AN ARROGANT REJECTION OF FOREIGN IDEAS OR A TACTFUL REJECTION OF SUBSERVIENCE?: THE GENTRY’S REJECTION OF CHRISTIANITY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY CHINA

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THE EASY WAY OUT

The clashing of China and Europe in the nineteenth century was not merely a conflict between states, but a conflict between massive egos. Until the nineteenth century, China remained relatively unchallenged in its position as “The Middle Kingdom”, the center of the universe and the leader of everything under heaven. From the European viewpoint, the concept of the Middle Kingdom was extremely arrogant and grated on their nerves. Consequently, following China’s humiliating defeat during the Opium Wars and the subsequent fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the West was quick to blame Chinese arrogance as the reason for the state’s collapse. Ever since, and perhaps as a lingering, subconscious backlash against Chinese haughtiness, many Westerners have been quick to use arrogance as an explanation for any and all events in Chinese history; the rise of the Gentry-lead anti-missionary movement in China in the 19th century is one of these events.

In the nineteenth century, China was seen by missionaries as Christianity’s final frontier, offering a wealth of potential converts; however, the missionaries were soon confronted with strong resistance, largely orchestrated by China’s gentry. Not surprisingly, many Westerners attributed the Gentry’s opposition to blind arrogance and the belief in the superiority of Chinese culture. By rushing to the explanation of Sinocentric arrogance, the Western discourse fails to acknowledge more logical causes of the Gentry’s opposition to the missionaries.

The Chinese Gentry’s rejection of Christianity was not merely an expression of arrogance, but rather was a highly logical and highly practical attempt to retain their elite position in Chinese society in the face of the significant threat the missionaries posed to their power. The Christian missionaries undermined the Chinese Gentry’s elite position of power by challenging their leadership role in society, questioning their intellectual authority, undermining China’s social hierarchy, threatening Confucianism, and undercutting the idea of the Middle Kingdom.

In this essay, I will avoid abstract theories and will instead focus on logic and facts. In order to show the practicality and rationality of the Gentry’s resistance to the missionaries, I will begin the essay with an assessment of the existing discourse on the subject of the Gentry and anti-missionary activity in China. I will then proceed with a brief history of Christianity in China. I will continue with an overview of the Christian

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1 Frederic Wakeman Jr., The Fall of Imperial China (New York: The Free Press, 1975) 111.
mission movement in China during the mid-nineteenth century, followed by an explanation of the Qing government’s response to their existence. I will then proceed with a systematic comparison of the roles of the Chinese Gentry and the missionaries and how these two groups competed for power. During the process, I will demonstrate that, in contrast to the topic’s construction in Western discourse, the Chinese Gentry’s rejection of Christianity and anti-missionary activities was a highly practical attempt to retain their elite position in Chinese society.

THE PERPETUATION OF ARCHAIC IMAGES

While the anti-missionary movement in China has been the subject of numerous books and articles, like many other topics in Chinese history, the discourse is often shrouded in the idea of Chinese ethnocentrism. From the beginnings of interaction between the West and China, the Chinese Gentry have been the target of Western frustration with perceived Chinese arrogance. In order to discredit what they perceived to be arrogance, Western literature attacked the Chinese Gentry, the leadership of Chinese culture and perpetuators of Chinese tradition. A Western physician in China during the mid-nineteenth century, C. Toogood Downing’s description of the Gentry demonstrates Western contempt for their leadership. Downing writes,

In fact the Chinese gentry, as far as I have seen with some few exceptions, have a sickly, unprepossessing look. There is more than mere effeminacy to be observed in the faces of the upper classes of the Celestial citizens; there is something which excites in many strangers a disgust and antipathy to the, even at the first glance ² 

In addition to being portrayed as physically weak, the Gentry were also labeled by Westerners as stubborn and ignorant. Reverend W. Gillespie wrote in 1854 that,

Change is abhorrent to them. They think it is impossible to be wiser than their ancestors were thousands of years before them….The result is that the Chinese mind is in a state of torpid hibernation. The empire has long been in a state of stagnation. Their condition, both socially and intellectually, has been for centuries stationary….Genius and originality are regarded as hostile and incompatible elements….Progress, in such a state of things, is impossible.³

Even more recently, many of these old stereotypes are continuing to manifest themselves in the Western discourse on China. While the passing of over a century has resulted in the censorship of conspicuously racist language, much of the Western discourse dealing with the Chinese Gentry still denies them of any rational agency. For example, Earl Swisher writes in Chinese Intellectuals and the Western Impact that,

Nineteenth century China thus furnishes an example of an entrenched intelligentsia, too rigidly committed to a traditional pattern to make the basic ideological changes necessary to maintain its leadership...he [the Chinese intellectual] lacked flexibility and operated in too narrow a frame.4

Similarly, D. E. Mungello’s *The Great Encounter of China and the West* further perpetuates the earlier Western discourse of the Gentry in relation to Christianity by portraying the Gentry as arrogant and impractical.

