

TEACHING THE HISTORY OF CHINESE CHRISTIANITY: SOME PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

Beginning in the sixteenth century, European Catholic orders, including Jesuits, Franciscans, and Dominicans, introduced Christianity and established mission outposts in China. Protestant missionary societies arrived in the middle of the nineteenth century. Despite the Eurocentric view of Christianity conveyed by Western missionaries, many Chinese believers successfully recruited converts, built churches, and integrated Christianity with traditional values, customs, and social structure. This pattern of Chinese church growth represents a large-scale religious development comparable in importance to the growth of Catholicism, Protestantism, and orthodoxy Christianity in continental Europe, the rise of Islam, and the Buddhist transformation of East Asia. The story of the Chinese church is an important chapter of the global history of cross-cultural interactions. The knowledge and insights gained from the China story throw light on the emergence of Christianity as a fast-growing religious movement in the non-Western world.

Some important questions arise for history teachers: How can we teach the history of Chinese Christianity, especially the transmission, acceptance, and appropriation of the Christian message in a Chinese context? How can we make the subject matter relevant to the discussion of Christian movements in contemporary China and of cross-cultural dialogues in the twenty-first century? What pedagogies should we use to contribute to a critical understanding of Christianity as an integral part of modern Chinese history and a fundamental aspect of human experience without teaching from a religious or ideological bias? How can we apply some of the pedagogies into a Chinese or Asian history survey and a World Civilizations survey? This article addresses these questions and looks at some pedagogical issues that arise from teaching the history of Chinese Christianity at the college and university level in the United States.

Over the last few years, I have drawn on research and fieldwork experience to teach an upper-level history course called "Bible and Gun: Christianity in China" at Pace University in New York City. This course presents an historical overview of the development of Christianity in China from 1500 to the present. Pace University has a diverse student body. The students take this course for different reasons. Some students are curious about any subjects related to China. Some students want to compare the development of Chinese Christianity with the Church in the West. Students from Russian Orthodox, Hispanic Catholic, Asian-American Protestant, and African-American Pentecostal backgrounds express strong interest in the religious experience of the Chinese church. Students majoring in political science, religious

studies, sociology, and anthropology are interested in church-state relations, human rights, and religious freedom in contemporary China. The students' intellectual concerns generate many interesting questions for discussion in each class session.

Beginning with a discussion of academic objectives and content of this course on Chinese Christianity, this article examines the use of historical games in teaching American college students about Christian missionary experiences abroad, the dynamics of Sino-Christian cultural interactions, and the indigenization of Christianity in modern China. As I argue elsewhere, historical games can be used as an interactive and reflective pedagogy in courses with international, cross-cultural, and comparative foci.¹ These innovative games are set in a particular political and social setting. Students are assigned specific roles and tasks informed by primary sources. By incorporating these materials into historical games, this course enables students to relive the past and gain personal perspectives on controversial topics such as the Rites Controversy in early Catholic missionary movements in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, the Protestant missionaries' reaction to the Opium War (1839-1842), the Taiping Movement (1850-1864), and the outbreak of the Boxer Uprising (1900). This style of pedagogy not only arouses students' interest in learning the development of Christianity in China, but it also makes them aware of the similarity of these problems elsewhere around the globe. Instead of subscribing to a deterministic view of history, students recognize that all events are unique. Contingency is a major principle of all historical interpretations. Whatever happens in the past is not random, but it is contingent on multiple factors, including the vagaries of individual acts. It is the historian's job to place the relevant factors into focus.

Why Teach a Course on Christianity in China?

This undergraduate course on the history of Chinese Christianity examines the internal and external factors that shaped Chinese responses to this world religion. It shifts the focus of attention from the role of Western missionaries in China to the study of Chinese participants in order to explore what Clifford Geertz calls "a native point of view" in the history of Sino-Christian interaction.² This reflects a new awareness of the experience of Chinese Christians and the development of Christian communities in

¹Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Teaching Nonviolence in Times of War," *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9:2 (Summer 2005), 240-245.

²Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 55.

the local society.³ Major topics include the early history of Nestorian Christianity, the Jesuit mission and the Rites Controversy, foreign imperialism and anti-Christian violence in late nineteenth-century China, the emergence of Chinese Christian villages in the interior, the Christian involvement in rebellions and revolutions, and the church and state in the post-1949 era. After completing this course, students will gain a greater awareness of the cultural interactions between Christianity and China since 1500.

