

The second encounter between Confucianism and Christianity

On June 19, 1898, in the midst of China's intense Hundred Days' Reforms, Kang Youwei, the leading advocate for fundamental changes according to the Western model, submitted a memorandum to the Manchu emperor calling for a state-sanctioned church (*jiaohui*) of Confucianism. The proposal never came to fruition. By the end of the summer, the conservative faction in the court re-established control, revoked all the directives of institutional change and divested the reform-minded young emperor of executive power. Kang Youwei fled to Japan and many of his associates were executed. As Ya-pei Kuo reveals, however, the idea of a state-sanctioned religion based on 'Confucianism' did not die.

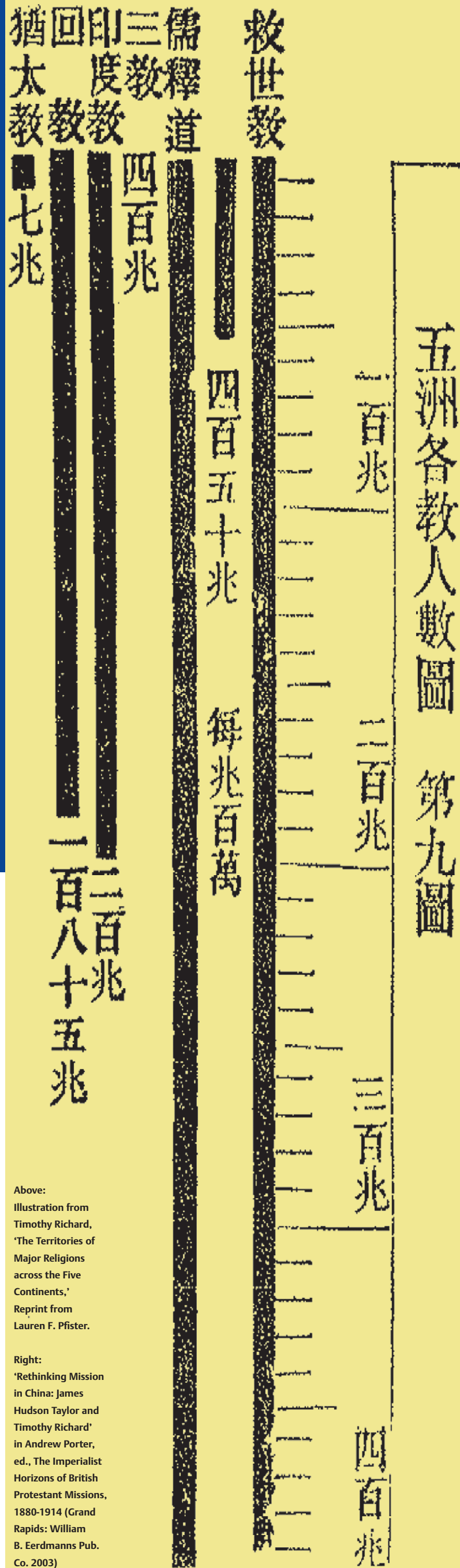
Ya-pei Kuo

IN THE NEW CENTURY, China continued to witness various political attempts to institute Confucianism as some sort of state religion. The Qing government's stipulation of the worship of Confucius at all levels of the new-style schools in 1904 and Yuan Shikai's revival of the state worship of the sage three years after the Republic was founded, were only two of the earliest examples. Meanwhile, remaining active and vital throughout the 1910s was the campaign led by Kang Youwei and his disciple Chen Huanzhang, petitioning for the constitutional acknowledgment of Confucianism as China's national religion.

Historians have explained these 20th century impetuses for giving Confucianism public and institutional recognition in two ways. First, and a more cynical approach, is to read them as a form of modern identity politics. Cultural symbolism allowed the powers that be to build a tacit rapport with the conservative constituency without compromising their forward-looking plans of socio-economic modernisation. The second approach places them in a larger historical context and sees them as part and parcel of the nation-building process. Cultural elements familiar to the population were transformed into national emblems and utilised for promoting group awareness and national solidarity among citizens, a phenomenon that was by no means unique to China.

