

China: A Case Study in “The Second Coming of World Christianity”¹

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At the beginning of the 20th century, the Edinburgh Conference convened and was populated by delegates who were confident that the “world would be won for Christ” in their life span. We even witnessed the initiation of a new Christian periodical with the audacious title, *The Christian Century*. Though still in circulation, one would look through its pages in vain today for such optimistic (naïve) prognostications. The same would be the case for the World Council of Churches’ pronouncements, which began with great fanfare after WWII with announced intentions of forming a world body for the explicit purpose of facilitating world evangelization: *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design* (1948). Largely through the influence of two-thirds world churches that have exploded in growth in the early 21st century, the WCC is becoming increasingly evangelistic in its parlance – due to the waning influence of less missionary Western denominations and the rising influence of millions of new Christians in Central America, South America, Africa and Asia. This paper looks at China as a case study of the rise, demise, and resurrection of missional Christianity. Andrew Walls, referring to the conversion of millions in the aforementioned regions and beyond, calls this, “The Second Coming of World Christianity.” China represents a superlative case study because Christians in China are becoming so numerous that some even claim that it equals the Communist Party in membership and will eventually challenge the Communist hegemony.

¹ The expression “The Second Coming of World Christianity” was used by Andrew Wall in a public lecture at Duke. The idea for this paper has two sources – one personal and the other institutional. Prior to coming to Oxford I will have spent the better part of a week in Hong Kong, at which time I will also lecture to Christians from mainland China doing Summer Study at Chung Chi Seminary College, University of Hong Kong. The institutional reason is related to Duke Divinity School and a new faculty addition. This past year we elected Dr. Xi Lian to the post of Professor of World Christianity. Reading his scholarship was an absolute fascination for me, and I am directly dependent on his body of scholarship for all that follows. I do not claim to be original here, although the claims that I make from what I have collated are entirely my own. [Chinese custom places the surname first. So his bibliographic entry reads Lian Xi, whereas as Westerners we would address him as Xi Lian.]

The era of American Protestant foreign missions has a legendary beginning, a “grand enterprise.”² The beginnings of the enterprise are rooted in the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” that occurred at Williams College (Williamstown, Mass.) when students were seeking refuge from a rain storm. With thunder and lightning as the backdrop, it is said that the praying students committed themselves to the overseas spread of the Gospel. Later, as students at Andover Newton Seminary, these same students were instrumental in securing institutional support for foreign missions, which led to the incorporation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1810. Over the next six decades, approximately two thousand (2000) missionaries were sent abroad. The first American Protestant missionary to China, Elijah C. Bridgman, sailed in 1829.³ One could not have predicted that by the end of the 19th century the country of China would become the de facto leading recipient of North American missionary attention in the world. By 1915, there were nearly 10,000 American missionaries abroad and thousands more from Britain and Western Europe. From Western countries there were more than 3000 missionaries in China. From the USA about one in every 1,500 adult Protestants was on missionary assignment.⁴ That number went to 13,500 in 1925, when missionary enthusiasm peaked before the financial pressures of the Great Depression and cultural reactions in China

² As Emperor K'ang Hsi is quoted in Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict in Cultures*, trans. Janet Loyd (Cambridge: University Press, 1985), 136-37.

³ Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 423. See also, James A. Field Jr., “Near East Notes and Far East Queries,” in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 38. The American Board ABCFM had as its prototype the London Missionary Society, founded in 1795. Most famous perhaps among the British missionaries to China was Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), who made his first visit to China in 1851. Founder of the China Inland Mission on June 25, 1865 (Overseas Missionary Fellowship International after the Communist takeover in 1950), Taylor spent fifty-one years in China, and the China Inland Mission is purported to have brought 800 missionaries to the country, who began 125 schools and testifies to 18,000 Christian conversions as well as the establishment of more than 300 stations of work with more than 500 Chinese helpers in eighteen provinces.