The course usually has twenty students per semester and the class meets for three hours a week. Each week, the class focuses on a particular historical topic. Students are required to finish weekly reading assignments and post questions and comments on Blackboard before coming to class. Besides submitting two research papers and completing the mid-term and final examinations, students should participate in classroom debates and presentations on selected topics.

The assigned readings for this course include historical narratives, scholarly articles, and English translations of Chinese primary sources. The key text is Daniel H. Bays' *History of Christianity in China*, which consists of many critical studies of the Chinese encounter with Catholicism and Protestantism and the experience of native believers in the local society.⁴ The latest studies by David E. Mungello and Lars Peter Laamann throw light on the Chinese interaction with Catholicism at the intellectual and the popular levels. Both Mungello and Laamann bring to life the human experience of European Catholic missionaries operating in the interior before and after the Rites Controversy. They reveal the sense of loss and isolation, the problems of poverty, intra-mission disputes, interdenominational conflicts, and the worldly temptations facing missionaries on the ground. Because missionaries were totally dependent on their Chinese converts, Catholicism became assimilated into the local culture prior to the arrival of Western imperialism in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁵

In addition, the English translation of *100 Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645-1941)* compiled by the Ricci Institute at the University of San

³Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860-1900* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Testing Missionary Archives against Congregational Histories: Mapping Christian Communities in South China," *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, 32:4 (2003), 361-377.

⁴Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁵David E. Mungello, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), and *The Spirit and the Flesh of Shandong, 1650-1785* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001). See also Lars Peter Laamann, *Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China: Christian Inculturation and State Control, 1720-1850* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).

Francisco is a useful source book.⁶ The Rites Controversy revealed major disagreement among Roman Catholic missionaries on how Catholicism should relate to traditional Chinese rites for honoring ancestors and their ancient philosopher, Confucius, and what appropriate Chinese terms should be used to refer to the Christian God. Because the Pope had a final say in the debates, the Jesuits, Dominicans, Augustinians, Franciscans, and members of the Paris Foreign Mission Society fought for approval from Rome for their respective mission policies to the Rites Controversy. The controversy makes a fascinating study of the Sino-Western encounter. It highlights the major philosophical differences between Western Christendom and Chinese Empire, and reveals the intense rivalries between different Catholic missionary societies and their relations with the Vatican.

Students consult scholarly studies of Catholic and Protestant missionary societies to understand the operations of Western missionary enterprises in China and their contributions to China's modernization and nation-building efforts.⁷ Students always praise Jonathan D. Spence's acclaimed study of the Taiping leader, *God's Chinese Son*, for its lucid and colorful account of Hong Xiuquan's conversion experience, his theology, and his political campaign.⁸ An in-depth study of church-state relations in post-1949 China appears in works by Eriberto Patrick Lozada, Richard Madsen, David Aikman, and Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin.⁹ Furthermore, biographies by

⁶Ray R. Noll, ed., and Donald F. St. Sure, trans., *100 Roman Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645-1941)* (San Francisco: The Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, University of San Francisco, 1992).

⁷Alvyn J. Austin, *Saving China: Canadian Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1888-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), and *China's Missions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832-1905* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 2007), Suzanne Wilson Barnett and John King Fairbank, eds., *Christianity in China: Early Protestant Missionary Writings* (Cambridge: Committee on American-East Asian Relations of the Department of History, Harvard University, 1985), Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), Jessie G. Lutz and Rolland Ray Lutz, *Hakka Chinese Confront Protestant Christianity, 1850-1900* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), Kathleen L. Lodwick, *Crusaders against Opium: Protestant Missionaries in China, 1874-1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), Oi-Ki Ling, *The Changing Role of the British Protestant Missionaries in China, 1945-1952* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), Murray A. Rubinstein, *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan: Mission, Seminary and Church* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), Jean-Paul Wiest, *Maryknoll in China: A History, 1918-1955* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1988).

⁸Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996).

⁹Eriberto Patrick Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Process in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

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Bernard Wang, David Lin, and Robert Huang add a personal dimension to the study of religion and politics in the Maoist era.¹⁰ These books and relevant journal articles are the reference materials for the course.