These explanatory models, however, do not seem to be applicable to the late 19th century. Rather than strengthening the dynastic regime's constituency, Kang Youwei's reformist ideas alienated a large portion of the elite and provoked their most vehement protests. Neither were there indications of a consistent nationalistic thinking at this stage of Kang's career. Although his idea was visionary enough to prefigure upcoming developments, it was motivated by a totally different set of political concerns than those of later years.

To understand the historical forces that fuelled the idea of a Confucian Church, one should probably start with Kang Youwei's memorandum itself. In the document drafted in 1898, Kang made plenty of references to Christianity and left no doubt about his source of inspiration. As an institution,



Above: Illustration from Timothy Richard, 'The Territories of Major Religions across the Five Continents,' Reprint from Lauren F. Pfister.

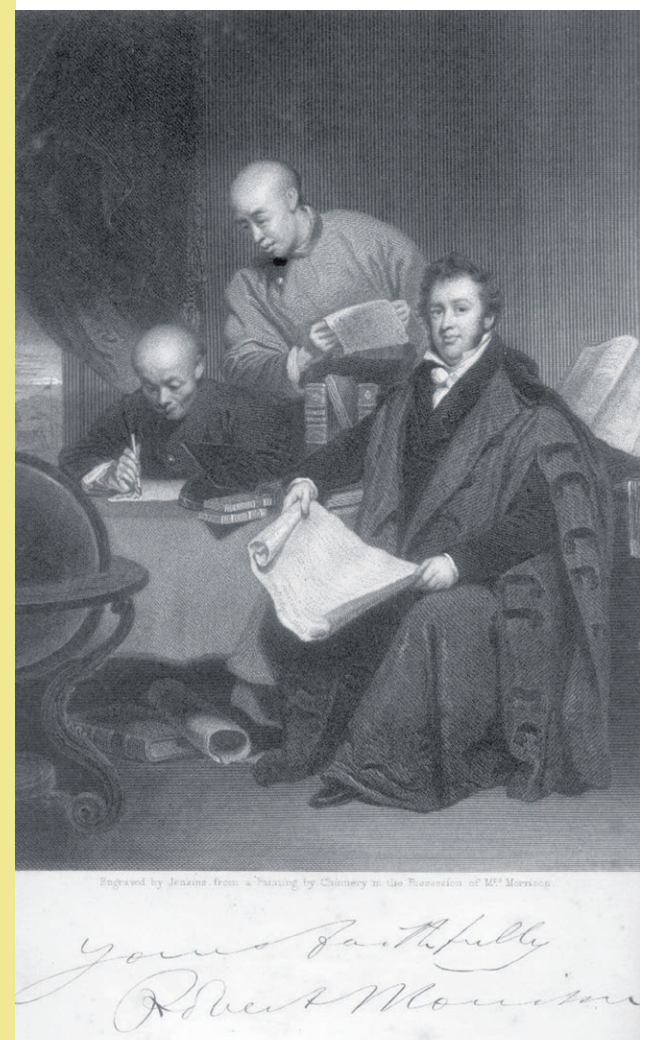
Right: 'Rethinking Mission in China: James Hudson Taylor and Timothy Richard' in Andrew Porter, ed., The Imperialist Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 2003)

the Confucian Church was meant to be the Chinese equivalent of the Christian Church. The political purpose of its creation, as Kang clearly explained to the emperor, was to establish a church-to-church channel of communication between China and the Western countries, and to depoliticise religious tensions caused by the increasing presence of missionary activities in China, which in the second half of the 19th century had often led to diplomatic disagreements and even wars.

More than a device of diplomatic manoeuvring, the church organisation was also an administrative tool for ideological and religious streamlining. Kang's memorandum lamented the rampant practice of heterodoxy in Chinese society: people worshipped all kinds of spirits and gods, but ignored the temple of Confucius. The creation of a church network would provide a new apparatus for systematically re-educating the people about the sagely teachings and recreating a cohesively pious Confucian society. Kang blatantly admitted that this institutional mechanism was based on Western models. 'Their chapels spread all over the land. Every day during the week, Kings and ministers, men and women venerate their god and recite from their scripture. Although their doctrine (*jiao*) is shallow, their practice is methodical and orderly. In comparison, our doctrine is refined, but our practice has been crude.'