⁴ James Reed, *The Missionary Mind and American East Asia Policy, 1911-1915* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1983), 13.

forced retrenchments.⁵ So comprehensive was the influence of Protestant missions in China, in 1912 after the Revolution of 1911 that overturned the Manchus (who had ruled since 1644), General Hwang Hsing, commander-in-chief of the revolutionary army, said that he would attribute the success of the Revolution “to Christianity more than to any other single cause.”⁶ In 1911, the Protestant community in China numbered just over 370,000. In 1912, some 65 percent of the republican government officials were Christians.⁷

In his insightful volume, *The Conversion of Missionaries*, Lian describes the dilemma of missionary work in the modern context, when he points to the dialectic between the expanding evangelical interest in spreading the Gospel and an “intensified economic thrust” that was inclined to opportunistically connect the two. Lian references the assertion by the Reverend Josiah Strong, Social Gospeler and general secretary of the evangelical alliance of the United States that “commerce follows the missionary,” and then adds that mission work also often followed doors opened by commerce.⁸ By 1937, as William A. Williams argued, China had emerged in the consciousness of American policymakers as “the symbol of the new frontier of America’s ideological and economic expansion.”⁹ Indeed, this assimilation of asymmetrical intentions had been previously heralded by no less than President Theodore Roosevelt, in relation to cultural and political winds of change in China: “Such a movement as this means a

⁵ Paul A. Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats: American Protestant Missionary Movement in China, 1890-1952* (Princeton: University Press, 1958) 274.

⁶ Hwang Hsing, interview with Bishop James W. Bashford of the Northern Methodist Episcopal mission after the Revolution, *China Mission Year Book, 1913* (Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, 95, appendix).

⁷ See Milton T. Stauffer, ed., *The Christian Occupation of China: A General Survey of the Numerical Strength and Geographical Distribution of the Christian Forces in China Made by the Special Committee on Survey and Occupation, China Continuation Committee 1918-1921* (Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922), 33.

⁸ Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries. Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 6.

⁹ William Appelman Williams, *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1962, 190).

shaking loose from the old superstitions which have fettered the Chinese,” clearly implying that the doors were open to import Western ideals in the Orient.¹⁰

This amalgamation is foundational to charges of colonialism in relation to American missionary endeavors. The amalgamation was, however, anathema to the likes of Hudson Taylor (himself British) and those who followed in his train. Their view of missionary work in China was much more along the comprehensive frames of reference that Lian’s scholarship outlines:

Throughout the nineteenth century, the flame of American foreign missions was kept alive by a combination of three kinds of religious-intellectual fuel: the biblical injunction “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), the conviction that America had a special and disproportionately large role in God’s saving plan for humankind, and, last, the vivid, horrid images, painted by pioneering missionaries and enlarged by their home constituencies, of millions of heathen on a lower rung of humanity perishing yearly without Christ. The impulse to pluck the brands out of the fire was irresistible. Of the three, the Great Commission entrusted by the resurrected Christ had already been incorporated into primitive Christianity. It simply helped sustain the images that evangelical Americans created of themselves and of the heathen others, inspiring missionary efforts on an unprecedentedly grand scale. They moved thousands of well-educated men and women across the oceans to lives often too harsh, dangerous, lonely, and fruitless for mortals to bear for their own sakes.¹¹

¹⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, “The Awakening of China,” in *The Outlook*, November 28, 1908, 666-67. See also Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (1958; reprint, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 532-33).

¹¹ Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries*, 7.

It is a well-known story that this missionary zeal perished along with many another ideal in the aftermath of two world wars in which missionary partners were killing each other in the trenches. As great a factor as the two world wars were, the missionizing ideal suffered and died among mainline denominations for much more subtle cultural reasons. Xi Lian has painted a graphic picture of this loss in the lives of three prominent early twentieth century American missionaries to China: Dr. Edward Hicks Hume, Frank Joseph Rawlinson, and Pearl Sydenstricker Buck: “Dr. Edward Hicks Hume, who in 1905 arrived in Changsha as a pioneer for the Yale Mission and later became the first president of Yale-in-China until his resignation in 1927; the Reverend Frank Joseph Rawlinson, who landed in Shanghai in 1902 as a Southern Baptist evangelical missionary and who later served (1914-1937) as editor-in-chief of *The Chinese Recorder*, the most influential missionary journal in China; and Pearl Buck, better known for her literary works but whose success as a writer was inseparable from her missionary beginnings. Buck was officially a Presbyterian educational missionary from 1914 to 1933.”¹²

