected scenarios, speculations, remembrances, philosophical comments, and philological investigation of facts and names.” “A Psalm for Utopia,” though not so self-consciously innovative as Reality and Fiction, is of the same family. It is self-conscious and straightforward, however, in its consideration and rejection of both
Christianity and Root Searching. The narrator, a writer herself and stand-in for Wang Anyi, searches for herself in the Christian faith of a Taiwanese writer friend and also in the Root Searching rituals so popular in the 1980s. She is finally not willing or not able to commit to a belief in Christ, but neither can she accept the clear vision of China that Li Ping’s characters see from their mountaintop vantage point.

We find kinship with those previous two stories by Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian in that Wang’s stand-in is unable to accept Christianity on the terms set by outside believers, and we have the same lack of a strong indigenous (i.e., mainland Chinese) Christian voice that might lend support to a seeking individual. She visits churches in Germany and the U.S., and talks with Taiwanese Christians, but tells us nothing of the Church in China. As in the other contemporary writers so far, the current alleged Christian revival in China is not to be found in Wang’s work. Characters search, but the journey is a lonely one. This woman, however, this “I” of Wang Anyi’s “Psalm,” does go further than previous characters like Nanshan or Wusi in her spiritual quest. This is in part because of the ten-plus years of gradual progress in “Opening Up,” which moved faster in Shanghai than in other places. As a Shanghai writer, this narrator, unlike the other characters who are stuck in the “neibu,” is able to spend time with other Christians and in religiously freer countries throughout the world because her work necessitates her attendance at various international conferences. In her thinking about Christianity, she therefore never reduces the faith to a moral system, and she does not consider it to be a useful tool for the building up of something more important than itself, unless it be the individual person. Her musings are also recognizably Christian rather than merely theist. Unlike the Christian-leaning characters in the other two novels, who reduce Christianity
to a worship of “God” (上帝 or 耶和华) and seem not to recognize central Christological
doctrines like the Incarnation or the Trinity, Wang’s narrator does mention Christ as
central to Christianity, and for a time she finds comfort and community in the Christian
faith.

Her moment of breakthrough is the very same moment she realizes the faith is not
for her. She is visiting a church in Germany and experiences an epiphany that answers
one of her fundamental questions: she has come to appreciate the Bible stories (though
they remain “myths” to her) and to understand the importance of personal faith, but she
has never understood “church.” “我实在不懂那些人上教堂是去做什么”148 (“I really
don’t understand these people who go to church; what are they going there to do?”), she
wonders aloud to a friend in an earlier scene. He offers the unsatisfactory answer that she
needs to go more often, and then she will unde
rstand. In the small German church, the
sense of goodwill and community overwhelms her, and she finally exclaims,

我只弄明白了, 人家为什么去教堂, 我还弄明白了, 人家的教堂在哪里.
可是, 我的呢? 我又为什么要去呢?149

[Now I understand why these people go to church; now I understand
where the church is for these other people. But what about my church?
Why do I need to go?]

That she eventually falls away from that faith we might best attribute to the absence of a
strong and consistent Christian community in her life, either because of the state of
religion in her hometown or in her home country. Isolation and community are major
themes in the novel, and when the character feels alone, she finds belief very difficult.

Despite these difficulties or because of them, Wang’s narrator provides bold
insights into Christianity, perhaps even the special case of many Chinese Christians or
Christians under similar social/political regimes, who may also ask, “Where is my church?” Li Ping and Zhang Xiaotian address matters of religion in a similar straightforward fashion, but their comments sound mostly over-rehearsed to readers even slightly familiar with Marxism or with the other government narratives of chapter two. Feng Jicai and Mo Yan deal only obliquely with Christian doctrines and questions of faith. Wang Anyi, by contrast, asks serious questions that Christians cannot answer with easy platitudes. Can I be a Christian in isolation? If I can be a Christian only with other people, only understand it at a remove, is my belief genuine? How much of faith is feeling and how much is conscious decision? What if Christianity just doesn’t “work” for me? Can I make myself believe? These are the haunting questions of Miguel de Unamuno’s martyr San Manuel Bueno, and they are always clearly implied if not explicitly stated in Wang’s story. The reader feels this is a real person whose religious experience must be taken seriously. Attention must be paid.

Wang Anyi’s manner of dealing with Chineseness here also provides a sharp contrast to the other novels. At one point in the narrator’s search for self, she ends up on a Root Searching tour of China, trying to find a cure for her modern sense of estrangement from her own past. Root Searching, as we saw somewhat in the Li Ping story, was a reaction to the loss of ideology and to the upheavals of reform in the 1980s and an attempt to reconstruct for China the moral foundation that seemed to have been damaged or lost during the Cultural Revolution. We saw some of this in Li Ping’s ending on Mount Tai, as the four characters looked out over the Yellow River and gloried in their great Chinese heritage. We would see much more, and more-subtle, versions of this throughout the ‘80s until “Root Searching Literature” came to bear its own moniker. By
1991 the movement had run its course so far that Wang Anyi can register her disgust with it. She sends her narrator out to the proverbial Chinese “Yellow Earth” of the North and on a trip to see the Yellow River, standing somewhere near where Li Ping’s characters stood to cry out their praise of that symbol of China. Wang Anyi’s character, though, says this: “我那时候发现，到黄土地来寻根是一句瞎话”\textsuperscript{150} (“I discovered in that moment that this idea of going out to the Yellow Earth and searching for one’s roots is really a lie”). This pilgrimage that is supposed to put her in touch with her past and her present, and with her Chinese community throughout time, leaves her feeling more alone and isolated than ever. Howard Goldblatt has claimed that Chairman Mao would have been pleased with Root Searching literature.\textsuperscript{151} In rejecting this empty brand of Chinese nationalism, Wang indicates that Root Searching carries far less potential for her than do her own personal memories and even less than Christianity does, and she spends much less time with it in the story than she does with the Christian faith. Christianity does not finally answer all her questions, but Wang Anyi gives it serious consideration. She sees the personal experience she had with the Christian faith as more valuable than the hype of a propaganda machine and more promising than Root Searching literature.

**Shi Tiesheng (史铁生) and Bei Cun (北村) Dive in the Deep End**

Western critics have largely ignored the subject of Christianity in Chinese literature, modern or contemporary. Lewis Robinson’s *Double-Edged Sword* is the exception to this rule, but even his work on modern China was published only by a small press in Hong Kong. Chinese scholars have consistently shown more interest in this matter. In a nation where book distribution and library systems cannot guarantee
nationwide availability for many published works of literature and scholarship, several studies of Christianity in Chinese literature have yet appeared in Beijing bookstores and in research libraries abroad in recent years, a few of which have been cited in the previous pages. There have even been mainland reprints of some classic pre-Liberation studies like Zhu Weizhi’s Christianity and Literature (基督教与文学) from 1940.

Among the fiction writers of the 1990s, the most critical attention in China has been focused on our final two writers of this chapter, Shi Tiesheng and Bei Cun. “Regarding all the literature of the ‘80s and ‘90s,” Wang Benzhao says, “The writers with the most Christian color to them are probably Shi Tiesheng and Bei Cun.” An essay in the Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy (文史哲) discusses these two writers, along with Li Ping and poet Hai Zi, as the four representatives of Christian culture among writers of the New Era literature. Neither Shi Tiesheng nor Bei Cun is particularly immersed in the literary mainstream—both have to some degree consciously left the mainstream—but both are considerably higher profile than we might expect for a Christian humanist like Shi and for a writer like Bei Cun, who offers explicit Christian hope in response to his characters’ modern and postmodern existential crises. The authors of the Journal of Literature article mentioned above end with their doubts about the possibilities for Christianity’s success in China (they are two more believers in the incompatibility of Christianity and Chineseness), but with also a somewhat contradictory positive assessment of the place of Christian values in Chinese literature:

It is difficult to make an optimistic forecast regarding the future development of China’s Church structures and Church membership (due to many historical and practical factors, particularly that “Christian forms
of faith do not mesh well with the Chinese people’s long-engrained practices of worshipping multiple gods for the purpose of material benefit”), but regarding the new ideas the Christian cultural spirit might offer Chinese culture and the values structure of Chinese literature, we have an optimistic presentiment.

Even these scholars who do not themselves take Christianity seriously as a likely stable Chinese institution yet believe research into the Christian question to be fruitful and to have some wider audience.

Shi Tiesheng, for all his “Christian color,” is not strictly a Christian writer. He is often personally described in ways that recall the private religious eclecticism of Xu Dishan, and his stories reflect that syncretism more than do the explicitly Christian characters of that Modern Era writer. Wang Benzhao and others point out the mixture of Zen Buddhism (禅, chan) and Christianity in some of his writing, and Wang speaks of how Shi advocates for a “religious viewpoint,” even if people have not accepted the influence of traditional Christianity: “‘Religion,’ in Shi Tiesheng’s eyes, has become a kind of value, an ideal to strive after.”

Shi has not described himself as having an exclusively Christian conversion experience, nor does he discuss particular Christian doctrines through his characters. Yet there is something perceptibly Christian in his ideas that Chinese readers and critics recognize and cannot ignore.

Though he claims no Church and does not provide his audience with a systematic theology, Shi Tiesheng’s pages are filled with religious speculation and with “God” (上帝, shangdi). This word itself is syncretistic—having been adopted as a common Christian term in China, it also refers to the ancient Chinese deity that many Christians believe to be evidence of early Chinese monotheism. In Shi’s essays on writing, this God is described as both “严厉而且温柔的” (“strict and gentle”). He is described as a
creator—the writer of a great work, in fact—and as judge who warns and judges and tests his creatures, all descriptions of an involved and personal God that clearly reference the Chinese Christian *shangdi*. Shi’s contentions about the importance of religion to a culture make a stark contrast to typical CCP rhetoric about the decline of religion: “宗教的生命力之强是一个事实. 因为人类面对无穷的未知和对来怀着美好希望与幻想，是永恒的事实” (“As long as there is knowledge and hope among men, religion cannot disappear”). He does, however, immediately add words that make the claim less controversial to Marxists and more controversial to Christians: “不如说宗教精神吧. 以区别于死教条的坏的宗教” (“Better to say the ‘religious spirit’ [cannot disappear] to distinguish it from religion of dead and evil dogma”). But he does elsewhere speak directly to China’s need for this religious spirit in words that sound far less cynical than the occasional ‘80s and ‘90s “Spiritual Civilization” propaganda campaigns of the CCP: “缺乏宗教精神的民族, 就如同缺乏爱情或不再渴望爱情的夫妻” (“A people without religious spirit is like a husband and wife who no longer have love or any hope for love”). And he addresses himself directly to China’s atheist rulers who are nervous about religious fervor: “科学家, 政治家和经济家, 完全没有理由惧怕宗教精神, 也不该蔑视它” (“Scientists, politicians and economists have absolutely no reason to fear the religious spirit and should not look down on it”). His contention is that all fields benefit from a nation’s revived religious spirit. In these statements Shi Tiesheng aligns himself to some degree with the contemporary “Cultural Christian” phenomenon. This is a loose
group of Chinese intellectuals who, not unlike Chen Duxiu, wish to adopt some of the cultural values of Christianity while standing apart from both the grass-roots Christian revival and the Chinese Church bureaucracy. Like these scholars, who see themselves both in the May Fourth tradition of burden-bearing Chinese intellectuals and also as Christian prophets, Shi Tiesheng sees hope for personal and national salvation in his distinctively—if not orthodoxly—Christian ideas.