Kang Youwei's fascination with the religious practice of the West was not uncommon among those who bothered to learn about Christianity. However, placed in the whole elite stratum, they were the minority. The widespread anti-Christian sentiment among the socio-political leaders had its deep roots in the international conflict caused by Western expansionism. For most educated Chinese, Christianity, which had been illicit since 1724, could only be openly practiced on Chinese soil because of the Western powers' intervention. The Treaty of Tianjing, signed after China's military defeat by France and Great Britain in 1858, forced the Qing government to acknowledge that 'the principles of the Christian religion... have proven to lead people to good deeds,' and to warrant Christian missionaries the rights to travel and preach freely in China. Although historians nowadays are cognisant of the different social and ideological origins of the global mission activities emanating from Europe and North America and those of Western colonial imperialism, to the elite of 19th China, these were indubitably intertwined forces.

The numerous legal disputes involving Christian missionaries and converts in the mid and late decades of the 19th century further aggravated officials and elite members in China. Most of these legal cases were about confiscated church properties during the Christian proscription and civil conflicts between Christian and non-Christian communities. They almost invariably ended with the invocation of treaty rights by missionaries and the interventions of the foreign legations through China's bureau of international affairs, *Zongli yamen*. The process compromised the juristic power given to local officials and magistrates, leaving them with a bitter antagonism against the missionaries and their political backers.



'Religion' and the clash of civilisations in the 19th century

The implications of some controversies reached further than property disputes and community violence, touching upon bigger issues of Christians' civil obligations to their communities. In 1861, for example, the Franciscan missionaries in Shanxi sent forward a request for official exemption of Chinese Catholics from paying community levies for local temple festivals. Their argument ran as follows: A Christian, whose first and ultimate religious obligation was to his chapel, having paid his due to it, should not be forced to make further financial contributions to other religions, especially not to those deemed heterodox (*yiduan*) by his church. The Franciscans' request, once taken up and endorsed by the French minister, soon led to an imperial edict that exempted thousands in China from their conventional fiscal liability to local religious activities. In 1881, the exemption was extended to Protestant Chinese. Similarly, in 1866 the French legation filed an official complaint against the requirement that participants must bow in front of the image of Confucius upon entrance to civil service examinations. This requirement, according to the minister, constituted a political infringement upon Chinese Christians' conscience and deterred Catholics from participating in the examinations.

With their nationwide impact, legal cases like these revealed to China's ruling class an utterly different concept of religion from what they had been familiar with. Missionaries' protests against Chinese customs and conventions were often premised on an assumption that was unique to Christianity, i.e. a person could belong to only one religion. A Christian's choice of faith had to be absolute and exclusive. This emphasis on the fixed boundaries between various religions was in sharp contrast with the Confucian's attitude toward his religious others. Placing premium on the social and moral effects, a Confucian could generously extend endorsement to other religions as long as they conformed to basic ethic and ritual norms and did not pose a threat to the existent order. In late imperial times, a wide range of sectarian practices, many with Daoist and Buddhist roots, were tolerated, or even incorporated into the state cult, because they 'had proven to lead people to good deeds' – the same justification for lifting the Christian ban in 1858.

The far-reaching repercussions and sheer number of these legal cases involving Christians probably made many curious about the religion from the West. Introductory essays on Christianity and case collections started to appear in the 1870s-80s, attesting to the demand. Most of these texts gave basic information about the religion's origin, history, major branches and tenets, along with summaries of the Chinese government's rulings on important cases. Most authors/compiler also offered comments with personal insights on the on-going conflicts. One point that many of these texts repeated was Christianity's obstinate fixation with the community boundaries between the believers and non-believers. The unique Christian notion of religious exclusivity did not pass unnoticed by their Chinese observers.