We noted previously assumptions about superior American culture went hand in hand with the Gospel, and the same could be said for British and other European countries as well. Western culture was simply assumed to be superior. Lian expresses it this way: “Traditional missionary mentality had relied on a hemispheric division of the world into light and darkness, the Kingdom of God and the territory of Satan, civilization and barbarism.” When this dichotomized assumption broke down, the missionary synthesis itself dissolved. In the case of China, Hume, Rawlinson, and Buck changed their missionary strategy because they slowly came to reject the dualistic missionary dichotomy: “They began to cast doubts on their Christian missions as they developed an appreciative understanding of Chinese religions and of the culture

¹² Ibid., 11.

they had set out to displace The growing belief in the worth and self-sufficiency of China's own cultural tradition threatened those distinctions that were required for their dedication.”¹³

The twentieth century witnessed two important revolutionary moments that have played a role in defining political and religious reality in China. The Revolution of 1911 had appeared to inaugurate a golden age of China's openness to Western ideas. Christianity and republican democracy seemed destined to fill the cultural and political vacuum after the collapse of the last Chinese monarchy. Yet it soon became clear that the Chinese were more enamored by two other gods above the Christian God, namely, democracy and science. This cultural iconoclasm, set in motion by a new generation of intellectuals in the mid-1910s when they orchestrated the New Culture (New Thought) Movement, went beyond rejection of China's own traditions to include Christianity as the enemy of science. Indeed, something akin to this same sentiment was occurring in America in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. In March, 1922, the conference of the World Student Christian Federation planned at Tsing Hua (Quing Hua) College in Peking provoked a severe anti-Christian response. Reactionary literature and explosive student demonstrations in major Chinese cities continued for several years, reaching a climax with the Nanking Incident in March, 1927, when half a dozen foreigners were killed by Nationalist government soldiers. The violence led to the exodus of more than 5,000 of the 8,300 Protestant missionaries in China.¹⁴

This did not spell the end of Christian missions in China, but it did increasingly reveal the chasm between those missionaries who held to the traditional dualistic missionary world view of light and darkness and those increasingly more “liberal” missionaries who were inclined to cultural assimilation. Of course, missionary work as such came to an end with the rise of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Russell & Russel, 1967, reprint of 1st edn., 1929).

Communism and the take-over in 1949. Western Christian missionaries were forced to flee or be placed in prison. This did not mark the end of Christianity for China; indeed, it was already flourishing in many quarters without the aid of (even in spite of) missionary effort. It has been estimated that there were as many as 800,000 to 1 million Chinese Christians in China in 1949, and today the number of Christians (Evangelicals, Pentecostals, independent ‘sectarian,’ and Roman Catholics exceeds 100 million. Perhaps a more “responsible” estimate is from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (58 million Protestants and 9 million Roman Catholics - December, 2011). Precise statistics are difficult because so much of Christianity is “underground.”¹⁵ Regardless of the exact number, even a 60-fold growth in half a century is a remarkable statistic that earns the descriptor “The Second Coming of World Christianity.”

To understand how this has happened, we discern that there is a start-and-stop interplay between the planted “foreign” missionary Christian identity and the emergence of an indigenous, self-propagating Christian identity that is often tinged with nationalistic pride. In this interplay, the distinctions one often encounters between Roman Catholic and Protestant mission work is beside the point. It is Chinese Christians who are the ground force in the Christian multiplication, but it is predominantly among “Protestant types.” We mentioned previously the growth since 1949, but it is even more startling if we look at the multiplication table since 1900. In a land of 400 million there were approximately 80,000 baptized Protestant Christians at the turn of the twentieth century. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, this had multiplied well over six hundred times to more than fifty million Protestants in China, and an equal amount of “Protestant type” independent, sectarian, house church Christians. Lian asserts, “Key to this growth, as we shall see, was the transformation of Christianity during the same period from an

¹⁵ http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11971#article_page_2. The most reliable comprehensive published statistics may be found in Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, *The Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2010).

alien “faith preachedz’ presided over by Western missionaries into an indigenous religion of the masses. With a predominantly rural and lower-class membership, this homegrown Christianity has been characterized by a potent mix of evangelistic fervor, biblical literalism, charismatic ecstasies, and a fiery eschatology not infrequently tinged with nationalistic exuberance.” He goes on to make the bold prediction, “It will likely also help shape the country’s future.”¹⁶