A... basis of anti-Christian feeling among the literati was Chinese ethnocentrism, or the belief that Chinese culture was superior to other cultures....The false way was referred to by various terms... all of which meant ‘false’ and ‘heterodox’ and carried connotations of being different in away that was not Chinese....From the outset, Christianity evoked hostile sentiments among the Chinese literati who saw it in much the same way that many saw Buddhism and Daoism. These teachers were viewed as false because they were heterodox; in fact, the terms ‘heterodoxy’ and ‘falsehood’ became synonymous.5

Had this idea been just one small aspect of Mungello’s argument, the theory could have been understandable, but this idea was the major reason offered. Rather than acknowledging the logical reasons for rejecting Christianity, Mungello merely perpetuates the archaic Western construction of the Chinese Gentry.

Other existing literature on anti-missionary and anti-Christian activity in China either fails to fully address the importance of the Gentry in the movement or fails to fully deal with the Gentry’s motivations. For example, Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *Christianity in China* provides a solid summary of the anti-missionary movement, but fails to provide a substantial answer to the origins of the movement.6 Latourette mentions the importance of the Gentry in the movement, but fails to go into depth on the reasons they were involved. Similarly, Morton Fried’s *Reflections on Christianity in China* discusses the anti-Christian movement and the various beliefs which spawned it, but fails to deal with the origins of those beliefs and how they spread through the Chinese population. Furthermore, by not adequately addressing the origins of myths, such as Christians eating the eyes of Chinese infants, Fried, like Mungello, furthers the portrayal of the movement as merely irrational and Sino-centric, rather than as a calculated resistance movement.7

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Jerome Ch’en’s *China and the West* is particularly noteworthy because it provides an excellent account of missionary activity in China during the nineteenth century and, with any background knowledge on the Chinese gentry, the missionary’s encroachment on the Gentry’s basis of power becomes clear. However, Ch’en fails to connect the dots himself and deals with the Gentry only in passing. Ch’en spends only one paragraph to briefly mention the threat the missionaries posed to the Gentry but fails to offer specifics.\(^8\)

In contrast to the other literature, Paul Cohen’s *China and Christianity* provides the best existing examination of logical reasons that the Gentry opposed the work of the missionaries.\(^9\) Cohen shows how the missionaries posed a threat to the status of the Gentry by attacking Confucianism and competing with them for social influence. However, published in 1963, *China and Christianity* is becoming dated and in need of revision. Furthermore, Cohen is not specifically interested in the anti-mission movement or the late-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Cohen’s book is an excellent foundation from which to begin and this essay will expand on his work. By focusing specifically on the roles of the Gentry and the roles of the missionaries, I will provide a more focused and systematic analysis of how the missionaries challenged the status of the Gentry and were thus rejected. In the process, I hope to show that, far from being a Sino-centric movement lead by an irrational Gentry, the anti-missionary movement was both calculated and logical.

**JESUS IN ZHONG GUO**

Far from a recent phenomenon, Christianity has a long and tumultuous history in China beginning from the time the Nestorians from Central Asia brought the religion to China in the seventh century. At various times between the seventh and fourteenth centuries, the Chinese government viewed missions positively because of the social services they provided to the Chinese population and even subsidized their existence.\(^10\) However, Christianity failed to take root in Chinese society and was thus reintroduced by the Roman Catholics in the sixteenth century and has been in China ever since. The Bible was first translated into Mandarin and distributed in China in 1823 and, between 1833 and 1914, circulation of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament, reached over 20 million copies.\(^11\)

Like Taoism and Buddhism before it, Christianity was almost immediately labeled as “heterodox” due to its foreign origin, non-adherence to Confucian traditions, and supposed politically subversive elements, a label which carried great stigma. Chekiang scholar Hsu Ch’ang-chih condemned Christianity in P’o-hsieh chi in 1640 along the same lines as Taosim and Buddhism, as an inferior foreign influence infiltrating Chinese culture. In 1724, the Yongzheng Emperor withdrew the Kangxi Emperor’s Imperial Edict of Toleration of 1692 and thus Christianity was not allowed to be preached in China’s interior again until after the second Opium War in 1858.\(^12\)