For those who wanted to acquire more direct and educated knowledge about Christianity, missionaries themselves became the best source. Along with the arrival of Robert Morrison in China in 1823, Protestant missionaries in particular brought with them a deep conviction in the unique power of text and words, and generated a large body of print material in Chinese. Most of these publications were straightforward evangelistic, aiming to inspire Christian followers and provide ready material to those who cared to learn about the religion. But missionaries also went beyond the scope of spiritual texts and sponsored books and journals that covered Western secular subjects, such as history, law, education and natural sciences. In these texts, missionaries' prefaces and inserted comments often revealed a great deal about their worldview and informed the reader about how they saw their own religion in relation to other matters in the world.

Moral fabric and civil order

Although not every missionary would choose to present their religion in the same way, many shared the assumption that Christianity was not only a religion, but also a civilising and modernising force of the world. The 19th century West was the embodiment of its potency. The political might, social prosperity and technological advancement of European and American countries resulted from the moral discipline and strength that only Christianity could generate. Without Christianity, there would be no Western modernity. It follows that the West's expansion, by facilitating the spread of Christianity through colonial establishments, had the ultimate benefit of bringing modernity and civilisation to the non-Western world. The improvement of moral fabric and civil order under the Christian influence in the colonies of South and Southeast Asia, in their narratives, attested to the religion's civilising capacity.

Missionaries' narratives reflected the religious ideology that pervaded the 19th century West. No longer associated with church membership, Christianity was a signifier of the West's national and civilisational cohesiveness, with a vague reference

to the cluster of moral and cultural values that every exemplar citizen of Western society, even a non-churchgoer, could unwittingly share and embody. In 1858, when Queen Victoria announced to 'the Princes of India' that '[f]irmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity, and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects,' she used the term in exactly this broad and diffusive sense. Not only was Christianity invoked to signify the British state's internal coherence. The Majesty's use of religion to demarcate the West and its others in the world was also typical of her time.

As the fundamental engine of a civilisation's potency, religion became an important lens through with the global power structure was understood. In the early 1890s, Timothy Richard, a Baptist missionary from Wales, published a series of maps and charts that provided statistical information about the world. On a chart that compared the sizes of adherence to different religions, he listed Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, and Buddhism with respective numbers of their following. Not only did Christians outnumber (440 million) the followers of all other three religions (respectively, 70 million, 50 million, and 1 million) combined, they also had the widest area distribution. Richard deliberately noted that Christianity 'governed' (*xia*) all five continents of the Americas, Europe, Australia, and Africa,



Above: Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927).

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amounting to 80 per cent of the land on the earth. In contrast, Confucianism 'governed' only China, Islam the Arabic world, and Buddhism less than one-tenth of a percent of the globe. Other than informing his reader of Christianity's predominance, a chart like this forcefully inculcated the assumption of religious exclusivity into the reader's mind: one geographic area was 'governed' by only one religion. Populations in the Americas, Australia, Africa, or even in Europe, might have multifarious faiths and practices. Yet, diversity and complexity had to be suppressed in this projection of religious uniformity in each area.

Presentations like this also emphatically placed religion at the centre of the geopolitics of the 19th century. Richard's chart gave little attention to individual nation-states. Mentioning China and Thailand as the lands of Confucianism and Buddhism, it subsumed the identification of all state entities under larger religious rubrics, indicating the existence of a higher force than politics in shaping world events. W. A. P. Martin, an American Presbyterian missionary to China, when narrating Christianity's strength, also stressed its independence from the operation of political regimes. Judea was annexed by the Romans yet, in the end, the conquerors had to submit themselves to the religion that came from Judaism. After the Roman Empire fell to the barbarians, their Christian faith continued to prevail during the medieval period. Being cogent of these historical precedents, Christian missionaries, according to Martin, consciously maintained their political autonomy. They were funded exclusively by their churches and followed no state orders when deciding where they went.