Roman Catholic missionaries first entered China in 1245, when an Italian Franciscan was sent to the Mongol court, culminating in the appointment of the first Chinese Bishop, Luo Wenzao (Gregory Lopez), appointed by Pope Clement X in 1674. Even though the Opium War (1839-1842), and the unfavorable treaties forced on the Chinese by the British led to the expansion of Protestant missions, the eventual result was to render missionary Christianity “more foreign.”¹⁷ To the extent that missions were seen as foreign, the assimilation of Christianity was thwarted. In the final analysis, the hierarchical structure of Roman Catholicism worked against the multiplication of Roman Christianity. The practical result of this is that the number of Roman Catholic Christians in China at the beginning of the 21st century is less than one third of the independent movement, more Protestant-like groupings. Indeed, the number of groupings are too numerous to accurately designate. There are however, several prominent groupings (with variations in each) that provide a window of insight into the spectacularly explosive growth of Chinese Christianity.¹⁸ For the first half of the twentieth century, indigenous Chinese Christianity flourished alongside Western missionary Christianity. Indeed, the indigenous

¹⁶ Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire. The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁷ Li Zhigang, “*Jidujiao* ,” in *China Mission Year Book* (1912 \), 220. Hereafter cited as *CMYB*, its publishing history is a bit complicated. Also published as *The China Christian Year Book* (Shanghai: Christian Literature Society for China, 1926-1935). Volumes 1-13 were published as the *CMYB* from 1910 – 1925. Vols. 14-26 (1929-1939) were under the title *CMYB*. With regard to the “anti-foreign sentiment,” the shift from “mission” to Christian is important.

¹⁸ A close examination of these constitute the body of Lian Xi’s, *Redeemed by Fire*, and I am following his research in what follows.

movements quite often employed ‘anti missionary’ language, using the antagonistic and oppositional language to fuel the enthusiasm of their converts and followers. It is not the case, however, that indigenous Chinese Christianity thrived simply because it was anti-missionary. The differences were more than simply ones of form and structure. The phenomenology of indigenous Christianity set the groupings apart in ways that many, especially the liberal Protestant expressions, viewed as marginal in theological integrity. Lian’s comment on the way this is depicted historically is important: “In historical discourse in the Chinese language, *Jidujiao* (Christianity) is typically reserved for Protestantism, and *Tianzhujiao* (the Teaching of the Lord of Heaven) denotes Roman Catholicism. What, then, constitutes ‘popular’ Christianity? . . . I find it mostly outside denominational missions, even though its influence also spread among them. After 1949, it retained its antiestablishment predilection and thrived in opposition to the Three-Self churches . . . It captured the religious and fervor and creativity of the masses that were excluded, for the most part, from the pursuits of the elite in Chinese society.”¹⁹

We must not simply assume, however, that popular Chinese Christianity only began to flourish ‘underground’ after the Communist takeover. It began to flourish in during the early days of the establishment of the Republic of China, marked especially by the May Fourth Movement (1919), which some scholars feel is inseparable from the student demonstrations in Peking related to the Revolution of 1911 that overthrew the Manchu government and the Qing Dynasty in 1912. By the 1920s, being antiestablishment was a cultural badge of honor, and among the masses it was not unusual to set cultural identity over against the perceived “vanguard of imperialism” represented by Christianity. It is not an exaggerated generalization to suggest that indigenous preachers and sectarian leaders chose to sanctify their revolt against Western control of the Chinese church as an uprising against “spiritual decadence and evil.” Here the

¹⁹ Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 12.

rhetoric takes on increasingly eschatological tones with cosmic significance – a theological drama in which God's elect in China (not the missionaries or those who comply to their expectations!) assume a key role in the divine redemptive scheme. To the keen observer with insights honed by sociology of religion, the observation would not be lost that the indigenous movements were often characterized by ethnocentrism and nationalistic sentiments rooted in the virulent outbreaks of antiforeignism. The guilt by association with colonialism became the fueling station for the anger that produced a fresh evangelistic zeal.