Shi Tiesheng’s primary message is of a highly optimistic Christian humanism with concepts of “hope” (欲望) and “love” (爱) at the center and a powerful personal response to the problem of evil. In his most famous story, an autobiographical narrative called “Ditan Park and I” (“我与地坛,” 1991), Shi Tiesheng describes his years of days spent in his favorite Beijing park. An illness had struck the writer when, as a young man, he was working in the countryside toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. He was left with paralyzed legs and no work. Feeling worthless and desperate and guilty as he takes his mother’s love and concern for granted, he spends his time in the local park, sometimes reading, sometimes watching people, mostly thinking about a question that crops up again and again in Shi’s work. The narrator has come to a point of crisis in his short life and he wonders, “Why should I be alive?” Early in the story he finds his answer, and the tone changes to one of hope and nostalgia as the crippled man begins to write and as we meet some of the people who also populate the park. His solution to his existential crisis is not without Christian underpinnings:

这样想了好几年, 最后事情終於弄明白了: 一个人, 出生了, 这就不再是一个可以辩论的问题, 而只是上帝交给他的一个事实; 上帝在交给
[I thought about this for some years and finally managed to understand: a person is born—this is not a question to debate, but is simply a reality handed to him by God; when God hands us this reality, its final result is already promised, so death is not something to be rushed and looked for. Death is a holiday that will arrive in its time.]

When his mother dies, he is again filled with anger at and regret for both himself and God. His faith in God’s will is shaken for a time, and he now wonders, not why death will not come sooner, but why death came to her so soon. He prays and considers the hard life his mother had, and he hears a reply: “我听见了回答: ‘她心里太苦了，上帝看她受不住了就召她回去”167 “Her heart was too heavy. God saw that she could not bear it and called her home”). He decides not to argue with God about life and death, but he continues to ponder the question “How then shall we live?” This matter is not so easily cleared up, and he suggests that the search for “dependable reasons for existence” continues.168 He finds joy in friends, in writing, and he ends with a thrice-repeated refrain: “人真正的名字叫做:欲望”169 (“The real name of man is this: hope”).

Though this hope is given no direct reference to a Christian doctrine of salvation through Christ’s sacrifice, Shi Tiesheng’s vision is one of redemptive suffering and of a modified Christian God who uses the evils of this world to form the virtuous souls of his people: “God uses three things—loneliness, suffering, and fear—to torment us,” he says, “but He is [at the same time] giving us three opportunities for happiness.”170 Niu Yunqing and Cong Xinqiang see, in these sorts of universalized and theist humanist values, a hope for an end to the imagined East/West opposition in twentieth-century
literature and hope for China’s literary future. Christian literature will never be mainstream, they say, but Chinese literature is enriched by a Christian humanist like Bei Cun. “We have had enough of Balzac-style realism in China. We need more Tolstoy.”

Bei Cun certainly could be a later Tolstoy, with an anthropology more pessimistic than Shi Tiesheng’s and more explicitly and exclusively Christian. He even cites Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* as a major influence in his college years. But that was before he became a Christian. In many ways his current identity as China’s only oddball Christian writer is a return to Tolstoy’s realism after a time of rebellion. Bei Cun began his career at the very forefront of the late-’80s Chinese Avant-garde that arose to reject Root Searching and the intellectual “worrying mentality.” Jing Wang puts Bei Cun at the “core of the school,” along with other writers more famous in the West, like Yu Hua (余华) and Su Tong (苏童), and describes the Chinese Avant-garde as laying down the burden of Chinese history and accepting writing as “fun on its own terms.” This disconnect between literature and reality, with its preference for stories as self-contained play, is often attributed to the influence of the new Borges translation appearing in China in 1984, but Wang is quick to point out that the key literary experimentation in China was coincidentally simultaneous with the Borges translation, not the result of it. Whatever the lineage, the Avant-garde began to gain momentum in 1986 and 1987, losing ground only in the early 1990s when it too apparently began to feel too weighty and burdensome for much of the Chinese audience, who turned to truly frivolous popular genres.

After about five years at the front lines of the advance guard of the new literature, Bei Cun found himself exhausted and at a point of crisis. He recognized a kind of
nihilism at the roots of the New Wave movement he was riding. Wang Jing speaks of the anti-humanism in the Avant-garde, and the drifting “rootless subject.” Henry Zhao says, “The force of their writing lies in their negation of everything, even the significance of their own existence.” In a time of existential crisis, and as his marriage fell apart, Bei Cun asked the same suicidal questions Shi Tiesheng asked: “What is the point of all this? Why should we live?” In a 1995 issue of Contemporary Authors (当代作家评论), a prominent mainland journal, he describes how he found answers through his Christian conversion:

1992年3月10日晚上8时, 我蒙神的带领, 进入了厦门一个破旧的小阁楼, 在那个地方, 我见到了一些人, 一些活在上界的人. 神拣选了我. 我在听了不到二十分钟福音后就归入主耶稣基督. 三年后的今天我可以见证说, 他是宇宙间惟一的真活得神, 他就是道路真理和生命.180

[At 8:00 in the evening on March 10, 1992, I received the leading of God and entered an old broken-down building in Xiamen. In that place I saw some people, some people who lived in a world above our own. God chose me. I hadn’t listened to the Gospel but twenty minutes before I had come back to the Lord Jesus Christ. Today, three years later I can testify that He is the one true living God of the universe; He is the Way the Truth and the Life.]

Such a personal testimony would probably seem odd or naïve in a Western literary journal, if not bizarre or dangerous. This is again evidence of the very different place of Christianity and religion generally in Chinese culture, evidence that God is not dead for Chinese audiences or critics.

That is not to say Bei Cun is the average Chinese intellectual. He is unique in Chinese letters today. In spite of other writers, like Shi Tiesheng who is also discussed in the same articles on Christian literature, Bei Cun is the only famous writer to have and tell a “typical” Christian conversion story, and he is a curiosity in the Chinese market. No
longer “avant-garde” in the 1980s sense of the term, some have placed him in the second Reform Era New Realist movement of the late ‘80s and ‘90s. Not quite at home there, more recently there has been a move to create a new category: a 2002 collection of his stories, *Citizen Kane* (公民凯恩), advertises itself as “China’s First Collection of Religious Fiction” (“中国第一部宗教主义小说集”). The term “Religious Fiction” here is an “-ism” in Chinese, which makes it sound more like a movement than does the natural English adjective translation; we could translate it as a “Religionism Movement.” Bei Cun himself has balked at the label in interviews, and it is not clear if the “movement” will stick, or who else might be included if so.

Paradoxically, his conversion has lost him Western readers, but has not apparently done any great harm to his reputation at home. In the U.S. only a couple of Bei Cun’s Avant-garde stories have been anthologized in New Wave anthologies, but his conversion and his Christian fiction have not been discussed in English. In China he continues to publish and to win recognition. In 2001 a collection of his post-conversion short stories was published as part of a “China’s Best Fiction (1978-2000)” series. Wang Meng, an elder statesman of Chinese literature and specifically mentioned in this chapter as a writer of an anti-Christian story during the Cultural Revolution, was on the selection committee for this series.

Bei Cun is somewhat cynical about literary criticism and about literature itself. His Avant-garde skepticism about the meaning and power of literature seems to have carried on past his conversion, but been translated into Christian terms.
许多优秀的作家的著作堆满了图书馆的书架，但他们都死了。没有一个人把永生的生命给我。现在，我对我仍在从事写作充满了疑惑和痛苦。182

[So many excellent writers are stacked on the library shelves, but they are all dead; not one of them gave me eternal life. Now, as I still make my living by writing, I do so full of pain and regret.]

This from the 1995 article, “My Conflict with Literature.” In a more recent interview he seems to have come to terms with his profession in Augustinian terms. Augustine in On Christian Doctrine makes the distinction between two sorts of things in the world: those that are to be enjoyed and those that are to be used.183 Ultimately only God can be enjoyed in himself, while all other things, literary texts included, are to be used to lead us to that ultimate joy in God. Literature is not to be enjoyed in and for itself, for that would be to put literature in the place of God. In a 2002 interview Bei Cun was asked if he thought his novels could save the souls of Chinese people (“您认为您的小说可以拯救中国人民的灵魂吗?”); he answered vehemently,

“不! 人是受造者却以创造者自居，是这个时代一切罪中最大的罪。但我的创作能使我对自己的属灵状况有更清晰的认识。若有可能使一部分人意识到生命中某些问题是最重要的，那我就心满意足了。所以，我认为文学是‘有用’的。”184

[“No! The creature putting himself in the place of the Creator—of all the sins of this age, that is the greatest. But my work can help me have a clearer understanding of my spiritual situation. If perhaps it can help some people to recognize a few of the most important questions in life, then I will be satisfied. Therefore, I think literature is ‘useful.’”]

As the Marxists hope to exploit the usefulness of religion and literature for the sake of establishing a just society, so Bei Cun through a Christian theology of art advocates literature as a path, not as an end.
This approach to literature, in which we hear also an implied reproach of the complex but ultimately pointless play of the Avant-garde, perhaps explains the new simplicity we find in Bei Cun’s post-conversion work. Augustine concedes that there are objects that are to be both used and enjoyed, and there are artistic pleasures in Bei Cun’s work, but more often he is clear almost to the point of didacticism in a mode we might expect from Socialist fiction. In the same 2002 interview cited above Bei Cun was asked, “If you were a Ph.D. student writing your dissertation on Bei Cun’s works, what sort of title would you use?” (“如果您是博士候选人，论文内容是对北村作品的评价，您会用什么样的标题?”) He replied, “我不认为博士一定比我最普通的读者更有真知灼见。所以我建议撤销这篇论文的写作”\(^{185}\) (“I don’t think that a Ph.D. necessarily has any better or more truthful insights than my most common reader, so I would advise them to cancel the project”). Such mistrust of critical commentary is common among writers, perhaps particularly among writers who see their writing contributing to a greater cause, but there is a straightforwardness in the works discussed below that suggests Li Ping more than Mo Yan. Perhaps the unambiguous Christianity of Xu Dishan’s characters is a more appropriate comparison, but while Yu Guan and Shang-jie underwent physical hardship and regeneration, Bei Cun’s characters instead fall prey to existential despair, as the writer himself once did.

One of the most “obvious” novels in its Christian message is also one of his earliest Christian works. “The Marriage of Zhang Sheng” (“张生的婚姻”) carries an inscription from the New Testament book of Romans: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The novel begins comically as Zhang Sheng, a
somewhat pretentious but mostly good young philosophy professor, and Xiao Liu (小柳) his fiancée, a pretty young woman who works at a local hotel, are on their way to the government office where they will be married. Xiao Liu backs out at the last minute and leaves Zhang Sheng standing dumbfounded and paralyzed in the street, holding the registration fee in one hand and the paperwork in the other. He thinks back irrelevantly to the pre-marriage health check-up, when the doctor recommended he be circumcised, and a policeman eventually gives him a ticket for loitering. The registration fee pays for the fine. This playfully absurd opening takes a dark turn as Zhang Sheng descends from depression to despair. He comes to see himself as part of a meaningless existence, and the carnivalesque world he inhabits in his madness is terrifying.

“Zhang Sheng” thus begins playfully, like Bei Cun’s career, but the writer has said that he prefers Kafka to Borges because the former is more honest than the latter. “我不知道这个瞎眼的家伙是怎样使这个没有目的地的过程充满乌托邦的魔力” (“I didn’t understand how this blind guy [Borges] could take these meaningless processes and fill them up with utopian enchantments”).186 “Kafkaesque” is a fair description of the city- and mindscape into which Zhang Sheng has been abandoned, but Bei Cun cites the Russians sometimes, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and their influence is even more clear. Bei Cun’s characters, like Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, think they can change the laws of the universe by force of will, but find themselves haunted and eventually captured by a will more powerful than their own. Like Flannery O’Connor’s southern sinners (with whom Bei Cun is probably not familiar), these are non-Christian characters caught in a Christian universe, and they are battered and beaten into submission to the
facts of that universe. Zhang Sheng finally contemplates and attempts both suicide and murder, and just as we think he’s reached the lowest point, he sinks further.