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8 Jerome Ch’en, *China and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979)
The nineteenth century marked a major shift in Christian influence in China as missionary activity increased throughout the country and Protestants joined the work of Catholics. The first Protestants arrived in China in 1807 lead by Robert Morrison. Morrison’s arrival in marked a turning point as Protestants arrived from all over the world to respond to the “challenge of China’s millions.” Furthermore, the forced opening of China following the Second Opium War and the signing of the Unequal Treaties, gave the missionaries greater freedom in their activities in China’s interior. Under intense pressure by the French who wanted to protect their Catholic missions, the Qing Government included toleration clauses in the Treaty of Tientsin of 1858, which legalized the preaching of Christianity in China’s interior and provided Christians protection from religious persecution. The Opium Wars also increased interest in all things Western, including Christianity. Protestant work increased drastically following the opening of China and there were soon 130 Protestant denominations from thirteen countries operating in China, Britain and the United States being the most influential players.

During the nineteenth century, the decision to travel to China was not one to be made lightly; different personal and spiritual factors motivated each missionary to make the long, arduous journey to China. Hudson Tayler, the founder of the China Inland Mission, defined his motivation for going to China and said “shall not the low wail of helpless, hopeless misery, arising from one-half of the heathen world, pierce our sluggish ear, and rouse us, spirit, soul, and body, to one mighty, continue, unconquerable effort for China’s salvation.” Other missionaries, especially the Protestants, were motivated by the belief that both Christian faith and Western science could enlighten the Chinese people. Robert Morrison wrote in 1807 that “light of science and revelation will…peacefully and gradually shed their lustre on the Eastern limit of Asia.”

In 1870, the Church had nearly 400,000 Chinese converts and over 250 Western priests. By 1885, this number increased drastically to 558,980 Chinese converts, an increase of nearly 30 percent in fifteen years. Prior to the First World War, the number further increased to approximately 1.5 million Chinese Christians. The increase in missionary activity placed the Chinese government in an awkward position. Essentially handcuffed by the unequal treaties and the threat of foreign force, the Qing government was forced to accommodate the missionaries, a position which eventually put the government in direct odds with the Chinese gentry.

QING RESPONSE TO THE MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

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13 Cohen, China and Christianity, 34.
14 Ch’en, China and the West, 94.
15 Cohen, Christianity in China, 67.
16 Cohen, China and the West, 94.
17 Cohen, China and Christianity, 78-9.
18 Ch’en, China and the West, 94.
19 Ch’en, China and the West, 92.
Following their decisive and humiliating defeat during the Opium Wars, the Qing government was in an extremely weak position, attempting to hold together a country crumbling from both the interior and exterior. The Qing government knew that they could not afford to have another clash with the Western powers and, following the Second Opium War, the Zhongli Yamen was formed by Prince Gong to handle relations with all foreign powers. After being forced to guarantee religious toleration following the Second Opium War, the Qing government realized that Christianity was an issue which China would have to temporarily deal with. In a letter to the governor of Hunan in 1860, the Tsungli Yamen wrote that Christianity was a threat to the minds of the Chinese people but, at this point in time, China could not afford to risk another conflict with the foreign powers. Only after China’s chaos settled could they begin to throw out the heterodox Christian religion.  

Rooted in a perverted Christian faith, the Taiping Rebellion, which raged in central China for over ten years in the mid-nineteenth century, further weakened the Qing’s central command, but also ironically strengthened Qing relations with the missionaries. Westerners, such as Frederick Townsend Ward, aided the Qing in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion, resulting in Qing appreciation and a generally more favorable view of Westerners. An edict issued by the coregents in the name of the emperor explained, “Their help in quelling the bandits near Shanghai was unquestionably a demonstration of their peaceful intentions and friendship.”

In the face of opposition from China’s people against Western influence, the Qing government tried to keep the peace with the outside world by honoring the treaties signed following the Opium War, which included protecting the Christian missionaries, while at the same time attempting to retain the support of its own people. The Qing government attempted to prevent local resistance to missionaries and, in return—acknowledging the awkward circumstances the Qing government was in—foreign governments instructed their missionaries to act respectfully, restrain excess, and avoid triggering conflict with the local Chinese.

However, local-based resistance to the missionaries erupted throughout China, largely instigated by the Chinese Gentry. The outbreak of anti-missionary violence on various occasions towards the end of the nineteenth century undermined the authority of the Qing Government and demonstrated the increasing influence of the Gentry. Despite their efforts to contain anti-missionary activities, the Qing government was not powerful enough to offset the authority of the Chinese Gentry, whose power was engrained in Chinese tradition for centuries.

WHO WERE THE CHINESE GENTRY?