Pedagogically, an undergraduate course about the history of Chinese Christianity introduces students to basic research skills and provides them with sufficient knowledge to understand a subject that is largely unfamiliar to them. For example, it challenges students to examine critically the nature of Christian missionary expansion into China and missionaries' relations with both Chinese and Western secular authorities. It also helps them explore the Chinese reaction to Christianity, especially the phenomenon of mass conversions and the creation of Christian villages, the Taiping Movement, and the Christians' participation in nation-building in the twentieth century.

Thematically, this course seeks to address several goals. The first goal is to help students develop a China-centered rather than a mission-centered perspective when looking at Western missionary experiences in China. By a critical reading of scholarly publications on the history of Chinese Christianity and some selected missionaries' writings, I remind students that Catholic and Protestant missionaries working in China never acted in a social and cultural vacuum. Whatever they did and said was a reaction to the problems and issues that they encountered in the local society and politics. When studying the scholarly texts and primary sources, I often ask students to look at the Chinese side of the story. For example, it is important to look at the translated writings by Chinese believers in order to understand why many native converts saw Christianity as an escape from a society deep in crisis and as a way to achieve moral cultivation and harmony between man and heaven.

Another example of interplay between Christianity and Chinese traditions occurred in the context of mid-nineteenth-century South China where Hong Xiuquan, inspired by a Christian tract, proclaimed himself the Chinese son of God and the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He preached about the coming of his Father's Kingdom and founded the Society of God Worshippers, a mass movement that quickly developed into a political and military force against the Manchu dynasty. Hong and his followers defeated the imperial armies and founded a new government in Nanjing

⁹(...continued)

1998); David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003), Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin, eds., *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

¹⁰Claudia Devaux and George Bernard Wong, *Bamboo Swaying in the Wind: A Survivor's Story of Faith and Imprisonment in Communist China* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), David Lin, *China Letters: A Collection of Essays* (Rapidan, VA: Hartland Publications, 1993), Stanley M. Maxwell and Robert Huang, *Prisoner for Christ: How God Sustained Pastor Huang in a Shanghai Prison* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2004).

known as the Taiping Tianguo (or the Heavenly Kingdom of Everlasting Peace). While Anglo-American missionaries stressed individual salvation from sin, Hong Xiuquan was concerned with the national salvation of China. As with other Confucian literati, Hong was looking for the "Original Way" (*yuandao*). His understanding of Christianity derived from his knowledge of Chinese classics. When he first saw the translated term *Shangdi* (the Heavenly Lord) in the Bible, he thought of the reference to *Shangdi* in one of the ancient Chinese texts, *Shujing*, (*The Book of History*). By Christianizing the Chinese concept of *Shangdi*, Hong rejected the legitimacy of the imperial Chinese institution and condemned the imperial emperors as blasphemous rulers. It is against this theological background that iconoclasm permeated the Taiping Movement. Smashing idols and rebelling against blasphemous rulers were two sides of the same coin in the Taiping crusade.¹¹

The Taiping leaders were also committed to economic equality and social justice. They took over China's economic heartland from 1853 to 1864. They propagated the universal brotherhood and sisterhood under one true and only God. They banned opium smoking, foot-binding, prostitution, and alcoholism. Women were to be treated as equals of men and were to be permitted to hold office, fight in the army, and take government examinations. Civil service examinations were based on Christian rather than Confucian principles. More remarkable was Taiping land reform that divided all land among families of the Taiping Christians and their supporters according to family size with men and women receiving equal shares. However, factional struggles among the leaders and lack of support from the West undermined the Taiping domination of central China. On July 19, 1864, imperial troops stormed into Nanjing and crashed the Taiping headquarters. Subsequently, Manchu rulers effaced all memory of the Taiping Christians. In similar fashion, foreign missionaries refused to acknowledge Hong's efforts to integrate Christianity with Chinese culture. Instead most missionaries associated the Christian faith with the military power of the West. Their obsession with the Bible and the gun betrayed Hong Xiuquan's efforts to transform Christianity into a driving force of national and cultural liberation in China. Though the Taiping Movement ended in failure, it represented a new form of political mobilization and religious integration in late imperial China. The study of the Taiping Movement challenges students to understand the endogenous and exogenous forces that shaped the political and social functions of Christianity in a specific context.