There is a Job-like absurdity to the piled-on and lengthy pages of Zhang’s sufferings, and Job seems to be the model for the ending as well, along with Saint Paul. Just as in the Book of Job God spoke out of the whirlwind and explained everything (or did not bother to explain, depending on one’s reading of that story), so the Christian God appears out of nowhere in the final two pages of this novel to rescue Zhang Sheng from himself. After trying to kill himself, trying to kill Xiao Liu, and causing indirectly the death of a child at the hands of another child, Zhang Sheng finds a Bible in his room tucked away on a corner shelf next to all his Foucault, Nietzsche, Plato, and the Neo-Confucianists:

[With an effort he sat up. He opened the Bible. It was the book of Romans. There was a line that drew him and made him keep reading: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”]

He read to the passage, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is
plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”

When Zhang Sheng read this, it was as if he had been struck, and he threw the Bible aside.

The passage thus begins with a probable allusion to Augustine’s “Tolle et lege” scene in the Confessions, when a voice compels Augustine, the sinning saint-to-be, to “take up and read” the Scriptures, which then open seemingly of their own accord to a passage that speaks directly to Augustine’s condition, a passage of judgment and conviction. If a reader is aware of this precursor text, the sudden conversion coming up in the Chinese novel is likely to seem more believable.

Zhang Sheng is unable to leave the Bible closed, and is again drawn to open it:

He leaned on the bed as if in a trance. After a while he picked up the book again and read, “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies
with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips . . .”

Zhang Sheng said, “Oh my God!” It was as if he was crawling out of a filthy hole, his body soaked and rank with the smells of the earth, and light suddenly touched his body. He did not know if there was a God, but that he needed something, of this he was certain. There was a central problem that had not been solved. If he were to walk out the door, nothing out there would have any meaning; if he wanted to sleep, all he could do was continue taking more and more sleeping pills.

He continued reading: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.”

The passages from Paul’s letter to the Romans—all taken directly from the popular Union Version of the Bible that we have run across before—speak directly to Zhang Sheng’s recent crimes and explain how his sin, being contrary to “Nature,” has naturally led him to this dark valley he inhabits for most of the story. The plot ends with what seems at first to be a Deus ex machina ploy—the Christian God has only been mentioned briefly once before in the story, so we are hardly prepared for this ghostly finger writing on the wall. But once we get over our shock, we see that for Zhang Sheng this scene does not mark the entrance of a God from outside the machine, but rather reveals to Zhang Sheng the maker of the machine and thereby both explains his misery and reveals his hope.

The passage and the novel conclude with these words:
张生呻吟了一声，他的心突然被抓住了。仿佛有一双严厉的手，正在剥他的衣服。他在挣扎，但无济于事。你是谁？怎么这样说我……张生好像被一束光打倒，在地上爬不起来。圣经把他完全控制在一个地方，牢牢地抓住了他。他又读下去：……没有义人，连一个也 没有；没有明白的，没有寻求神的；都是偏离正路，一同变为无用；没有行善的，连一个也没 有。他们的喉咙是敞开的坟墓，他们用舌头弄诡诈。嘴唇里有虺蛇的毒气；满口是咒骂苦毒；杀人流血，他们的脚飞跑……

张生跪下来了。他把圣经合上，全身发抖。天哪！他说，到底有没有神，你要救我，我怎 么办？天哪——他突然愣住了，天哪——这个天到底是谁？

张生被一道更强的光射中，这道光刺入更黑暗的隧道，使他彻底暴露在光中。他意识 到那就是神——他从高天而来，在时间里突然临到他，把他征服。张生打开圣经，是马可福音十 四章，主对门徒说：我心里甚是忧伤，几乎要死；你们在这里等候警醒。上十字架前，主到客 西马尼祷告。回来后见门徒都睡着了，就对彼得说：西门，你睡觉吗？不能警醒片时吗？总要 警醒祷告，免得入了迷惑。

张生的泪水打湿了圣经，他开始祷告。一边祷告一边流泪，这些眼泪和光一起清洗着 他的身体和灵魂，结束一个。一身的缠累突然间消失了，周围鸦雀无声。张生被一只温暖的 手托住，光芒中的安息笼罩了他。祷告完了，他站起来。看见一切都更新了，周围变得比原来 更安静。连阳台上的花也被赋予了生命。张生与所看到的一切重新接近，并在与它们融合时，充满温暖。

他在窗前坐了足足二十分钟。什么也不想。只是在享受。这时张生觉得，就是在地 上捡起一根草都是美的。

他拨通了小柳的电话。

哲学家张生的流泪，祷告和归主，就这个时代来说，是一件希奇的事。189

[Zhang Sheng moaned; his heart was suddenly gripped. It seemed a pair of powerful hands was tearing at his clothes. He was struggling, but to no effect. “Who are you? How do you know so much about me?” 189Zhang Sheng seemed to be knocked down by a band of light; he could not crawl up from the floor. The Bible had him fully in its power and held him fast. Again he read: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no
one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood.”

Zhang Sheng fell to his knees. He shut the Bible. His whole body was trembling. “My God!” he said. “Whether there is a God or not, you have to save me! What can I do? God!” He suddenly stopped and stared dumbly: God—Who is this God?

Zhang Sheng was impaled on a more powerful beam of light. This beam pierced into a darker tunnel until he was completely immersed in the light. He was conscious that this was God—He had come down from the highest heavens and suddenly come to him in time, conquered him. Zhang Sheng opened the Bible. The Gospel of Mark, chapter 14: “The Lord said to the disciples, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,’ he said to them. ‘Stay here and keep watch.’ Before he ascended the cross, the Lord went to Gethsemane to pray. When he returned he found the disciples all sleeping. ‘Simon,’ he said to Peter, ‘are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.’”

Zhang Sheng’s tears wet the pages of the Bible; he started to pray. He prayed and he wept. The tears and the light together cleansed him body and soul. The weariness and tangle of his body suddenly disappeared. The room was silent and Zhang Sheng was held in a warm and tender hand; a rest within the brightness covered him. When he finished praying he stood up and saw that everything was new. The world around him had become more peaceful than before; even the flowers on the balcony were more alive. Everything he saw, he had to be near to, and when he touched them, he was filled with warmth.

He sat before the window for fully twenty minutes, not thinking of anything, just taking it in. This Zhang Sheng felt that each blade of grass plucked from the ground would be a beautiful thing.

He dialed Xiao Liu’s number.

So Zhang Sheng the philosopher wept, prayed, and came to the Lord. In this day and age, it’s a curious business indeed.

The references to St. Paul’s “road to Damascus” experience are explicit here. Saul, the great Pharisaical philosopher and persecutor of the early Christian Church, is knocked off his horse by a light from heaven and becomes Paul, Christian missionary to the Gentiles. Zhang Sheng, in the tradition of Augustine and Paul, becomes the Christian God’s most recent scholar-victim “in this day and age.”
Even with these literary analogues in the background, the scene is still liable to sound naïve to the Western reader who is not used to such conversion scenes outside of evangelistic literature. There may be no recourse for this—Chinese audiences clearly do not feel the same about such a “mawkish” ending, and this story is one that is included in the “Best Chinese Stories” series—but the final line of the novel seems to speak to those readers, East or West, who find these final pages hard to swallow. “In this day and age, it’s a curious business indeed.” Bei Cun seems to be aware of the potential reaction of the skeptical reader and tries to get there first. He thus challenges us to consider why it seems strange to us, why we are uncomfortable with it. Such religiosity—and in particular the invocation of the true believer as one swimming against the tide of the times—has often been the norm throughout history, and such emotional conversions still are commonplace today. Bei Cun’s old Avant-garde instinct to provoke the reader and to push the limits of the normal are here put to work, using traditional rather than previously unspoken subject matter. The taboos of writing are turned on their head, and one of the stars of the Avant-garde is suggesting that the survivable limits of that nihilism have been reached; there is no road ahead now, only the road back to faith.

Part of what makes the ending so startling is the fact that the rest of the novel is more subtle, even vague, in its Christian worldview. We begin with the quote from Romans, of course, “For all have sinned,” but until we get to the end we are not confident that this is a Christian world that these characters inhabit. It consistently feels closer to a nightmare world without hope, like the dream worlds of Kafka or like The Brothers Karamazov without Alyosha and Father Zossima. “Emptiness” is a constant refrain in descriptions of this world. Xiao Liu is suddenly scared by the emptiness she sees behind
Zhang Sheng, and this is why she runs away in the first section.\textsuperscript{190} Zhang Sheng, who had not noticed this vacancy before, suddenly is face-to-face with it, and stares into that abyss on a daily basis and can find nothing to fill it until the end. All goodness in the story is shown to be empty, hypocritical, or contingent. Seemingly innocent or minor characters are painted with a touch of evil. A boy who loves stamp collecting shows a sudden and unhealthy lust for a particular stamp of Zhang Sheng’s, almost a momentary demon-possession, but then it passes. We suspect that in these passages Bei Cun is illustrating the thesis expressed in the inscription, but we are not confident until the final two pages.

Christianity has only been mentioned once before that. Zhang Sheng is giving a lecture on Nietzsche, a self-conscious admission by the writer of that thinker’s popularity with Chinese students throughout the twentieth century, but also an admission of the difficulties involved with the cross-cultural translation of his philosophical system, which is based on millennia of thought that is foreign to the target culture. Zhang Sheng describes how Nietzsche had felt the death of God in his time and proposed the superman theory that must take God’s place. A student challenges Zhang Sheng:

这时，有人递了一张条子上来，问：尼采说上帝已经死了，又说有一个超人要出现，请问这个超人是不是尼采本人？或者说尼采本身要当一回上帝，所以蒙骗我们，试图对上帝发动政变？\textsuperscript{191}

[At this point, someone passed a note forward asking, “Nietzsche says that God is dead and that a superman must appear. Isn’t the superman Nietzsche himself? That is to say, doesn’t Nietzsche himself want to play God, so he fools the rest of us in order to stage a coup against God?”]

Zhang Sheng replies that to announce the death of God is a frightful thing and a heavy responsibility; Nietzsche was a strong man to give religion the final death blow and to
take on the burden of the result. When another student stands up and calls Nietzsche “mad,” Zhang Sheng replies,

中国是一个没有神观念的地方，我们很难内在地体会尼采的痛苦。

学生说：既然没神，为什么不去认识神呢？
张生审视着他：听你的口气，你是一个基督徒？
阿门！学生嘹亮地回答，

[“China is a country that has never had the God-concept, so it is difficult for us to truly understand Nietzsche’s suffering.”
The student said, “Since there’s no God here, why not go get God?”
Zhang Sheng studied him closely: “You must be a Christian?”
“Amen,” the student replied brightly.]

and Zhang Sheng is then able to dismiss the student from his mind. He does not dwell on this conversation, and it is not referred to again, even in the final scene. Bei Cun keeps us in the dark, along with Zhang Sheng until the shocking road-to-Damascus revelation of the ending. It is a risky ploy, and most readers probably find it much easier to follow Zhang Sheng through his despair than to identify with him in his conversion. The reader is left behind in the last few pages, uncertain. But the ending is at the same time probably something of a relief for even the most jaded readers, and this is part of Bei Cun’s strategy too, it seems. Zhang Sheng’s descent into the inferno is so unrelenting and exhausting, that we are glad he finds release, even if the jump to paradise is so sudden that we cannot conveniently follow.