It must be emphasized, however, that it was not antiforeignism or nationalism as such that fueled Chinese evangelistic zeal. It was a more a conscious and sustained messianic vision. Rooted inferentially in Christian theology, but to a great extent traditionally Chinese in temperament, popular millenarianism controlled the indigenous, largely sectarian, emerging populist strains of Christianity. One cannot speak of a homogenous movement, but rather of disparate, often competing groupings that shared the basic trait of mass eschatological religion: visions of an impending catastrophic end of the world and the redemption of the “spiritual elite” who were privy to the messianic scheme – a Chinese Christian Gnosticism. During the war-torn Republican period, when cosmic catastrophe loomed large on the horizon, independent evangelists were delivering an amalgamation of fervent collective eschatological prediction with, to borrow Norman Cohn's phrase, an “eschatology of the individual soul.”²⁰ The appeal of this eschatological proclamation did not lessen with the arrival of Communism in 1949. In recent decades, “underground” church leaders have had little difficulty fitting social and economic dislocation as well as official persecution into an apocalyptic scheme.

²⁰ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 2nd. Edn. 1961), 13.

It is not a fair analysis to reduce all of populist Chinese Christianity into the Gnostic eschatological framework. Some sectarian groups also offered a more expansive *koinonia* that included supportive communities offering mutual aid amid economic hardship and protection against persecution. Prominent in this characteristic is the “Little Flock,” which began amid revival in the 1930s, the influence of which has continued into the 21st century in the underground church – a movement that is increasingly no longer underground. Lian describes the 21st century phenomenon: “Like the earlier groups, it has generated an intimate experience of the divine and found a way to open the floodgate of celestial power, to channel its flow, to deluge the world and its evils, and to drench oneself in heavenly ecstasies as one awaits the return of the Savior.”²¹ Church historians will remind us that millenarian Christianity is not a new phenomenon, and it has typically flourished among the masses amid times of economic hardship and political persecution. This certainly fits China during the last 100 years.

Even though Western missionary efforts exploded numerically at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, the numerical proliferation of Chinese Christians has its roots at least if not more in indigenous messianic movements. An early modern example of this in the middle to latter part of the 19th century is the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Largely disavowed by mainline missionaries as well as Chinese leaders, who found its proclamation of raw supernatural power and its messianic visions distasteful if not heretical, the movement played itself out rather quickly; however, it foreshadowed the development of late 20th century sectarian Chinese Protestant groups that have proved to have lasting viability. Parallel to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, mission historians have also paid attention to the innovative opium-refuge churches in the 1880s, such as “Xi the Overcomer of Demons.” Consequential social analysis requires consideration of the thesis that even while the number of Protestant missionaries was increasing,

²¹ *Redeemed by Fire*, 15.

the number of converts was not rising proportionately because the missionaries, especially the mainline Protestants, were not fostering a Christianity rooted in Chinese culture. To be sure, there were Chinese leaders active in the establishment of the interdenominational National Christian Council of China (NCC) and the Church of Christ in China in the early 20th century; however, even the most sympathetic observer must conclude that it was mostly nominal Chinese leadership – as is reflected, for example, in the word “interdenominational.” All the denominations were fundamentally Western institutions.

The missionaries were keenly aware of their “relative failure,” and steps were taken by many denominational churches in “progressive efforts” to make Christianity relevant to the struggles of an emerging “modern China.” They made symbolic accommodations to rising nationalism and often advocated various forms of “social Christianity” to infuse Protestant spirit and values into Chinese attempts at nation-building. The results were scant and dubious at best. In startling contrast, self-proclaimed Chinese leaders of emerging, independent Protestant groups were gripped by an indefatigable, premillennial vision of the impending end of time and the Second Coming of Christ. Mainline Protestants were constitutionally incapable of such proclamation, and independent mission board missionaries were not consistent in their eschatologies – inclined to spend time arguing the finer points of dispensational theology. So, while the mainline missionaries were busy organizing councils and independent missionaries were espousing their own versions of eschatological theology, the indigenous Chinese Christians were busy “saving the world from impending doom.” The “True Jesus Church” (founded in 1917) was the first indigenous group to demonstrate durability and lasting influence. The TJC thrived on exuberant Pentecostalism, apocalyptic convictions, and quite often denunciations of missionary Christianity. This fit socially with Chinese religious sensibilities as well as with the

mounting anti-imperialist sentiments. Denounced as a pariah sect, the TJC went on to become the largest independent indigenous Chinese church during the missionary era in China, prior to the Communist takeover in 1949.