The Chinese Gentry were a unique class who provided leadership to China’s masses in return for legally and socially accepted privileges in Chinese society. In the late nineteenth century, the Chinese Gentry numbered approximately 6 million, or

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20 Cohen, China and Christianity, 73-4.
21 Fried, Reflections on Christianity, 101
22 Ch’en, China and the West, 61.
23 Cohen, China and Christianity, 75-76
24 Cohen, China and Christianity, 76
approximately 1.5 percent of China’s population. Though one could enter the Gentry by passing the government examinations, the class was largely self-reproducing, as education required leisure time typically only available to the elite; furthermore, academic degrees were occasionally purchased rather than achieved.26 Despite holding degrees, the Gentry did not enter the government bureaucracy. Instead, Franz Michael explains, “On their own, or in cooperation with officials, they dealt with the many interests of their communities for which the official government had no time.”27

The Chinese accepted the Gentry’s leadership because they believed the Gentry played an important leadership position in society and continued traditional values. Michael further explains,

In the eyes of Chinese society, they [the Gentry] were the educated elite of morally superior men, qualified to lead society. They preserved and carried on Chinese cultural tradition. They were the writers, the philosophers, the painters, the poets, and the men of affairs who together made up the greatness of Chinese civilization.28

The general public did not question the elite status and privilege of the Gentry, but accepted their role as leaders of Chinese civilization. Fan Chung-yen described his role as a member of the Gentry during Song times and wrote, “To be first in worry about the world’s troubles and last in the enjoyment of its pleasures.”29 Both the general public and the Gentry members themselves believed that the Gentry selflessly served China. The role of the Gentry became even more important during times of societal chaos when the government was often unable to provide organization. Michael explains, “Leadership of the community, more urgent in times of emergency, was always an accepted task for the Gentry.”30 As was the case following the issuing of the toleration clauses by the Qing government and the Taiping Rebellion, the influence of the Gentry often threatened the authority of the central government, which could not afford to alienate the influential gentry and thus permitted the Gentry’s influence.31

However, the Gentry’s service was not without reward: the Gentry were on a similar social level as local officials and received various privileges due to their high status, such as paying lower taxes and receiving special attention in court cases. The Gentry’s legal immunities and economic privileges allowed them to even interfere with state and economic issues.32 Members of the Gentry demonstrated their social status by wearing symbolic dress, appearing with prominent officials, and attending exclusive ceremonial functions.33 Furthermore, the Gentry benefited monetarily from their role in society and, despite only constituting roughly two percent of China’s population,

26 China and Christianity, 82; Michael, State and Society, 422
27 Michael, State and Society, 422.
28 Michael, State and Society, 423.
29 Michael, State and Society, 424.
30 Michael, State and Society, 425.
31 Michael, State and Society, 427.
32 Cohen, China and Christianity, 83.
33 Michael, State and Society, 424; Cohen, China and Christianity, 82-3.
received at least 23 percent of China’s annual national income and over 50 percent of this income was compensation for their services.\textsuperscript{34}

The Gentry were accustomed to their unchallenged elite position in Chinese society. In the nineteenth century, the Qing government could not afford to lose the support of the Gentry, as the influence of the Gentry could threaten the authority of the central government.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, their privileged position in society went largely unquestioned and reinforced by the Chinese people. Paul Chao explains,

\begin{quote}
China has always been a class society where the upper classes are conscious of a natural obligation towards their social inferiors, and the inferiors look up to their superiors for exemplarily conduct and right action.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

The dynamics of this symbiotic relationship are rooted in Confucian principles, which ran deeply in nineteenth century Chinese society. In order to understand the Gentry’s basis of legitimacy and why the Gentry were so deeply respected and largely unchallenged in Chinese society during the nineteenth century, a basic understanding of Confucianism is necessary.

\section*{CONFUCIANISM AND THE CHINESE GENTRY}

Though often misconstrued by Western discourse as a religion, Confucianism is best described by D.E. Mungello as “a tradition of wisdom handed down from antiquity.”\textsuperscript{37} Confucianism was first fully developed by the Chinese philosopher Confucius in the fifth century B.C. who, living during a time of chaos and disorder, hoped to lead a revival of traditional Chinese values and social roles. Consequently, Confucianism is essentially a guideline for ethical behavior founded in hierarchal relationships.\textsuperscript{38} According to Confucian belief, people are not born of equal intelligence and capability; instead, there are “great men” and “small men.” The great men are the scholars and officials and their role in society is to gain knowledge, while the small men are the laborers who were responsible for physical work. In Confucian thought, the work of the great men is valued more than that of the small men and, therefore, the great men are entitled to special privileges and should be served and supported by the small men.\textsuperscript{39} Paul Chao explains, “the ruler and his officials are likened to the wind and the commoners to the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends. When ‘chun-tzu’, the morally and intellectually superior man serves in government, peace and social order will ensue.”\textsuperscript{40}