“The Love of Ma Zhuo” (“马卓的爱情”), another of Bei Cun’s post-conversion novellas, is similar in its comedic structure. Two young students fall in love and get married and the story follows the decline of their relationship into misery, separation, and madness. The two suddenly realize, in the crucible of marriage (as Zhang Sheng did in
the crucible of sudden singleness), that life is empty and that they have no idea how to
love another person. Like Zhang Sheng’s decline, the decline of these two has a hyper-
realistic nightmare effect, as if Bei Cun took all the worst moments in his own marriage,
magnified them, and strung them together until life for these people is an unmitigated
horror. Again he is drawing here from Nietzsche and Western Modernism a pessimistic
worldview that describes life as essentially empty and mundane contentment as an
illusion.

Once more we have no hint of Bei Cun’s solution until the ending; here we lack
even the Biblical inscription to hint to us that sin, original and otherwise, might be the
cause of all this, that despair and isolation are not the way things are meant to be. The
story of the two students Ma Zhuo and Liu Ren (刘仁) is told by a friend of theirs who
gets involved somewhat in their situation. We see him briefly at the beginning telling this
strange story to another vague and nameless friend; the two, oddly enough, are sitting on
a beach somewhere, discussing this miserable pair. The first-person narrator tells the
story through without interruption, but we return to the beach to close the framing story at
the end:

我的天哪，我们不会生活，你看生活被我们弄成这个样子，我们
像走迷的羊，都走 在自己的路上，我巴望尽快离开经历这条黑暗的河
流，一定有一个安慰者，来安慰我们，他要 来教我们生活，陪我们生活。
我相信一定有的，这就是我不同于它们两个人，能暂时活下去 的原因。
伙计，你睡着了吗？
我住口起身，发现他真的睡着了，海滩上的人已经走光了， 天黑
了下来，潮水已经涨到 高处，我们躺的这块礁石被潮水团团围住。我恐
惧地望着黑暗的潮水，看来靠我们自己是无 法上岸了，一切都是徒劳。
但我的伙计还没有醒来.193
“My God. We do not know how to live. Look at what we’ve made out of life, what we’ve turned it into. We are like wandering sheep, each one takes its own road. I’m looking forward to getting out of this black flowing stream as soon as possible. There has to be a comforter who will come and console us. He will come to teach us how to live, to live with us. I believe there has to be such a one. This is what makes me different from those two, what allows me to go on living for a time.

“Hey buddy? You asleep?”

I shut up and stood up and discovered that he really was asleep. All the people were gone and the beach was empty. The sky was dark and the tide had already come in. The rock we were lying on had been entirely surrounded by water. I gazed fearfully at the dark water. It looked like there was no way for us to reach the shore on our own. All was futile.

But my friend still will not wake up.]

The Christian allusions in this ending are almost as clear as in “The Marriage of Zhang Sheng,” though without the chapter and verse evangelical straightforwardness that there seems intended to lead the reader from the story to the Bible. Here Bei Cun makes more subtle references to Isaiah 53, “All we like sheep have gone astray”; to the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts (the Comforter); and we hear shades of Ecclesiastes (“All is vanity”) at the end.

There can be no doubt that this parabolic conclusion is Bei Cun’s description of the human condition without Christ, and perhaps the state of Chinese literature in the work of his former Avant-garde colleagues. There is nothing terribly mysterious to explain here that the “most common reader” cannot also see. But it is worth noting the extent to which this story takes back up the mantle of the Chinese intellectual, the burdensome worrying mentality that goes back to the May Fourth writers and from there back to Confucian antiquity. The faceless and nameless friend or “buddy” in this working-class narrator’s voice is the reader, the Chinese reader most immediately, and the parable is strikingly similar to a parable by the most famous Chinese writer of the Modern Era. Lu Xun, noted for his occasional pessimism, once described China as a
burning house with no windows or doors. Everyone in the house is asleep except for him. He is thus faced with a dilemma: Do I shout to wake them up, even though I know there is no hope? Or do I let them die peacefully in their sleep, without even trying to save anyone?\textsuperscript{194} Bei Cun is similarly pessimistic about life and also unsure if his shouting will do much good, but unlike the atheist Lu Xun, Bei Cun is convinced that a Comforter does exist, for China and for the world. Only if we are awake to the reality of God, he responds to the skeptic, do we have a chance of escape.

Conclusion

On a number of occasions during my years of teaching literature and writing at Peking University—when the class discussion touched or hinged upon matters of religion or philosophy—a bold student would raise a hand in class or come to the front afterwards to ask a question along these lines: “How can so many Americans believe in God when science has proven there is no God?” The question is raised with a mixture of the innocence of Ha Jin’s Manna and the self-possessed skepticism of China’s top young scholars. In spite of the apparent naïveté of the interlocutor, it is always clear, as with Ha Jin’s creation, that there is a sharp and active mind behind the question, a prepossessing curiosity rather than a blank slate or a closed and decided needling. These students wanted to talk about important things, about metaphysics. I was always glad to see this unabashed curiosity from students in China, this inquisitiveness about metaphysics, which, based on my equal years of experience in U.S. classrooms, is much rarer, or rarely spoken aloud, among American students. However, I was always bothered by the overly skeptical, or possibly over-credulous, turn of the Chinese student’s mind that could not
conceive of how to reconcile religion and science or the words “Chinese Christian,” a
turn of mind that seemed to indicate that some inviolable boundary had been trespassed
in the joining of these terms.

It will not surprise the reader to learn that I have never had such religious
conversations or entertained such questions about the Divine when teaching about China
in any American public-school classroom, where God is now something of a dead letter.
We saw in chapter four that the contemporary literature about China which is most
readily embraced by the American academy to this point is either largely skeptical about
Chinese Christianity, if it is dealt with at all, or the religious content is minimal and may
easily be placed to one side. The contemporary situation in China is very different indeed.
Chinese literature about Christianity published over the past twenty-five years reflects the
attitudes I saw in those classrooms among China’s young intellectual elites: unabashed
curiosity and “show-me” skepticism working in tandem with a kind of “Chinese pride”
that Perry Link describes as maintaining “a profound distinction between ‘Chinese’ and
‘foreign’” and according to which China’s “specialness” equals “superiority.”

Chinese writers and critics, like my Chinese students, like to talk about
metaphysics—about “God,” whatever that word may mean—in different ways than is
typical among their counterparts in the West today. In a very real sense God is not a dead
concept in Chinese literature; he is still too young. Likewise, however, despite
globalization and China’s contemporary policies of opening up to the world, it is not
God, but China and Chineseness that are still the dominant concerns of Chinese
intellectuals and the literature they write. Christianity is discussed more openly and
considered more carefully in contemporary Chinese literature than in that of the West, but
only in the hands of a very few Chinese writers do these religious discussions and considerations move beyond the borders of Chinese nationalism to embrace a broader humanistic vision. God is not dead in China, but Chinese nationalism, so far, is alive and well.
Notes


2 “近20多年来, 中国小说及其观念的变化和发展, 应该说是自现代小说诞生以来最 为剧烈和复杂的.” 中国小说50强编委会, 序, 长征, 北村著(长春: 时代文艺出版社, 2001) 1. [Best Chinese Fiction Editorial Committee, preface, Long March, by Bei Cun (Chang Chun: Time Arts and Literature, 2001) 1.] Translations of Chinese sources and of their citations are mine unless otherwise noted. The original Chinese text for all primary-text passages translated by myself will be included in the text before the English translation. Chinese-language secondary-text quotes are normally quoted in the text in English; the original Chinese can be found in the corresponding note.

3 Note on capitalization: With respect to the capitalization of “Modern” I have tried to be consistent and to follow as nearly as possible the custom of other scholarship in the field. I use “Modern” sparingly: when speaking directly of the “Modern Era” in China (in order to match the words “Reform Era” which often occur in close proximity), when speaking of “Modernism” as a (normally Western) literary movement, or when referring to someone as a “Modern.” I will often use the word “modern,” therefore, to speak of the 1911-1949 Modern Era in Chinese literature (1911-1949) and the writers of that period, and I will use “contemporary” as the uncapitalized latter-day counterpart to “modern” when speaking of the Reform Era in Chinese literature (1979 to the present) and the writers of our present age.
4 Lewis S. Robinson, Double-Edged Sword: Christianity and Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1986).

5 Jenner, in Goldblatt, Worlds Apart 185.

6 Richard C. Foltz, Religions of the Silk Road (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999) 72.


11 Cohen 32. (Quoted in Robinson 3.)


14 Link 249; Link’s translation of the phrase.

15 Link 293.


22 Robinson 2.

23 Robinson 144.


25 Shaw, in Whitehead 176.

26 Robinson 15.


28

29 Robinson 13.

30 Robinson 113.


32 马佳 209-10. [Ma Jia 209-10.]

33 Robinson 114.

34 “而且, 这几篇小说中情绪化色彩太浓, 带有明显的时代精神的印痕和受制于特定 历史环境的局限.” 马佳 223. [Ma Jia 223.]

35 Robinson 113.


37 Xiao Qian, Chestnuts and Other Stories, trans. Xiao Qian and others (Beijing: Panda, 1984) 120.
38 Xiao Qian, Chestnuts 47.

39 Xiao Qian (Hsiao Ch’ien), Semolina and Others (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1984) 37.

40 Robinson 119.

41 Robinson 114; 马佳 223. [Ma Jia 223.]

42 Robinson 115.

43 Robinson 126.

44 Robinson 126, 115.

45 “影响了它们的美学价值.” 马佳 223-24. [Ma Jia 223-24.]

46 王列耀 20. [Wang Lieyao 20.]

46 Robinson 8.


48 Robinson 6.

49 “支配人心底最高文化, 是唐虞三代以来伦理的道义. 支配西洋人心底最高文化, 是希腊以来美的情感和基督教信与爱的情感.” 马佳 29. [Ma Jia 29.]

50 Robinson 7.

51 Hsia 86.

52 马佳 31. [Ma Jia 31.]
Quoted in and translation by Hsia 86.

Robinson 40.

Robinson 59.

Hsia 85.

Hsia 91.


Robinson 197.

Xu 58.

Hsia 88.

Xu 61.

Xu 87.

Robinson 191.

Xu 85.

Xu 85.

Robinson 196, 187.

Robinson 198.

Robinson 198.

王本朝 48-49. [Wang Benzhao 48-49.]

George N. Patterson, Christianity in Communist China (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1969) 11-12. (Also quoted in Aikman, p. 154.)


76 Oksenberg and Bush, in Schell 17.

77 杨声韵,“从文学作品看中国青年与宗教的纠结,” 景风 79 (十月 1984).


80 Jing Wang 4.

81 [Li Ping 112.] 110. [Li Ping 110.]
82 Li Ping 111. [Li Ping 111.]

83 Li Ping 169. [Li Ping 169.]

84 Robinson 199.

85 Li Ping 178. [Li Ping 178.]

86 Buruma xxi.

87 Li Ping 173. [Li Ping 173.]

88 Li Ping 178. [Li Ping 178.]

89 Li Ping 146. [Li Ping 146.]

90 Li Ping 147. [Li Ping 147.]


92 Li Ping 193-94. [Li Ping 193-94.]

93 Zhang Xiaotian 135. [Zhang Xiaotian 135.]

94 Zhang Xiaotian 130. [Zhang Xiaotian 130.]

95 Zhang Xiaotian 131. [Zhang Xiaotian 131.]

96 Zhang Xiaotian 136. [Zhang Xiaotian 136.]

97 Robinson 199.

98 Aikman 98.

99 Zhang Xiaotian 144. [Zhang Xiaotian 144.]


Jing Wang 4.

Wakefield 238.


王本朝 48. [Wang Benzhao 48.]

冯骥才, 神灯前传 466. [Feng Jicai, Part One of the Story of the Divine Lamp 466.]

111 Wakefield 238.


114 Jing Wang 2.


117 Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 372-73. [Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 372-73.]