The continual political and economic upheaval in China in the first half of the 20th century assured fertile ground for apocalypticism, as is reflected in the rise of The Jesus Family, an independent mutual-aid community that formed in Shandong Province during the 1920s amid the bleak backdrop of natural disasters and a large scale breakdown of the political order. Similar to the TJC, it was energized by end-time expectations and euphoric worship. Its most distinctive feature, however, was the utopian pursuit of Christian communalism, one that found its triumph over poverty and wartime miseries in closely knit communities whose worship services were fundamentally Pentecostal ecstasies. This combination essentially characterized almost all indigenous Chinese Christianity. Rapturous worship and the quest for tight-knit communities of love that shunned the world around them is the general bent of mass Christianity in China that continued through the 20th century.

These characteristics do not change but are actually proliferated in a broader stream of revivalism that spilled across North China and Manchuria during the 1930s. This “Shandong Revival” is rooted sociologically in the hopes and fears of displaced farmers and refugees victimized by the political and economic conditions. Complete with trances, visions, tongues, and prophecies, the revival made space for indigenous expressions of religion rapture that contrasted starkly to what Harvey Cox has called the “ecstasy deficit” in mainline denominational entities.²² These populist movements also intentionally circumvented the authority and doctrinal teachings of Western missionaries and thereby catapulted lay Chinese

²² Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 86.

Christians in positions of spiritual leadership. The laitization of Chinese Christianity was a major catalyst in the emergence of indigenous Christianity in China.

The emergence of itinerate revivalist preachers is supremely typified in the emergence of Wang Mingdao – whose unflinching, fundamentalist opposition to “liberalism” in Western-controlled churches endeared him to grassroots Christians; and it played in perfect harmony with the tune of antiforeignism. Wang preached against the “fake medicine” of the Social Gospel offered by mainline missionaries who had lost confidence in the supremacy of the conversionist narrative. By contrast he proclaimed an individualistic Christianity of repentance and eschatological salvation that was perfectly attuned to the prevailing pessimism of the masses regarding their social and economic prospects, also fulfilling their craving for spiritual and moral certainty, as well as restoring to them a sense of personal dignity and worth. Even more colorful and charismatic was John Sung (Song Shangjie) – whose revivalist preaching is reputed to have led to 100,000 Chinese conversions, about 20% of the reported 500,000 Chinese Christian population in 1935. Beyond his charisma, his flair for drama, and his alleged magic of faith healing, the paroxysms of mass conversions at his revival meetings pointed to the fathomless despair and agony of missions of his compatriots caught in the tumults of war, economic upheaval, and social devastations.

As remarkable as were the ministries of Wang Mingdao and John Sung, the most prolific of all was the ministry of Ni Tuosheng – known in the West as Watchman Nee. The founder of the “Little Flock” mastered the syntax of prophecy combining myriad revelations into a coherent, complete, and majestic divine scheme of human destiny as civilization approaches its climactic grand finale, the Second Coming of Christ. Often touted as the leading Chinese theologian of the twentieth century, Nee displayed his real genius in transmitting the premillennial

dispensationalist teaching of the Plymouth Brethren (and others). In interesting contrast to his predecessor revivalists, Nee offered a religious experience in stark contrast to the sometimes orgiastic religiosity of other revivalists. He offered a more subtle if not profound, numinous union with God – achieving what Max Weber termed “apathetic ecstasy,”²³ what Lian has termed a “theology of triumph” that trumped the blight of the masses, restoring worth, dignity, and hope.²⁴

And finally, to understand the “Second Coming of World Christianity” in China, one must pay attention to the emergence of unauthorized “house churches” in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. Even as the leading indigenous sects that arose during the middle half of the twentieth century were forming loosely into a Three-Self framework (self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating), new spin-off versions of messianic Christianity were emerging at the grassroots level. In opposition the Communist interdictions, the “underground church” has exploded numerically. Thriving in the face of social dislocation and state repression, it has acquired both the official designation and the temperament of sectarian heterodoxy – demonstrating manifest potentials for ongoing and even radical mutation. Spilling the borders of both China and Western nations, these versions of “home grown” Christianity help shape the 21st century rising tide of a global Christianity in the South and the East,²⁵ indeed, “The Second Coming of World Christianity.”

²³ Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*. Translated by Hans H. Gerth. (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951), 181.

²⁴ *Redeemed by Fire*, 10.

²⁵ Lamin Sanneh and Joel Carpenter, *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), vii.