The Chinese Gentry were both legitimized by Confucian beliefs and major proponents of Confucian teachings. The fundamental beliefs of the Gentry were Confucian and the Gentry were seen as the protectors of Confucian thought. According to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Michael, \textit{State and Society}, 426.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Michael, \textit{State and Society}, 427.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Paul K. Chao, \textit{Chinese Culture and Christianity} (New York: University Press of America, 2006) 35.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Mungello, \textit{Great Encounter}, 48.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Chao, \textit{Chinese Culture and Christianity}, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Chao, \textit{Chinese Culture and Christianity}, 38.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Chao, \textit{Chinese Culture and Christianity}, 36.
\end{itemize}
Chinese belief, the Gentry were the recipients of knowledge passed down from Confucius over numerous generations.\textsuperscript{31} Franz Michael explains, “The gentry were educated and examined in the tenets of Confucianism; and were understood to have mastered its moral principles as a result of their education”.\textsuperscript{42} The Gentry helped reinforce Confucian ideology by establishing schools throughout China, teaching Confucian thought, and maintaining Confucian temples.\textsuperscript{43} Michael explains, “Confucianism was accepted by the state as the official ideology, but it was studied, taught, believed in, and preached by the gentry, who gave it reality as the focal force of Chinese culture.”\textsuperscript{44} As long as the Chinese continued to subscribe to Confucian belief, the role of the Gentry would remain both legitimate and necessary.

THE MISSIONARIES CHALLENGE TO THE GENTRY

Many historians are quick to attribute the Gentry’s rejection of Christianity and opposition to the Christian missionaries during the late nineteenth century to mere cultural arrogance; however, in fact, the Gentry’s opposition to the Christian missionaries was a calculated response to the threat the Christian missionaries posed to their position of power in Chinese society. The Christian missionaries challenged the Gentry’s status by encroaching on the Gentry’s leadership, questioning the Gentry’s intellectual authority, undermining Chinese social hierarchy, threatening Confucianism, and undercutting the idea of the Middle Kingdom.

The Christian missionaries threatened the status of the Gentry by challenging their leadership role in Chinese society by performing many of the roles traditionally performed exclusively by the Gentry. With the drastic increase in their numbers in the late nineteenth century, the missionaries played an increasingly large role in the daily lives of the Chinese.\textsuperscript{45} Due to the various domestic crises and the Qing government’s increasing friendliness towards the Church in the late nineteenth century, the missionaries were increasingly able to exert influence in governmental affairs.\textsuperscript{46} Traditionally, the Gentry were the only class of people who were allowed to meet with government officials on a regular basis, which both increased their power in governmental affairs and reinforced their elite status. However, in the late nineteenth century, the missionaries too began to meet with local officials as equals, a practice formally legalized with an imperial decree in 1899.\textsuperscript{47} The missionaries acted as advisors and even interfered in military and domestic affairs. For example, the French Bishop of Guizhou guaranteed Muslim rebels that the Qing government would treat them leniently if they put their arms down.\textsuperscript{48} Similarly, in the 1890s, Baptist missionary Timothy Richard had extensive contacts with both local and central Chinese officials and eventually influenced the Hundred Days

\textsuperscript{31} Mungello, \textit{Great Encounter}, 47.
\textsuperscript{42} Michael, \textit{State and Society}, 423.
\textsuperscript{43} Cohen, \textit{China and Christianity}, 83.
\textsuperscript{44} Michael, \textit{State and Society}, 423.
\textsuperscript{45} Cohen, \textit{China and Christianity}, 45.
\textsuperscript{46} Ch’\'{e}n, \textit{China and the West}, 108.
\textsuperscript{47} Cohen, \textit{China and Christianity}, 84.
\textsuperscript{48} Ch’\'{e}n, \textit{China and the West}, 93.
Reforms of 1898. In the late nineteenth century, the missionaries influenced Chinese litigation, a role earlier reserved for the Gentry. Paul Cohen explains,

although the native convert was still a Chinese subject, he now frequently turned to the missionary when faced with legal or other difficulties, and it was often to the missionary that he now rendered obedience, sometimes in return for protection.

The missionaries were able to use the protection guaranteed them by the edict of toleration to demand the safety of their converts. Kenneth Latourette explains, “Not infrequently, Chinese feigned conversion to obtain the support of the powerful foreigner.” The foreigner’s influence could be very advantageous in legal disputes and, furthermore, while the Gentry were treated leniently by Chinese courts, as foreigners, the missionaries were actually immune to Chinese laws.