119 Henry Zhao 13.
120 Henry Zhao 13.


122 Mo Yan, Red Sorghum 308, 345. 莫言, 红高粱家族 318, 352.

123 莫言, 红高粱家族 358. [Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 358.]


125 莫言, 红高粱家族 2. [Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 2.]


128 莫言, 红高粱家族 371. [Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 371.]

129 Mo Yan, Red Sorghum, trans. Howard Goldblatt 357.

130 莫言, 红高粱家族 372. [Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 372.]

131 Mo Yan, Red Sorghum, trans. Howard Goldblatt 357.


133 Mo Yan, Red Sorghum 5, 213-16. 莫言, 红高粱家族 3, 206-10.


135 莫言, 红高粱家族 371. [Mo Yan, Honggaoliang jiazu 371.]

136 Mo Yan, Red Sorghum, trans. Howard Goldblatt 357.
137 “基督教被用作这些作品的比附力量和借鉴对象，而并没有建立起‘基督
教’对於人和社会的重要意义。” 王本朝 52. [Wang Benzhao 52.]

138 Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Beyond Realism: Thoughts on Modernist Experiments in
Contemporary Chinese Writing,” in Goldblatt, Worlds Apart 72.

139 王本朝 52. [Wang Benzhao 52.]

140 Bonnie S. McDougall, introduction, Brocade Valley, by Wang Anyi (New
York: New Directions, 1992) v.

141 Ban Wang, “History in a Mythical Key: Temporality, Memory, and Tradition

142 McDougall vi.

143 王安忆, “乌托邦诗篇,” 香港的情与爱: 王安忆自选集之三 (北京: 作家出版
257-304.]

144 王安忆 269. [Wang Anyi 269.]

145 王安忆 269-70. [Wang Anyi 269-70.]

146 王安忆 272. [Wang Anyi 272.]

147 Ban Wang 613.

148 王安忆 284. [Wang Anyi 284.]
149 王安忆 289. [Wang Anyi 289.]

150 王安忆 293. [Wang Anyi 293.]


152 “就整个八九十年代的文学而言，最有基督教色彩的作家应是史铁生和北村。” 王本朝 54. [Wang Benzhao 54.]


155 “由於历史与现实的诸多因素，尤其是‘基督教的信仰方式不符合中国民间多神崇拜所体现的物质利益原则’，故对未来中国教会组织及其信徒的发展难以作出乐观预测。但是，基督教文化精神对於中国文化，对於中国文学价值建构可能提供的某些创意，我们却有着乐观的预感。” 牛运清和丛新强 29. [Niu Yunqing and Cong Xinqiang 29.]

157 王本朝 55. [Wang Benzhao 55.]


159 史铁生, 写作之夜 182, 147. [Shi Tiesheng, Nights for Writing 182, 147.]

160 史铁生, 写作之夜 87. [Shi Tiesheng, Nights for Writing 87.]

161 史铁生, 写作之夜 87. [Shi Tiesheng, Nights for Writing 87.]

162 史铁生, 写作之夜 60. [Shi Tiesheng, Nights for Writing 60.]

163 史铁生, 写作之夜 62. [Shi Tiesheng, Nights for Writing 62.]

164 牛运清和丛新强 23. [Niu Yunqing and Cong Xinqiang 23.]

165 史铁生, 写作之夜 51, 192. [Shi Tiesheng, Nights for Writing 51, 192.]

166 史铁生, 史铁生代表作: 我与地坛 (沈阳: 春风文艺出版社, 2002) 231. [Shi Tiesheng, Representative Writings: “Ditan Park and I” and Other Stories (Shenyang: Spring Breeze Arts and Literature Publishing House, 2002) 231.]

167 史铁生, 史铁生代表作: 我与地坛 234. [Shi Tiesheng, Representative Writings: “Ditan Park and I” and Other Stories 234.]

168 “人都忍不住要为生存找一些牢靠的理由.” 史铁生, 史铁生代表作: 我与地坛 248. [Shi Tiesheng, Representative Writings: “Ditan Park and I” and Other Stories 248.]
169 史铁生. 史铁生代表作: 我与地坛 247-48, 251. [Shi Tiesheng, Representative Writings: “Ditan Park and I” and Other Stories 247-48, 251.]


171 朱运清和丛新强 28. [Niu Yunqing and Cong Xinqiang 28.]

172 朱运清和丛新强 26-27. [Niu Yunqing and Cong Xinqiang 26-27.]

173 “我们注重的是 ‘巴尔扎可式’ 的, 而忽略了 ‘托尔斯泰式’ 的另一种现实主义.” 朱运清和丛新强 27. [Niu Yunqing and Cong Xinqiang 27.]


175 Jing Wang 5.

176 Jing Wang 2.

177 Jing Wang 5.

178 Jing Wang 11, 4.

179 Henry Zhao 11.

180 北村. “我与文学的冲突” 66. [Bei Cun, “My Conflict with Literature” 66.]

181 北村, 公民凯恩 (乌鲁木齐: 新疆人民出版社, 2002). [Bei Cun, Citizen Kane (Urumchi: Xinjiang People’s Publishing House, 2002).]

182 北村. “我与文学的冲突” 67. [Bei Cun, “My Conflict with Literature” 67.]
See On Christian Doctrine, Book One, sections I-V.


北村, “我与文学的冲突” 66. [Bei Cun, “My Conflict with Literature” 66.]


Chapter Six

Conclusion

We have by this point heard the stories of most of the principals in our drama: policymakers, missionaries, and professional writers and intellectuals from the U.S. and the PRC. But apart from a few whispers in the early chapters and the odd Chinese Christian author in the latter, little has yet been said herein by the main character herself: the Chinese Christian Church. After so much has been claimed about its members by others—that they are persecuted, they are free, they are the fastest-growing church in history, they are a long-term but fading “contradiction,” they are content, they are desperate, they are fake Chinese, they are good Chinese citizens—Chinese Christian clergy and laity should have the final word. What do Chinese Christians have to say about today’s China, about their own Christian faith, about how their individual narrative tributaries join the larger rivers of Chinese national and Christian meta-narrative? Much of the wrangling above, in the last two chapters in particular, has been over whether or not Chinese Christianity is possible. More than “possible” or even “likely,” Chinese Christianity is a fact. How Chinese Christianity looks, however, is sometimes very different from American Christianity, and very different from what many Americans—who do not always realize they are practicing one of several brands (all potentially quite orthodox) of Christianity—would expect or prefer.

The Chinese Christian Church is clearly divided, and not only into the twos or fours of Catholic and Protestant, “official” and “underground.” It should not, it seems, have the near-univocal power of an authoritarian government, nor even the two-voice strength of the foreign missionaries—the common bipartite division of the Chinese
Church into “official” and “underground” is largely an American simplification of the actual case. But the Chinese Church is not so scattered as it might appear; the Church is not nearly so divided, for example, as are the myriad writers in chapters four and five above. Raymond Fung recorded his impression in the early 1980s, after extensive field research among congregations of the emerging Reform Era Chinese Christian Church, that Chinese Christians speak in “one voice,” be they so-called “official church” or “underground” Christians.¹ What sort of voice that might be, what it might be saying, and what the dissenting voices are, will be the subjects of these concluding pages. To explore the unifying factors among the various Chinese Christians, we will be returning to a subject that has appeared frequently in the preceding chapters: the narrative of nationalism.

Race and national feeling are powerful uniting factors for the Chinese Church and exert a great influence also in tying the Church to the Chinese government. National loyalties, both political and cultural, in the Chinese Church have often been recognized, but are often underestimated by outsiders who would be rid of Communism forever and who perhaps want to continue to see the Chinese Church as an American protégé. The nationalistic ties between the Chinese Church and the CCP are coerced, these observers want to claim, and Chinese Christians’ primary loyalty is to their allies in the Church outside of atheist China. These, of course, are themselves nationalistic claims, the very American narratives we looked at in chapters two and three. It should not surprise Americans who understand something of their own melting pot of nationalist and religious narratives that Chinese Christians are in a similar situation and have strong ties to their homeland. Religious loyalties may officially, and actually, come first, but in the
absence of a direct conflict of loyalties, and even often in its presence, Chinese Christians have little difficulty combining their patriotism and their Christian faith.

Defensive identity conundrums about “imperialist Christianity” and its incompatibility with “true Chineseness” often come up in the fiction and other writings of non-Christian Chinese, but Chinese Christian writers—see Nien Cheng and Bei Cun, for example—do not have much to say about “how Chinese Christianity is possible.” To paraphrase Frederick Douglass, when he refused to address the matter of “how a slave can possibly be human”: perhaps they feel they have better employments for their time.²

The fact that Chinese Christianity is possible is too obvious to those who achieve the synthesis, and the mechanism by which the combination is achieved is often unconscious and unconsidered. In whatever manner or manners the synthesis happens, for the vast majority of Chinese Christians, it seems, national pride has not prevented them from engaging in full and orthodox Christian belief, and Christian belief has not stemmed the flow of national pride.

Chinese Christians generally tell a story of a Church that is independent of foreign Christian bureaucracy, equal and not subordinate to foreign Christianity, and even superior in unity to Christianity outside China’s borders. Their narratives of the past, present, and future Chinese Church give China a special and unique place in the meta-narrative of Christian history. Readers who live in this “City on a Hill” called the U.S. may be loathe to grant a young Church such autonomy and perhaps even to “pass the mantle of God’s favor,” but it is hard to begrudge the Chinese Church this sort of narrative empowerment simply because Americans have believed they held the patent.

What is the “one voice” that Chinese Christians speak with? The answer is very simple: it
is a voice that is both fully Christian and distinctly Chinese. The former sorts of narratives will be quite familiar to Westerners; the latter are somewhat stranger.

The following introductory personal narrative should illuminate some of the features of the Reform Era Chinese Church: its uncoerced patriotism, its independent spirit, and, for better or worse, its pride.

Chinese Christian Reaction to the Embassy Bombing of 1999

When I was teaching English at Peking University in 1999, scant days after China celebrated the eightieth anniversary of the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement of 1919, NATO planes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (allegedly due to a military mapping error), killing three people and injuring many more.

Those of us who started studying China only recently will often lament the fact that we cannot go back in time and witness the student enthusiasms of the 1980s. We hear stories from older colleagues and read accounts of the 1989 demonstrations and of the excitement of campus life during the first decade of Reform. In those sad days after the 1999 embassy bombing, we foreign teachers had the dubious privilege of witnessing an enthusiasm of a slightly different sort, a kind of reenactment of the anti-foreign demonstrations of 80 years previous and a distorted mirror image of the more Western-friendly, though still highly patriotic, 1989 marches.

My “Oral English” students, when they came to class at all that week, told stories of how government-requisitioned buses took them daily from campus to the American embassy at the far corner of town. They told me proudly how the Chinese policemen there, though charged with the defense of foreign property, spoke words of
encouragement and looked the other way as the teenagers threw rocks to break the 
embassy windows. Big-character posters went up at sanjiaodi (三角地), a triangular 
public bulletin-board area on campus. In 1989 this had been a pulpit for cries of 
democratic reform; the posters there now decried Americans as “soulless beasts.” In 
1989, posters there and in Tiananmen Square pictured Premier Li Peng in the uniform of 
a Nazi officer;^3 in 1999, the big-character denunciations of foreign imperialism 
accompanied pictures of President Clinton and Secretary Albright with Hitler mustaches 
scribbled above their lips.

We had heard the news of the bombing on Saturday morning. The next day, 
Sunday, I was to go down the street a few blocks from campus to the local Christian 
church as I always did. I had been tutoring and interviewing the pastors during the week, 
and on Sundays I served as the usher and greeter for the small but consistent contingent 
of foreigners who attended the church. Some concerned colleagues advised me not to 
leave campus that weekend, but though I felt sad and somewhat wary, I did not believe I 
would be in any danger, so with only a little trepidation I set out walking on Sunday 
morning as usual. I arrived at the church by walking through narrow hutongs, my usual 
route. Nothing was quite the same, but nothing horrible happened either. A group of 
young men walking behind me in the alleyway shouted in Chinese, “American!” as if to 
get my attention, to see if I would react and reveal myself. I ignored them, but walked a 
little faster.