On the other hand, we should not overlook the positive impact that European and American missionaries had on Chinese society. The best example can be seen in the role that Protestant missionaries played in establishing the International Safety Zone and rescuing large numbers of civilians during the "Rape of Nanking" in December 1937. The publication of the missionaries' correspondence about this tragic event

¹¹Thomas H. Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and Blasphemy of Empire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

throws light on the complexities of religion and politics in wartime China.¹² On the controversial subject of church-state relations in Maoist China, I urge students to go beyond the conventional discourse in the West of religious persecution in order to see how the Communist religious policies were, in fact, an integral part of the nation-building process. I refer to the stories of Y.T. Wu (Wu Yuzong), Watchman Nee, and Wang Mingdao in discussing the strategies that some Catholic and Protestant leaders developed to engage with the socialist state after 1949.¹³

The second goal of this course is to acknowledge the active agency of Chinese believers in their religious transformation and the important role that they played in the establishment of Christian communities and in the spread of religious values within and between generations. Christianity became far more indigenous in modern China than has been acknowledged in the scholarly literature and mass media. What contributed to its success was the ongoing process of indigenization (how Christianity became integrated into local society and culture), localization (how the Church was created as a territorial body at the local level), and networking effect (how the religious message was passed from individual to individual, family to family, and village to village). Chinese Christians never kept their faith to themselves but took the gospel message to others and planted large numbers of churches. They played an active role in advancing Christian interests and transforming the church into a native institution at their home villages. They did not run the church according to some rigid regulations imposed by foreign missionaries. Instead, they skillfully combined the Western church model with the Chinese kinship, village, and lineage networks to construct their congregations. Their creativity and efforts earned them the reputation of cultural pioneers at the crossroads of East and West. Only by looking at the lives of these humble believers can we acquire a better understanding of the impact of Christianity in China.

The third goal is to acknowledge the conversion experience of Chinese believers and the ongoing development of Christian communities. Current scholarly interest in the dynamics of Chinese Christianity, responding to church growth in post-Mao China, recognizes Christian communities as an important site of Sino-Christian interaction. Coming from marginal sectors of society, rural Christians believed that this new religion would enable them to rely on foreign missionary resources and secular authorities for protection. They believed that their conversions would provide

¹²Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), Zhang Kaiyuan, ed., *Eyewitness to Massacre: American Missionaries Bear Witness to Japanese Atrocities in Nanjing* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), Timothy Brooks, ed., *Documents on the Rape of Nanking* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

¹³Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bazos Press, 2002), Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, 74:1 (March 2005), 68-96.

advantages in the competitive arena of local politics. Their continued adherence to the Christian faith and their efforts to integrate Christianity into local society highlight the importance of native evangelistic movements as part of traditional religious diversities in rural China.

The China-centered dimension places Chinese Christians and their interactions with foreign missionaries at the center of discussion. This fosters an outlook of cultural sensitivity and global interdependence and creates a participatory and shared intellectual environment between students and teacher. It enables students to situate the development of the Church within the wider contexts of internal and external conflicts within China from the past to the present. Second, it promotes a multicultural understanding of the history of Chinese Christianity and it makes a significant contribution to East-West dialogue, showing that the core values of Christian, Buddhist, and Confucian civilizations—decency, civility, concern for public good, idealism, and critical thinking—are as important concerns for Christians in the past as for us today. It indicates that the interactions among different civilizations is not always a “clash,” as Samuel P. Huntington has argued, but an entanglement whose inspirations are worth exploring and whose mutual developments are worth promoting.¹⁴ Therefore, students do not just engage in an active dialogue with the minds of the past. They also develop a more sophisticated understanding of the world as opposed to a simplistic division of the globe into mutually exclusive and hostile civilizations. In fact, instructors can integrate some of the topics on the history of Chinese Christianity into an Asian or Chinese history survey and a World Civilizations survey. For example, we can ask students to compare the revolutionary ideas, mobilizing tactics, and political outcomes between Hong Xiuquan’s Taiping Movement and Mao Zedong’s Communist Revolution of 1949. We also can discuss the experience and survival tactics of civilians in World War II through a study of the missionaries’ humanitarian works during the “Rape of Nanking.”

What Are the Learning Outcomes?