The missionaries further competed with the Gentry by providing social services, traditionally provided by the Gentry. To help convert the Chinese, the missionaries, especially the Catholics, established orphanages, hospitals, and schools, and provided various welfare services including famine and flood relief and medical treatment. The missionaries used their social services to establish contacts with the Chinese and draw them into the Church, but in the process, they were also competing for influence with the Gentry. Paul Cohen best summarizes the influence of the missionaries and says, “as a person of considerable influence on the local scene, the missionary subverted the Gentry’s traditional role as leader, advisor, and opinion former of the common people.”

In addition to competing for influence with the Gentry, the missionaries threatened the very social hierarchy which perpetuated the Gentry’s hegemony. While the official government examinations were the route for social mobility, the missionaries provided an alternative way to gain greater agency for China’s masses. Many poor Chinese joined the Church to benefit financially from the Church’s services, such as the annual stipends provided to converts. Jerome Ch’en explains, “Many converts were of modest origins and had material gains in view, which gave rise to talk of ‘rice Christians’.” Other Chinese converted to benefit from the protection the Church offered from the central government due to the toleration edicts. Furthermore, the church provided hope for poor families by providing education to converts, even arranging for some students to study abroad in the United States beginning in 1871. Many Chinese were motivated to convert to Christianity after hearing the dramatic success stories of the church helping other poor families send their children abroad to become educated

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49 Ch’en, China and the West, 108.
50 Cohen, China and Christianity, 85-6.
51 Latourette, Christianity in China, 67.
52 Cohen, China and Christianity, 85.
53 Cohen, China and Christianity, 84-5; Ch’en, China and the West, 95.
54 Latourette, Christianity in China, 67.
55 Cohen, China and Christianity, 85.
56 Cohen, China and Christianity, 31.
57 Ch’en, China and the West, 106.
58 Mungello, Great Encounter, 49.
59 Ch’en, China and the West, 108.
professionals. To the resentment of their fellow Chinese, many Christian converts acted arrogantly towards their non-Christian neighbors because of the special benefits and increased agency they received as members of the church. The missionary’s activities provided an alternative route for socio-economic mobility and altered the traditional Chinese social hierarchy, thus threatening the position of the Gentry.

Furthermore, Christian beliefs and the work of the missionaries threatened Confucianism, the belief system which gave the Gentry their power. Earl Swisher states that, during the late nineteenth century, “The Confucian intellectual was challenged more seriously than at any time since…the declining Chou dynasty in the third century B.C.” The Gentry were particularly alarmed by Christian beliefs, which threatened the Confucian organization of relationships, on which the Gentry relied for power. The Gentry greatly feared and resented the Christian belief in fundamental equality. Jerome Ch’en explains, “Christian equality was repudiated, because it might reduce the Confucian familial and societal hierarchies to anarchy or at best disorder.” The Gentry criticized Christianity on the ground that it promoted disobedience, citing the fact that Jesus, the son of God, was crucified and that the bible never emphasizes Jesus’s deference to his family. Furthermore, the Gentry feared both the Catholic belief that the Church is superior to the state and the Protestant belief that the individual must follow God’s will, even if it contradicts the law. The missionaries also campaigned extensively against ancestor worship, an important demonstration of respect to elders based on Confucian beliefs. During baptism, converts were asked,

You have rejected the idols that you formerly worshipped, and you knew that your countrymen are you still worship many things which they call gods?...Are you willing to cast off for ever all idolatrous practices, including the worship of ancestors?

While Confucianism emphasized living one’s life in a certain manner in order to keep order, the Gentry worried that, according to Christian beliefs, salvation did not rest on one’s behavior but merely accepting Jesus as one’s savior.

Exacerbating the situation, the missionaries believed that Confucian beliefs were the main obstacle to China’s progress and, since Confucius was the enemy, the most direct embodiment of Confucian influence, the Gentry became the target of missionary frustration. William Muirhead of the London Missionary Society wrote “until the incubus of Confucianism is removed we have no hope in reference to China.” During the 1870s and 1880s, missionaries like Young John Allen, Timothy Richard, and Gilbert

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60 Ch’en, China and the West, 107.
61 Ch’en, China and the West, 141.
63 Ch’en, China and the West, 142.
64 Cohen, China and Christianity, 80; Ch’en, China and the West, 142.
65 Cohen, Christianity in China, 68.
66 Ch’en, China and the West, 104.
67 Ch’en, China and the West, 142.
68 Cohen, China and Christianity, 80.
69 Cohen, China and Christianity, 80.
Reid all believed that Christianity would help end both Confucianism’s moral impurity and social injustice.\(^{70}\)