At the church, I felt people were looking at me more carefully, but the service 
went on without incident, and no mention was made of the bombing apart from prayers
for the victims. The head pastor, Qi Tieying, was not preaching that day, and he seemed to be absent. It seemed right that one thing, at least, should be different.

The next Sunday Pastor Qi was back, and he explained in his sermon that the day after the bombing he had been called to attend several citywide Church meetings, discussions concerning what Church reaction should be and what pastors should tell their congregations about the “imperialist attack.” Pastor Qi said he had changed his prepared Scripture text from one on “The Gifts of the Spirit” (the passage from I Corinthians that climaxes in the “greatest gift,” i.e. “love”) to John 17:15, Jesus’s prayer for his disciples: “My prayer is not that you [God] take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” Pastor Qi spoke much about his sadness and even more about his anger, a righteous anger that is appropriate in these times, he said. No doubt he spoke in a vein similar to the sermons preached from most every registered-church pulpit in Beijing that morning, but it was clear that he was personally upset by the subject; he was not simply preaching a sermon ordered up by the Church leadership. He spoke against those who might speciously argue that the bombing was God’s will, that God was punishing China’s atheist leaders. He preached against passivity and for active resistance against invaders.

He was impassioned and sincere also when he spoke briefly on the importance of unity in the Chinese Church and how unity has improved in China since the Liberation by the Communists:

1949年以前北京有教堂60余座, 他们都称自己信的是唯一正确的, 使人无所适从。今天则不然, 无论走进哪个教会, 听到大家所传的是相同的福音, 大家同信的是一位真神, 一位救主, 一位保惠师圣灵。
[Before 1949 there were more than 60 churches in Beijing, every one of them claiming that what they believed was the only correct way. This put people at a loss for what to do. Now things are different. No matter what church you go into today, everyone preaches the same Gospel, and everyone believes in the same one True God, one Savior, and one Comforter, the Holy Spirit.]

In 1919, the Chinese Christians were under attack, along with the foreigners, for their foreign ties and foreign church leadership. In 1999, the Chinese Church was criticizing foreign countries in the language of Chinese nationalism and even criticizing itself as it existed in that earlier age. Pastor Qi was carefully separating the Chinese Church’s own current identity from that previous modality.

The day after Pastor Qi’s sermon, Monday, a week after the government-sponsored (though not entirely government-initiated) demonstrations began, they just as suddenly ended, called to a halt in the official media. My students and I had always had a fairly good relationship before the bombing, and that did not change. The students, the pastors, the department, all made it clear that they could distinguish between my government and myself. The administration gave a small banquet for all the “foreign experts” to reassure us that, though our governments may have their disagreements, our personal relationships were unchanged because of this incident. I did not try to articulate my unease with this for my students or colleagues—I suppose I was simply grateful and glad to feel their acceptance once again—but I never felt that the simple dichotomy between my government and myself was fully comforting or fully possible. It felt like a stopgap rhetorical measure, a half-truth that sounded just reasonable enough to get on with the practical business of life; it felt artificial and shallow. It smoothed things over, but I could never again be fooled into feeling at home in China. I remember the young
men shouting “American!” down the hutong. I remember the young first-year student who during the entire month of May could not bring herself to look at me.

**Background and Framework**

It was not so easy for them or for me to separate the “American teacher” from the political system and the leaders that define “America.” Did those students think of themselves as fully autonomous and detached from the government that supplied the buses, whispered encouragement, and provided loose stones to throw, the government that ordered them to return to classes a week later and was obeyed? The lines between rulers and their citizenry are rarely sharp, in the school or in the Church. The attempt to mark a clear barrier between the “Chinese people” and the “People’s Government” for most Chinese citizens is doomed to failure, as doomed as is the attempt to separate the “Chinese” from the “Christian” for the Chinese believer. Chinese Christian identity in the mainland today, even more uniformly than American Christian identity, is bound up with national pride and normally too (admitting a strongly dissenting minority voice) with at least a modicum of support for China’s ruling authorities.

Some excellent work has been done recently on Chinese Christian identity formation. Yang Fenggang’s sociological study *Chinese Christians in America* describes how members of the eponymous community manage to form a three-way adhesive identity out of their faith, their Chineseness, and their new Americanness. In our pluralistic age, Yang says, assimilation no longer means giving up one’s ethnic identity in favor of a dominant culture, but assimilation and preservation rather become “selective”; identity choices are no longer “either/or,” but “both/and.”

*Chinese Christians in the*
mainland, curiously, have attained a similar freedom by nearly opposite means: the increasing diversity of American society necessitated the creation of models more helpful and current than the homogenizing “melting pot”; modern Chinese nationalism, largely the result of Western imperialism, dictated rather that before Chinese Christians could achieve a both/and adhesive identity, less diversity and greater ethnic homogeneity had first to be accomplished through the expulsion of Western Christians. Studying China’s indigenizing Christian movement more from the mainland perspective, Duan Qi, a scholar at the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), has written *Struggling Forward: The Indigenization of Protestant Christianity in China*, and Daniel Bays’s *Christianity in China* devotes an entire section with six essays to “The Rise of an Indigenous Chinese Christianity.” Both Duan Qi and Bays focus on the factors that have drawn many Chinese in recent years to the Christian faith and have made the formation of a Chinese Christian identity relatively crisis-free: the nationalization of Church structures; the familiarity and easy translatability of traditional Christian morality into a Confucian and “Puritanical” Marxist society; the fact that the material-life affirming nature of a faith in which God becomes man makes some sense to a culture which has always been, arguably, more humanist than spiritual in its philosophies.

We will close this study by looking briefly at two sorts of narratives that have emerged in response to China’s unique church-state dilemma, for China, too, has its narratives that doubt the possibility of “Chinese Christianity” and those that support the possibility. The first sort should be familiar to Western audiences: the sometimes paranoid, always tragic anti-government, anti-Three Self stories of interference and
persecution. These narratives of conflict rather than compromise seem to reflect a minority group for whom the “Chinese” in “Chinese Christian” can have nothing to do with current political structures. The final set of narratives are nationalistic Chinese Christian narratives that have little to do with praising or blaming the CCP, or deciding how to work with or against the powers-that-be, but rather narratives in which Christian meta-narratives, historical or eschatological, work hand-in-hand with Chinese pride to demonstrate that the Chinese Church has a special, even unique, place in God’s plans for the world. Under such narrative conditions, “Chinese Christianity” becomes not only eminently possible, but extremely enviable as a special category in the mind of God himself.

The Anti-Government Narratives

Anti-government Christian narratives in China, as we might expect, emerge primarily from the persecuted segments within Chinese Christianity and dissident groups abroad. These are the Christians who have had to face a direct contradiction between Chineseness as defined by the CCP and their own Christian faith and who have chosen to hold to Christianity in spite of all difficulties. They in no way necessarily cease to be “Chinese Christians,” of course, but the essence of their “Chineseness” is divorced from the political structures of the People’s Republic today.

As suggested by my opening narrative above, to separate oneself completely from the government under which one carries on daily life is a difficult matter. It might be slightly easier, however, for the Chinese people than for some Westerners, as Chinese culture is older and Chinese national identity is historically less closely tied to their
present form of government than is, for example, American identity. This fact makes itself clear linguistically; separation of one’s “Chineseness” from the “Chinese government” might be easier for the Chinese people since they have at least three different words that can all be translated into English as “Chinese.” Yang Fenggang describes how Chinese Christians in the U.S. define their Chineseness along the spectrum of these three terms:

zhongguoren [中国人] for national or political identification with the Chinese nation-state, huaren [华人] for cultural identification with the Chinese culture, and huayi [华裔] for primordial or biological identification with the Chinese people. [...] Thus defined, any person can concurrently have all three identities, although one identity may be more prominent than the other two. It is also possible to hold only one or two of the identities without the rest. For example, a person in China is a Chinese citizen (zhongguoren) but may completely reject the traditional Chinese culture and thus have no huaren identity. Some diasporic Chinese may hold strong cultural identity (huaren) but may not identify with China the state and thus have no zhongguoren identity. A person of Chinese descent may be far removed from any political identification with China and know almost nothing of Chinese culture, thus only huayi identity remains.6

These distinctions are a more serious and self-conscious matter for Chinese living abroad. It would be difficult—though it is not unimaginable—to find mainland Chinese Christians who did not call themselves a zhongguoren. Rejection of this title by a mainland Chinese citizen would almost certainly mark them as self-consciously anti-government. Whether or not such personal and linguistic divorce from the current Chinese leadership is common in the PRC—it is not—it is yet significant that linguistic options are available. Though the CCP has tried to marry “Chineseness” inseparably to itself and define itself as the representative of the Chinese people, China’s long history and the CCP’s short history make “Chineseness” a bigger thing than the Party can practically swallow, and the Chinese language reflects that undigestible toughness of the
word. The term for the Chinese “people” (minzu 民族) can also be translated as “ethnicity” or “race,” again containing deeper connotations than simply “the Chinese citizens who are alive today,” and representing a breadth and depth of meaning that is difficult for the CCP to assimilate easily.

Despite this freedom to create complex versions of Chineseness in which the current government must share a bed with regional loyalties, with Confucius and the Buddha and even Christ, it is not easy to find Chinese Christian narratives of strong dissent against the government. Accounts of Christian persecution, of course, can be found regularly in Christian newsletters in the U.S. and on “Suffering Church” websites, and mistrust of and discontent with the TSPM has been common ever since the organization was founded to unify all Chinese Christians under the Party’s big tent. Still, Chinese Christians who advocate major or violent political change in China, possibly with help from the U.S., or Chinese Christians who tell American-style stories of the collapse of the CCP and the institution of American-style democracy in the PRC, these stories that many American Christians associate with the “underground” churches and their Cold War spy narrative conventions—these are practically unknown in mainland China. No doubt government control and self-censorship have effectively quashed some incipient rebels who might otherwise use the Bible to actively oppose the Party, and censorship has made officially published narratives that are unfriendly to the government impossible to find in the mainland, but reading through the major Western sources, which one might expect to present such narratives if they could be found, suggests that very few mainland Chinese citizens—because of the nature of Christianity or of Chinese
nationalism or both—are calling for anything more radical than government reform and the just implementation of policies of religious freedom.

Early in the Reform Era, Raymond Fung collected narratives from several emerging Christian communities. They almost all had stories of persecution to tell, but they mostly had great hopes for the dawning era and told stories of cooperation with the government. Despite the fact that almost all of these Christians had suffered for their faith in recent years, Fung reveals a surprising fact about their attitude toward the government and the organs of church control:

Of the 14 grassroots communities included in this book, one is clearly hostile to the Three Self Movement. The others are either indifferent or positive in their response. [. . .] Not that every single Christian in these grassroots communities wishes to join the Three Self Movement. A few have reservations about some in the leadership. But that they are one in believing and in living out their patriotism, and the principles of self-government, self-support, self-propagation, we have little doubt. 7

When we turn to the most secretive and “hostile” of the underground church testimonies in Fung, even there we find little or no rancor expressed against the government. The “Responsible Brother” of the church begins with these words:

It is not easy for Christians from the outside world to understand this. But a long while ago, we made a decision to be a holy people, setting ourselves apart for the cause of the gospel. This means, among other things, that we will not be part of the Three Self Movement nor will we take part in public Sunday services, no matter what. I guess you can call us an underground church, the way you were met by one of us near a bus stop and brought here in a round-about way. 8

We hear in this last sentence one of the familiar spy-narrative elements that we associate with the illegal, underground church from our American “underground missionary” narratives. But the remainder of the story is mostly about the growth in the membership of the church and is not political at all. When he does spend more time on politics, the
Brother makes these complicated—some Americans might say contradictory—

statements:

With regard to the Three Self Movement, I would only say that the believer and the non-believer do not share the same yoke. Their sermons may sound evangelical, but they don’t mean it. It’s all a show in concert with the Religious Affairs Bureau and in pursuit of their goal of religious control.