To further stimulate interest in the subject matter, I use some role-playing games to teach the history of Chinese Christianity. I assign students “historical roles” with “victory objectives” informed by translated missionaries’ sources. I ask them through role-playing games to debate controversial subjects such as the Rites Controversy, the Taiping Movement, and the Boxer Uprising. I divide them into teams and ask them to study the sources carefully, prepare their arguments in writing, and present their ideas in class debates. While students collaborate with each other in group discussion, they are continuously reminded in the games to present their arguments logically and

¹⁴Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (Summer 1993), 22-49.

sensibly. The preparation proves to be a difficult task, but the results meet and even exceed expectations.

This innovative pedagogy enhances the personal interaction between students and teacher in preparation for each game, the students' commitment to understanding the particular texts thoroughly in order to play the game, and their constant enthusiasm and excitement in group discussion. Drawing on student evaluations and feedback, what follows is an assessment of the strengths and limitations of their innovative pedagogy.

Most students find the games to be a challenging, stimulating, and engaging learning tool. The games draw attention to the complexity of past events through a combination of primary sources, historical role playing, and debates. In particular, the reacting nature of the games allows students to reconstruct the events such as the Taiping Movement and the Boxer Uprising. By participating in the games as if they were living in the past, students find it easier to understand the complexities that Hong Xiuquan, the Boxer soldiers, and the local Chinese Christians encountered in times of crises. As one student remarked:

[The strength of the games] ... lies in the fact that it makes you aware of the crises faced by these historical figures in China. You almost feel as if you were Hong Xiuquan or the Boxers. As a learning tool, the games make you understand these events better. It is one thing to sit there and read about the events. It is another experience when you can actually relive these events.

Thus, this interactive pedagogy results in a valuable learning experience and students often refer to these games as an exciting way of learning history. Fascinated by the whole experience, one student made the following comments:

I feel the games help me understand the events a lot better than just reading the book alone. It is a more hands-on approach and it is a lot of fun. ... The games change one's perception of history in general ... A stereotype of history often states that it is boring and all you do is sit and memorize dates, names and places. The games kill that stereotype because not only do you study history, but you actually live it out and have fun with it.

Through active involvement, students come to understand the past and develop effective interpersonal skills, which they would have otherwise had no opportunity to acquire in a traditional classroom setting.

Underlying this interactive pedagogy is a participatory learning experience between students and teacher. The ultimate goal of this cooperative and co-creative

learning process is to transform students from passive recipients into active learners. As one student recalled:

I would say that this interactive learning is my favorite. I believe people learn better when they participate rather than simply being lectured to. During these debates, my mind does not wander ... I am constantly on my toes about what is happening and this helps me remember the topics under discussion. I remember things because I want to, not because I must cram for the examination and then forget it all. ... The games provide a creative outlet for us to take part in re-acting major historical moments.

Given the competitive nature of the games, each team must be critical of the sources and evidence used by the other teams to construct their arguments. The effective use of primary sources is indeed a key to the success of the games. The primary sources take students back to the events and the mindsets of the past and arouse a sense of curiosity and imagination among students throughout the learning process.

Conclusion

This course on the history of Chinese Christianity introduces students to the narratives of Western missionaries and Chinese converts in the modern era. Their stories are wonderful examples of religious communities that used Christian resources to empower themselves and to fight for positive change. These historical experiences enable students to understand better the rapid development of Christianity in mainland China today. Instead of asking how Christianity managed to survive in China from 1949 to the present, students look at the ways in which Christianity became deeply integrated into the society and in which Chinese believers used this religion to create a new set of religious, social, and political values in the process of nation-building and modernization. Other instructors might select some of these topics for discussion in an Asian, Chinese, or World Civilizations survey.

Conceptually, it is important to address the role of contingency in history. Some students asked about the historical alternatives (i.e., events that could have happened but did not). What if the Vatican had adopted the Jesuit approach in the Rites Controversy? What if the Taiping soldiers had succeeded in creating a Chinese Christian kingdom during the mid-nineteenth century? In exploring these alternatives, students did research on other important topics such as the conflicting ideas between Jesuits and Dominicans over Chinese rituals throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the factional struggles within the Taiping Movement. One might criticize such questions as "historical fantasies," but it is a great intellectual exercise to explore the question of "what might have been" with students rather than taking history for granted. The question of "what if" in history creates a much deeper impression on the students in understanding the past. After all, history without controversy is dead history. Controversies always challenge our opinions and raise questions about the human experience in other times and places. If alternative scenarios had happened, they would have completely changed the course of world history in the late twentieth century.