By questioning Confucianism and promoting Western knowledge, the missionaries questioned the intellectual authority of the Gentry, undermining one of the main sources of their elite status. Protestant Missionary, John Chalmers exclaimed,

under the outward show of politeness and refinement imparted to the educated Chinese chiefly by Confucianism, there lies almost nothing but cunning, ignorance, rudeness, vulgarity, obscenity, coupled with superstition, vainglory, arrogant assumption and inveterate hatred of everything foreign.\(^{71}\)

While the Gentry were traditionally supposed to be of superior intellectual ability, the missionaries engaged in many public debates with the Gentry, which placed the supposedly all-knowing Gentry in the position to be proved wrong. The missionaries were also able to read and write, abilities traditionally almost exclusive to the Gentry.\(^{72}\)

Furthermore, the missionaries preached the belief that everyone was born of equal intellectual capability, which fundamentally challenged the Gentry’s claim to inherent superiority.\(^{73}\) In the 1870s, with the founding of the Jesuit supported Zikawei Observatory and the Conference of the Protestant Missions in Shanghai, the missionaries began to focus on using Western knowledge of science and technology to enlighten China which further questioned the Gentry’s intellectual authority.\(^{74}\) With the missionaries more advanced knowledge of science and technology and their derision of the Gentry as ignorant, the Gentry’s traditionally unquestioned intellectual authority was seriously threatened.

Related to the questioning of Confucianism, the missionaries threatened the Gentry by challenging the idea of the Middle Kingdom, that China is the seat of civilization. By challenging Chinese dominance, the missionaries threatened the status of the Gentry, who were supposed to be the protectors of Chinese civilization. The Gentry were deeply indebted to Chinese civilization and the idea of the Middle Kingdom, therefore, any challenge to the either was viewed by the Gentry as a great threat personally. Paul Cohen explains,

When Confucian civilization came under attack, as it did in the nineteenth century, the gentry stood to lose the most. And their position became particularly vulnerable when the attackers announced that they, and not the Chinese, were the custodians of civilization.\(^ {75}\)

Not only did the missionaries claim that all civilization originated from Jerusalem, rather than China, but they also went so far as to openly criticize Chinese society.\(^ {76}\) The

\(^{70}\) Cohen, China and Christianity, 100.
\(^{71}\) Cohen, China and Christianity, 80.
\(^{72}\) Cohen, China and Christianity, 85.
\(^{73}\) Swisher, Chinese Intellectuals and Western Impact, 36.
\(^{74}\) Ch’en, China and the West, 94-98.
\(^{75}\) Cohen, China and Christianity, 77.
\(^{76}\) Cohen, China and Christianity, 25-78.
missionaries called for progress, which both questioned China’s position as the peak of civilization and implied the superiority of Western culture. Though China had been challenged by foreign forces at various times in the past, such as the Mongols, the influx of Christianity posed a more significant threat as it challenged not just rule, but Chinese culture as a whole. In response to the threat the missionaries posed, the Gentry instigated and organized a local-based movement against both the missionaries’ activities and Christianity in general.

THE GENTRY’S CALCULATED RESPONSE

In the nineteenth century, most of the Gentry resisted Christianity either by refusing to convert, organizing resistance campaigns, or publishing anti-Christian literature. At a meeting of the Christian workers in China, C.Y. Cheng described the anti-Christian movement and said,

the movement is aiming at nothing less than the downfall of Christianity and its complete eradication from China’s soil. So far the activities of the movement have been confined to the intellectual classes, but there is no telling what will happen when it has reached the ignorant mass of the country….The agitators are working for a mass movement against the Religion of Christ, with the intellectual leaders as its brain.

The Gentry released pamphlets describing the missionaries as unoriginal, evil, and perverted. One of the most notoriously anti-Christian writings was written by a gentry member under the name of T’ien-hsia ti-i shang-hsin jen entitled Pi-hsieh chi-shih written in 1861 which accused the missionaries of various offenses, including: casting spells on women to convince them to convert to Christianity then sexually exploiting them, paying for converts, and casting spells on the Chinese to cause them to convert. Other writings accused Christians of even stealing the eyes from Chinese corpses to make silver with for profit. While seemingly ridiculous, these claims were able to gain speed in the nineteenth century Chinese climate. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, anti-Christian literature became increasingly violent and more explicit in its intentions. Rather than merely inciting malicious rumors, notes were posted in visible public spaces calling for action against specific targets.