I am not a political man. I support the People’s Government as everybody does. But as a Christian, I can have no consort with atheistic communism. No Christian in close fellowship with God would or could do so without losing his soul. I know that quite a number of famous evangelical pastors are also members of the Three Self Movement Committee now. God only knows why. But God would always leave behind his faithful to bear his name. We hope we are worthy. The only important thing for a Christian is to be constantly in Christ, hidden in him, to appreciate his glory and beauty, worship him, enjoy him, and look forward to his coming in the fullness of his glory.⁹

MacInnis’s collection of primary texts and interviews from later in the same decade contains a similar lack of anti-government sentiment even from, for example, a pastor who was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and who is openly critical of the local anti-Christian CCP leaders. The pastor is equally critical of local heretical groups and anti-TSPM Christian sects:

Recently some of us have discussed how to deal with them [the local “underground”]. This is what we decided:

“First, to use love only. Second to use patience. Don’t be hard on them. We Chinese all have freedom of religious belief. If they are preaching the true gospel, and do nothing against the government, they are not breaking the law. It’s a religious question, not a political question. We have carefully avoided using forceful measures against them. However, they should not steal our members; we call that sheep stealing.”¹⁰

The large body of anti-government, pro-American Chinese Christian literature that one might expect to find, based on American underground narratives, does not seem to exist.

Having said this, there is an undeniable if minority strain of anti-CCP, pro-Western thought in the Chinese Christian Church. Written documents from this sector are
rare. The “secret documents” leaked to the U.S. and described in chapter two would be a good example of the subversive work of this sort of Chinese Christian, putting their concern for persecuted Christians above national loyalties and risking reprisal by their own government in order to solicit aid from outside China’s borders. Foreigners who spend any time around Chinese Christianity are liable to attract one or two such “anti-China” Chinese Christians. We remember the man encountered by Stuart Stevens in Xi’an who was so desperate to leave his country, and Nien Cheng who felt mainland Chineseness was no longer her Chineseness. I myself met a few such true “underground” Chinese Christians in my years in China, people who sometimes spoke or acted as if they were living in a spy novel. I say this without any intention of disparaging their, no doubt often hard-earned, caution, which an American like myself is fortunate enough to find difficult to understand.

One woman, who divided her time between the official church services I attended and her own “underground” illegal evangelism, would often tell me harrowing stories of persecution by government and TSPM agents. She knew or had heard of Christians like herself who had been betrayed by TSPM clergy, fingered for proselytizing and turned over to Public Security. She was nervous about listening devices and would check lamps and bumps in her rugs; she had heard and related to me stories of such technology being used against uncooperative Christians. Even though she spoke almost no English and my Chinese was poor when we first met, she attached herself to me much as the man who glommed on to Stevens; unlike that man, she never talked about going to the U.S., but she, like others of this sort who feel persecuted in China, had an affinity for foreigners and seemed to trust American Christians more readily than Chinese. Whether their stories
should be believed or not (almost all probably have happened in China at some point), the “anti-China” Chinese Christian is a real, if small, segment of the mainland Church, and a tragic one. If they are right about the continuing extent of corruption in the TSPM, the implications are terrifying. If, as I suspect, these anti-government underground Christians are often more paranoid than they need be, they are nonetheless victims of a corrupt anti-Christian government that has wounded many and cannot now win back the trust of all its people.

A stronger and more influential anti-government Chinese Christian narrative comes largely out of the diaspora community, but seems to have a following in the mainland as well. Best discussed with reference to dissident exile Yuan Zhiming’s widely circulated 1990s video series China’s Confession (Shenzhou, 神州), a meta-narrative interpretation of Chinese history that condemns China’s leaders, from Imperial China to today, and removes the CCP from participation in the Chinese Christian identity. The underlying plot of the narrative has much earlier roots, but the contemporary manifestation authored by Yuan is the best-known and most recent formulation, and the attention it has garnered in the U.S. and in China makes it the most relevant version for our purposes here.

Yuan Zhiming became famous in mainland China in the mid-‘80s as one of the writers of the controversial River Elegy (河殇), a television series that used “the symbols of China to launch an attack on the actual state of the nation.” Ian Buruma notes that “China in the 1980s was going through a fashionable wave of cultural self-criticism”—in literature we saw this trend in the Scar Literature and Root Searching movements—so “the timing was right.” To Yuan and his culture-critic colleagues, the Great Wall
became a symbol of “inward-looking, closed, authoritarian xenophobia,” and the dragon “a token of power worship and totalitarian failure.” The Yellow River that we saw at the center of some Root Searching literature was also at the center of River Elegy, but here it was transformed into a metaphor for “a sluggish, unchanging history, interrupted only by ghastly convulsions.” These symbols of China’s failings were daringly contrasted with images of the prosperous West, the message being the same as that of the Modern Era reformers almost a hundred years earlier: “That is where China should be. Why are we not there yet? What is this Chinese sickness that holds us back?”

Yuan Zhiming left China just before June 4, 1989, when River Elegy was being condemned for its inflammatory messages. He became a Christian in the U.S. and followed up River Elegy with China’s Confession, a video series that puts a Christian spin on many of the same concepts of the earlier series. The Chinese title of China’s Confession, Shenzhou, is an ancient poetic name for China that can be translated as “Divine Land” or “God’s Land.” As this title implies, the meta-narrative draws from familiar Christian speculations about early Chinese monotheism and China’s ancient sages as pre-Christian prophetic voices. The most famous of the early wise philosophers, the story goes, like Plato and Virgil in some Western Christian narratives of history, were monotheistic and God’s truth had been revealed, however imperfectly, to them. They were the “witnesses” to Christian truth in Chinese culture over the centuries. (Yuan has also recently published a Christian interpretation of Laozi’s Daodejing, called Laozi vs. the Bible: A Meeting Across Time and Space.) However, the narrative continues, when the dragon—an Imperial symbol in China and a symbol of demonic forces in Christian mythology—came into China, that truth was perverted and subsumed under a reign of
chaos and evil stretching from early Imperial China all the way to today, when we find China still suffering under the new “dragons” of the twentieth century and beyond.

Both series, but the explicitly Christian *Shenzhou* in particular, fall neatly into the anti-CCP/pro-Western mold of many American narratives. Yuan Zhiming has openly confessed this bias in conversation with Buruma: “He listed four types of Chinese reformers. Some like the Western lifestyle, he said, but not the system. Some like the economic system but not the politics. [. . .] Some, he went on, like everything about the West except religion. And some embrace everything, including religion. He himself was of the last persuasion.”14 Though his first priority, Yuan says, is to change China spiritually, he admits also that he wishes “to change China politically.”15 Now a Christian evangelist and a popular speaker at Chinese Christian churches all over the U.S.,16 Yuan Zhiming has spread his message in person and through his videos, which are shown to their members by many overseas Chinese Christian congregations.

The ideas are neither new nor are they uncontroversial. The question of the symbolic significance of the Chinese dragon has been asked and argued over by Chinese Christians and Western missionaries since the beginning of Christian missions in China.17 Neither are Yuan’s pro-Western ideas intended strictly for an American or Chinese-American audience. I myself never saw *Shenzhou* for sale in China, but I heard it was making the rounds of the house churches. Aikman confirms this rumor in his 2003 study,18 but I had an even earlier and more reliable source to inform me that the series was being watched in the mainland and that the official Chinese church viewed it as an unfriendly and/or dangerous film. On Sunday morning September 2, 2001, before she preached her sermon, Pastor Liu Liming of the Haidian Church advised our congregation
to avoid *Shenzhou*. Another TSPM pastor friend I talked with about this announcement agreed with Pastor Liu that the series was no good, but thought the Church should not make such an issue of it. This public opposition by the Church to *Shenzhou* suggests perhaps a rather larger grassroots audience for anti-CCP Chinese Christian narratives than I have so far allowed and also suggests there exists a slightly closer relationship between the government and the Christian Church leadership in China than the TSPM would like us to believe.

The vast house church population of China is the real wild card in this matter. There is clearly openness in many house churches to foreign support in the form of Bible donations or teachers or other Christian resources, but despite evidence of *Shenzhou*’s appeal to the “underground” church and even to congregants at TSPM churches, Raymond Fung’s early ‘80s claim about the underlying patriotism of Chinese Christians, even in most house churches, seems to remain essentially accurate. Aikman provides current evidence that this is so. In 1998 a group of sixteen house-church leaders from across Henan and Anhui provinces convened and claimed to speak for the 80-million-strong “House Church” of China, by virtue of numbers alone calling itself the “main stream of Christianity in China.”¹⁹ They drafted a “Confession of Faith” and a statement of the “Attitude of Chinese House Churches Toward the Government, Its Religious Policy, and the Three Self Movement.”²⁰ Though they are critical of the government’s handling of the house churches and of the TSPM alliance with the government, the latter document begins with these words: “1) We love the Lord, the Chinese people, and the state; we support the unity of the nation and the unity of the peoples. 2) We support the constitution of the People’s Republic of China and the leaders and the government of the
people that God established.”21 Whether a Chinese Christian is in the “House Church” or the “Three Self Church,” it is this latter statement, and not the pro-U.S./anti-CCP narratives, that is the mainstream of Chinese Christian thought.

**Apolitical Chinese Christian Nationalism**

Even when the “national faith” of legal Chinese Christianity is completely or nearly completely divorced from the politics of the CCP, it can hardly be separated from Chinese nationalism. It may be catholic in the sense of universal, and it may avoid complicity in cynical Party definitions of Chineseness, but the Chinese Church is almost always particularly and proudly Chinese. This means the Chinese Church sees itself as special, unique, and (though Chinese Christians may insist to the contrary) these claims of “specialness” to the outsider may often feel like claims of superiority.22 The American Church has its self-centered narratives of history in which the U.S. is at the center of God’s narrative of Christian history. The Chinese Church has a similar canon of stories that arrange the Chinese past, present, and future in the context of a Christian narrative: God has been with China from the beginning; God is caring for China now; God is preparing China to be at the center of the great work of the future.