Clashing civilisations

Eager to overcome the Chinese elite's anti-Christian sentiment, missionaries nevertheless had no control over how and by whom their narratives would be consumed and interpreted. Kang Youwei probably represented the most unfriendly consumer of missionaries' cultural products. Like many from a similar background, Kang started to educate himself about Christianity in the late 1870s and had read most of the available material on the subject by the early 1890s. His writings of this period made frequent references to Christian practices.

A growing proficiency and confidence can also be detected in his private and public comments on events related to Christianity. This familiarity, however, did not ease the emotional animosity. Christianity represented to Kang a vicious threat that the followers of Confucianism could not afford to ignore. In the principle of religious exclusivity, Kang particularly saw a voracious appetite for expansion. Christian evangelists would never be content with peaceful coexistence with other religions. Wherever they went, they sought to undermine others until their religion was in absolute domination. The sense of urgent crisis was further exacerbated by the assumption of correlation between a civilisation's potency and its representative religion's prowess. The confrontation between Confucianism and Christianity was more than a religious war; it constituted a crucial aspect of the total clash between two civilisations.

Reformers like Kang Youwei played up this sense of threat to justify changes. Confucianism needed to learn from its new rival, and Christianity's operational mechanism, in particular, could be appropriated to give Confucianism the needed modern edge. Kang started to Christianise Confucianism in the early 1890s. His major works from this period tried to portray Confucius as a prophet-like figure, and re-interpreted the Classics as nothing but the sage's revelationist message about human future. Institutionally, the church system, which he identified as the source of Christianity's unique propagandist and organisational efficiency, became the prominent object of emulation in his programme of reforms after 1895. Kang maintained that the adoption of these new measures would change only the outer form of Confucianism and give the ancient teaching new communicative capacity and social impact, without altering its moral content.

A more close analysis of reform ideas articulated around 1900, however, suggests that knowledge about Christianity probably had a more profound influence on its consumers than Kang Youwei would admit. In their search for the secret of Christianity's prowess, people like Kang started to gain a glimpse of the Western notion of religion and to project a new model for Confucianism. Underneath the strategic justifications for a church system in China, Kang's jealousy of the Christian form of pietism, demonstrating itself in his desire to replicate practices such as church attendance, bible reading, and ritual participation, was most palpable in his 1898 memorandum. The fascination with Christianity's ability to penetrate into its followers' minds and hearts, in the following decade, became more widespread. The Christian-inspired imagination of a society of religious purity prompted the elite to support a systematic overhaul of Confucian rituals and the hardening of the boundaries between Confucianism and other non-Confucian elements. An exceptional combativeness against popular religion ensued and became a characteristic of this time.

Confucianism as world religion?

Christianity also provided a new model for re-imagining Confucianism's relationship with the existent political structure. In its imminent confrontation with Christianity, Kang saw an opportunity for religious expansionism. Confucianism, with its supreme profundity, had the potential to become a true world religion. In overcoming the current Christian threat, it would achieve a global fame and enjoy unprecedented following from all over the world. In this fantastical projection of a future scenario, Kang indeed imagined a politically stronger China to aid Confucianism's expansion. Yet, Kang emphasized in a private letter, the ultimate objective of modernising the ancient teaching was to give it the ability to spread beyond the land of its origin, and transcend the ups and downs of its political patron. Like Christianity, Confucianism had a large part to play in human history and could not afford to seal its fate with merely one nation.

The recognition of religion as an autonomous force on its own constituted probably the most significant legacy of the 19th century re-encounter between Christianity and Confucianism. No matter how vague Kang's idea of a Confucian Church was, it expressed a clear vision of administrative demarcation between the religious and the non-religious in state affairs. Still seeking the state's backing, the proposed church was meant to be an institution independent from the other sections of state bureaucracy. Underneath the proposal for a Confucian church lay a new model for the relationship between Confucianism and the Chinese state. In its new form of 'state religion,' Confucianism required no 'Son of Heaven' to personify its religious and moral ethos and offered no theoretical underpinning for the state's cosmological claims. The centuries-old model of mutual embodiment gave way to a more precarious patron-client relationship. Religion remained an important aspect of politics, but the terms in which religious politics played out were fundamentally altered.

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