With a country already frustrated by China’s defeat in the Opium Wars and in chaos due to the Taiping and Nian uprisings, the Gentry’s literature created an extremely volatile atmosphere. Using an already frustrated local population as the wood, the Gentry provided the flame to ignite local anti-missionary outbursts. Capitalizing on general resentment towards the West following China’s humiliation in the Opium Wars and the

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77 Cohen, China and Christianity, 85.
78 Swisher, Chinese Intellectuals and Western Impact, 26.
79 Cohen, China and Christianity, 3; Ch’en, China and the West, 141
81 Cohen, China and Christianity, 45-9.
82 Cohen, China and Christianity, 39
83 Cohen, China and Christianity, 87.
general chaos of the Taiping Rebellion, the Gentry encouraged local populations and, occasionally the transient literati, who gathered to take the government exams proctored in cities, to oppose both the missionaries and their converts, often in direct opposition to the central government’s calls for peace. Cohen writes of the anti-missionary literature that,

it activated suspicions, fears, and resentments which the non-Christian populace accumulated on its own through direct, personal experience with the missionary and convert. An interplay of forces was thus set up which could, given the necessary spark, lead to violence.

The Gentry helped organize and encouraged riots against the missions and an entire section of the Pi-hsieh chi-shi even advocated establishing militias to monitor and, ultimately, throw Christians out of China, and called for the use of capital punishment for any Chinese who did business with a Christian. The Gentry’s writings were not merely abstract calls for general action, but went so far as to even list the names of specific missionaries who should be targeted and even suggested ways to target and destroy the missions.

This environment helped result in an increase in the frequency of riots in the late nineteenth century and even an increase in the number of lynchings of Christian converts. In the 1860s, anti-Christian literature circulated by the Gentry was closely linked to anti-Christian violence in at least fourteen of China’s eighteen provinces. Anti-missionary violence in Henan in the early 1870s was directly linked to the writings in the Pi-hsieh chi-shih and similar writings were involved in violence in Nanchang, where a Christian orphanage and church were destroyed, and in Hunan, where a church was destroyed and a Christian family’s home burned, killing five.

Ultimately, the Gentry’s activities helped contribute to an environment at the turn of the twentieth century in which Christians became the easy target of one of the most devastating movements against the foreigners in Chinese history: the Boxer Rebellion. Explaining their goals as to “Protect our country, drive out foreigners, and kill Christians,” the movement had clearly been influenced by the anti-Christian atmosphere developed by the Gentry and expressed many similar ideas as the Gentry’s writings. By the end of the Boxer Rebellion, 46 catholic, 146 protestant foreigners and hundreds of Christian converts were murdered. In many ways, the Boxer Rebellion marked the climax of the Gentry’s efforts over the latter half of the eighteenth century: the Chinese masses had not only rejected Christianity, but actually sought to remove it from Chinese soil.

84 Cohen, China and Christianity, 86.
85 Cohen, China and Christianity, 87.
86 Ch’en, China and the West, 141; Cohen, China and Christianity, 57.
87 Cohen, China and Christianity, 86.
88 Cohen, China and Christianity, 86.
KILL OR BE KILLED

The missionary’s activities in the nineteenth century left the Chinese gentry with one fundamental decision: accept the threat the missionaries posed to their power in Chinese society, or mobilize to remove the threat all together. The Gentry chose the latter. While on the surface, the language used by the Gentry against the missionaries, such as calling on the Chinese to “protect China from degenerating into a land of beasts and barbarians”, appears to be based completely on arrogance and Sino-centrism, the motivations were actually both practical and logical. As this essay has shown, the Chinese gentry’s rejection of Christianity was an attempt to retain their elite position in Chinese society in the face of the threat the missionaries posed to their power by undermining the Chinese gentry’s elite position of power.

Much of the Western discourse dealing with China in general, and the Gentry’s anti-missionary activities in particular, is shrouded by the haze of the abstract explanations of arrogance and ethnocentrism. These explanations are detrimental to the West’s understanding of China, as they rob the Chinese of rational agency and perpetuate the archaic image of the stubborn, incomprehensible, and arrogant Chinese. Whether one agrees with the Gentry’s actions or not, the logic of their movement against the Christian missionaries is undeniable. Ironically, and tragically for the Chinese gentry, the anti-missionary movement had an unforeseen side effect, contributing to the destabilization of the Qing government and the collapse of imperial China. While initiating a successful resistance campaign against the Christian missionaries to protect their status, the Chinese Gentry inadvertently destroyed the very socio-political system they were trying to protect and on which their status depended.

91 Cohen, *China and Christianity*, 87.