We have seen how the historical narrative described in *Shenzhou* and also propounded by many Western missionaries provides China with prehistoric (Sino-) Christian roots. God and His Truth have always been in China; how could it be otherwise? Foreign indigenizers, from the Nestorians and the Jesuits forward, have tried to show the correspondences between Biblical morality and Chinese morality, between Biblical expressions of the Divine and Chinese religious writings. This work has changed
in that now it is more firmly in Chinese hands, but it continues apace. Yang Fenggang describes how many Chinese-American Christians see their faith as a way to fight the contemporary deterioration of morals both in the U.S. and in mainland China. In China, they realize, the twentieth century has destroyed the basis for a reinvestment in traditional values; many are particularly concerned with the loss of traditional Confucian iterations of family values. They see Christianity in part as a solid foundation for a reestablishment of these values, a system by which their children can be taught the respect and obedience, for example, that they were taught as children or wish they had been taught. \(^{23}\) A scholar in the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences has discovered the same phenomenon in the mainland Chinese Church. He provides examples from his research to show that “the greatest influence of Christianity is on family relations,” and he mentions in his description of the churches he visited, “the most frequent sermon topic is filial piety.” \(^{24}\)

Like the sages of old, twentieth-century Chinese history is also subject to “re-reading” by Chinese Christians. Yang describes how the Communist years were a time of trial, but also in many Christians’ eyes a true liberation, a freeing of the Chinese Church to define itself and discover its place in God’s narrative directly, without the mediation of the foreign church. \(^{25}\) At the individual level, it is not uncommon to hear Christians describe certain aspects of their new Christian faith by analogy to their Cultural Revolution days of Maoist fervor. Pastor Qi told me how he was instructing one older woman about how to pray and read the Bible every day. The woman seemed to have trouble understanding exactly what to do at first, but eventually her face brightened and she said, “During the Cultural Revolution I used to memorize passages out of Mao’s *Collected Sayings* every night, and I would talk to the Chairman before I went to sleep.
This is just like that.” Pastor Qi tried to tweak the comparison, I would guess, but overall he seemed satisfied that the comparison was helpful to this new believer and would start her off on the right track. One of the testimonies in Fung’s collection is titled “When Can We Have a Christian ‘Long March’?” referring to the famous Communist retreat in 1935-1936 that paved the way for eventual victory in China’s civil war. The testimony ends like this:

I believe I am a better Christian now. I need God’s presence and I know Jesus is with me. But my personal problems bother me. There is no future. Every day is the same. I have so little to look forward to. I at least have my fellow Christians to turn to, a place where I pray and sing and let God’s words flow over me. But it is not just for me. There are these millions of my generation. When I think of myself, I think of them. When can we have another “long march”, hard and poor, but going together, sharing things together, not just serving people’s dollars? Do you know if there is really such a thing as a Christian marching song?26

What he is after is what most Christians in the U.S. would call a “revival.” This fuller and more real and exciting sort of faith he can describe only according to the “secular-religious” fervor that China has witnessed in the twentieth century. The Chinese Church tells its Chinese stories with an eye ever toward the Christian meta-narrative, a meta-narrative that presumes a Providence that must have had a plan for China from the beginning and that can bring good even out of the suffering of the past two centuries.

The Chinese Christian narrative also places itself ahead of the U.S. Church in that it considers itself to exist in a more evolved state, owing to the CCC/TSPM alliance against Western imperialism: as we read in Pastor Qi’s sermon at the beginning of this chapter, while the foreign Christian churches are beset with division, the Chinese Church is seen as unified and “postdenominational.” The claim to unity and the self-proclaimed postdenominational title is in one sense as fatuous as the “one-China” policy—the PRC,
Taiwan, and the U.S. can all pretend we agree that there is only “one China and that
Taiwan is part of China,” and the illusion of harmony will persist as long as no one brings
up sovereignty. In the same way, in the Chinese Church we find all sorts of divisions
between house churches and registered churches, as well as within each group—Pastor
Qi describes how every church teaches the same things under the leadership of the
TSPM, while at the same time the various house-church leaders are writing a “united
appeal” that claims “The House Church represents the main stream of Christianity in
China” and “The Chinese House Church is the channel through which God’s blessings
come to China.”

On the other hand, even within the contradiction between the official church
statements and the house church statements, we can see the importance of uniformity, of
monism, to both sides. Chinese Christianity does, almost across the board, take pride in
its relative uniformity in comparison to the Christianity of the U.S. We might expect to
hear this from an official church pastor like Pastor Qi, particularly in the anti-imperialist
mood of that week in 1999. We would certainly expect such sentiments from TSPM head
Bishop Ting, who does indeed frequently and proudly trumpet, “We Chinese Christians
have chosen the road of postdenominational unity, not because we are better than anyone
else, but because of our own particular historical situation. In retrospect, we can only say
that this has been a result of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who has allowed us to bathe
in the ocean of God’s grace.” (Note again the reshaping of Chinese history according to
a narrative of God’s Providence.) But we also see evidence of imperfect but real
cooperation going on between different Protestant traditions under the aegis of the TSPM
churches. We have already mentioned Pastor Qi’s and other pastors’ practice of sharing
TSPM church space with house-church groups. Fung’s collection of testimonies is full of examples of denominational blending. In one story a Seventh-Day Adventist church willingly folds itself into the local TSPM:

There is no more Adventist Church. There is the Adventist tradition. But it is one church. When we first got the invitation, some of us were fairly apprehensive. Memories die hard. But as we began seeking the view of the home groups, it was obvious that most were in favour of working with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Practically speaking, we are already holding public worship and hymn singing. I don’t think we could have come to this understanding had it not been for what we and all the other Christians went through in the past twenty years.

Again we hear the narrative of Communist history shaped according to a meta-narrative of Providential provision. The persecutions by the government, ironically, become part of God’s guidance toward compromise with the new, supposedly reformed, government bodies. MacInnis includes an interview with some pastors in Fujian Province who describe all the different groups that meet in their building:

Surprised at the casual reference to denominations, I asked if, indeed, denominations still exist, despite the fact that they had been officially abolished years earlier. “Yes and no,” was the reply. “We all belong to one church here, use the same building and contribute for its support, and send our young people to the same seminaries for training. But denominational loyalties live on in the people’s hearts, and the True Jesus members have always worshipped on Saturday instead of Sunday. So we have worked out a modus vivendi. We practice mutual respect.”

Furthermore, Yang Fenggang argues convincingly that this postdenominational phenomenon might be cultural or even racial in some sense:

In 1986 some Chinese Christian leaders in the United States embarked on a debate about denominationalism. Some well-known Chinese Christian leaders criticized misconceptions that Chinese Christians held on denominationalism. They urged Chinese churches to join American denominations in order to avoid unsettling experimentation in church polity as well as to achieve assistance in personnel and material resources. However, most responding articles rejected denominationalism, contending that the theological, liturgical, and organizational differences
of various denominations confused more than attracted people. Some articles blamed denominational competition for the failure of Christian missions in China. They saw no need for Chinese Christians to rely on American denominations for assistance in material and personnel resources and insisted that Chinese Christians should take up the responsibility for supporting and nurturing their own churches. [...] Moreover, they saw denominationalism as unbiblical and as contradictory to unity in Christ.  

Yang makes the point earlier that “Ethnicity or national origin is one of the main sources for denominationalism in the United States.” Drawing the inference back to mainland China, this suggests that Chinese postdenominationalism has much to do with the common Chinese construction of a unified racial Chineseness. It is as difficult for Chinese Christians to imagine splits in the Chinese Church as it is to imagine divisions in the Chinese people or the Chinese nation. This has implications clearly not only for how Chinese Christians might identify with the CCP, but also for Chinese Christian opinion on issues like reunification with Taiwan. The nationalist myth of a unified, monolithic, and historically continuous Chinese nation and race, as debatable as some of those claims may be, has a strong shaping influence on the Chinese Christian narrative of history.  

In this interplay between nationalist narratives and Christian narratives, the Christian faith allows Chinese Christians to reclaim some of the traditional Chinese pride that has been lost since the nineteenth century, and Chinese nationalism since the nineteenth century allows Chinese Christians to narrate themselves into the center of God’s plans for the coming days. Just as the slaves in the antebellum U.S. found their own portrait in the Israelite slaves, and just as the American Church in general has claimed “chosen nation” status for the U.S. in the past two centuries, the Chinese Church translates preexistent Chinese nationalist ideas of specialness and particularity into Christian ideas of the Chinese Church as God’s chosen people. We saw already how the
Back to Jerusalem narrative in the Chinese Church envisions Chinese missionaries completing the circuit of the Gospel of Christ around the globe and bringing it “back to Jerusalem” where the Christian Church was launched. According to this eschatology, it is the Chinese Church that will be responsible for the final missionary movement that will lead to the return of Christ to this earth. Yang describes another similar narrative of China’s domination of world Christianity, this one based not on a geographical narrative of East-to-West movement, but rather on China’s enormous population and the ubiquity of Chinese people around the globe since the various diasporas: 1949, 1989, and 1997 (from Hong Kong). The slogan of this movement is “Reaching the Chinese to reach the world.”\(^{33}\) The idea is to focus on first converting Chinese people, who will then be able to serve as natural missionaries throughout the world, many without even needing to travel far beyond their doorstep.

The diaspora analogy to God’s original “chosen people” is not lost on Yang or on Chinese Christians in general who, like most Christians, are not shy about comparisons with the Jewish narratives. Fung’s collection ends with a 1980 “Open Letter” from the TSPM to the Christian Church in China. The letter comes out of an early Reform Era meeting that did much of the initial work of reopening the Church. The participants begin by comparing their meeting to the first major convocation of the early Jewish Christian Church recorded in Acts 15.\(^ {34}\) This is a part of the Christian tradition, of course, reinterpreting Hebrew scriptures to apply them to gentiles, but Yang suggests that the Chinese Christian comparison of itself to the Jews is more extreme in its identification and perhaps its separatism than the common Christian analogies. Yang also explains the Chinese use of the words “waiguo” (“外国”) and “waiguoren” (“外国人”), usually
translated as “foreign” and “foreigner,” but the English words are distinct in usage from the Chinese terms in a very important way. Whereas the English word “foreigner” changes depending on the speaker’s location—a Spaniard is a “foreigner” when the speaker is in the U.S., but an American speaker becomes the “foreigner” when in Spain—the Chinese term “waiguoren” is constant regardless of location. I, an American, will always be a “waiguoren” to my Chinese students, even if we meet at a conference in Chicago. That is, as Yang puts it,

Apparently, many Chinese people use the word *waiguoren* very much like the word *gentile* is used by Jews. It is a word to distinguish non-Chinese from Chinese, without necessarily any connotation of the modern nation-state (guo). The boundary is an ethnic or racial one, not a political one. This word is another evidence of the strong ethnic Chinese identity.\(^{35}\)

This strong ethnic identity behind Chinese Christian narratives is not so monolithic in the corresponding American narratives. The U.S. has strong national myths that can perform similar molding actions on its narratives and meta-narratives, but the Chineseness of the Chinese Church is significantly different and foreign to Americans in this regard.

Bishop Ting in an interview once said, “Observant China visitors know the Church in China is predominantly evangelical in nature and spirit. At the same time, to be evangelical in China is not to be anti-Three Self or anti-Socialist. We urge evangelicals and others abroad to grasp this uniqueness of China’s religious people.”\(^{36}\) Bishop Ting does not speak for all Chinese Christians, but these words of his, which would sound like rank contradiction to many American Evangelical Christians, are clearly more comprehensible and compatible in the ears of Chinese Christians as a whole. Raymond Fung’s claim that the Chinese Church speaks with “one voice” may be an exaggeration,
but the Chinese Christian voice is far more unified than the many narratives of division,
East or West, make it out to be.
Notes


3 Jonathan Spence reprints a photograph of one of these posters in *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990); photos follow p. 740.

4 Sermon quotes from the Haidian Church come from transcripts of sermons printed in the following week’s Sunday church bulletin called “True Light” (真光) or published in a sermon compilation book of the same title. Most transcripts can also be found online at <www.hdchurch.net/>. 齐铁英, “脱离那恶者,” 真光 81 (1999) 4. [Qi Tieying, “Protect Them from the Evil One,” *True Light* 81 (1999) 4.]


6 Yang 164.


8 Fung 64.

9 Fung 66.


12 Buruma 47.

13 Buruma 47.

14 Buruma 50.

15 Buruma 44.

16 Yang 157-58.

17 Yang 146-47.


19 Aikman 294.

20 Aikman 303-07.

21 Aikman 303.


23 Yang 51.


25 Yang 178-89.

26 Fung 73.

27 Aikman 294.

29 Fung 16.

30 Donald MacInnis, “An Interview with Pastors Zheng Yupei and Huang Jinghua at the Putian Protestant Church, Fujian Province,” in MacInnis 334-35.

31 Yang 63.

32 Yang 29.

33 Yang 174.

34 Fung 79.

35 Yang 176.

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