

Terrible Rumors about Christianity and the Missionaries in Late Qing: What and Why?

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"The foreign missionaries gouge out the eyeballs of the Chinese people to turn lead into silver or make excellent mirrors... In the church, people who hardly know each other freely mate and pair. Human beings and devils, women and men, sleep together." ¹

"The missionaries gave women aphrodisiac pills so they could not help making love... During the baptism, the missionary sprayed water on the woman and let her undress herself. He got out her bowels from her vulva, cut them off and put them in a bottle. After that he made love to her, bathed her and then wakened her with another spray of water." ²

These repulsive and obscene accounts of missionaries and their practices come from the widely-circulated anti-Christianity posters and pamphlets *Heresy Exposed in Respectful Obedience to the Sacred Edict* (《謹遵圣諭辟邪全圖》) and *Hunan Manifesto* (《湖南合省公檄》) in late Qing. It was true that some missionaries were ill-behaved but anyone with some common sense now can see that these accounts were largely groundless and calumnious. Such rumors did exist in the Ming Dynasty but they had never gained so much popularity as in late Qing in terms of the extent and depth of their influence on the society and social movement.

Christianity was in China as early as in the Tang Dynasty in the form of Jing Jiao (景教) within the Nestorian Church. It did not have very much influence and lost viability when Tang Wu Zong (唐武宗) launched an

eradication movement against Buddhism around 845.³ In the Yuan Dynasty, Christianity, both the Jing Jiao and the Catholic Church, grew with the favor from the emperors. However, when Yuan was collapsing, the Catholic Church left China and Christianity fell into oblivion. Again, at the end of the Ming Dynasty, Jesuit missionaries Ruggieri and Ricci came to China. They acted very "cautiously and delicately" to "win the friendship of the most cultivated circles in order, eventually, to reach the Court."⁴ Ricci studied Chinese culture and circulated Western sciences. His Christian teachings had a deliberate and conspicuous resemblance to the Chinese Classics. The church developed quickly. Nevertheless, over the twenty years that followed Ricci's death, the literate and ruling circles became better informed about the content of Christianity and perceived the real motives of the missionaries.⁵ To the educated classes as a whole, Christianity represented a theft of the Chinese Classics and a threat to the imperial ruling permeated with Confucianism. As a result, many missionaries were driven out of China. The early Qing Court was sympathetic to Christianity. But since the Vatican intervened in the Chinese ways of missionization for its non-adherence to the Christian doctrines and various conflicts arose, Christianity gradually lost favor from the Court.⁶ In 1724, Yong Zheng (雍正) Emperor banned this religion and the Catholic activities went clandestine.⁷

Christianity had not gained a truly firm foothold in China. But as trade became more frequent between Qing and the Western world, Christianity penetrated China in a different mode with the church's close ties with the trade. The first Protestant missionary to China, Robert Morrison, served as an employee of the East India Company, directly involved in the British trade in China.⁸ In late Qing, China's gate was finally forced open by the Western gunboats. As a result of treaties and concessions of the Qing Court, the Christianity missions gained unprecedented presence and

power in China. It was during the same period that Christianity encountered the most intense opposition ever.

Although dynasties and emperors shifted one after another, China was basically ruled with a respect for and worship of the Confucianism. The imperial tolerance of Christianity was based on a Sino-centric view that the missionaries came to learn from the Chinese Classics. When their motivation was discovered and interpreted as subversive to the Chinese political and intellectual system, they became enemies to China. Christianity was at that time mainly accused of its incompatibility with and impairment of the Chinese values and institutions. Christianity's development had always been under the Chinese reign until late Qing. As China went further in the 19th century, the Qing Court lost power to the foreigners and how Christianity expanded went beyond its control. The court found itself in an insecure situation and the restriction on Christianity was no longer realistic when they had already given in on many other more tangible issues. The foreign Christian presence in China was strongly felt by the people especially in practical matters so it followed that the anti-Christian attacks also focused more on the less abstract things such as the "perverse" conduct of the missionaries, which resonated so much with the majority of the Chinese minds. The attacks on ideology continued but became less prominent.

The treaties and conventions signed after the Opium War (1840-1842) and Anglo-French invasions (1858-1860), together with the decrees that the Qing Court issued under pressure, provided the missionaries with freedom and rights in missionization.⁹ With their rights, these missionaries felt themselves as saviors of the nation and attacked Chinese traditions at will. Besides, many missionaries were actively involved in commercial, military and political affairs as advisors, information sources

and translators.¹⁰ Furthermore, the missionaries' abuse of their position harmed the interests and hurt the pride of the Chinese people.

By decree, many churches confiscated during the Yong Zheng period were to be returned to the Christian churches. Many of these buildings had been converted for other uses and others simply became residential homes. With their privileges, some missionaries were inflexible in their claims for the return or the indemnities. Some even arbitrarily laid claims on whatever land and buildings they wanted.¹¹ In translating the *Sino-French Convention of Peking* into Chinese, a missionary added that "missionaries can purchase or rent land to build as they wish".¹² Consequently, the church became even more powerful with the land in their hands, which was of critical importance in an agricultural society like China. The gentry had been an influential unofficial group with substantial economic advantage in the Chinese society but the advent of the Christian church directly jeopardized their economic dominance.

On the other hand, since the gentry's social position and prestige rested largely on their active identification with Confucian traditions and values, when the Confucian civilization came under the Christian attack, the gentry's position became particularly vulnerable.¹³ Originally the gentry had a role as teacher of the commoners but now the missionaries were competing with them for their students. The missionaries converted some common people and stopped them from participating in social affairs and events that the gentry presided over. Moreover, the missionaries also interfered in these matters. Therefore, the gentry's cultural hegemony and social position were seriously threatened by the missionaries.

Some missionaries arrogantly abused the Chinese bureaucratic etiquette and attempted on the Chinese internal political affairs. One typical example took place in Guizhou (貴州) in 1861. Bishop Faurie dressed up

as a very high-ranking Chinese official and went to the local officials in a luxurious sedan with an escort of over 100 soldiers to display his triumph of getting a powerful missionary passport. This not only angered the Chinese officials for the infringement on their power but also aroused antipathy of the common people. ¹⁴

Since one of the clauses in the new French treaty granted "Chinese subjects freedom to practice Christianity without being liable to punishment *for this reason*", many missionaries readily intervened in law suits and local affairs "on behalf of their converts or in order to gain converts" whether or not the issue in question had anything to do with the belief and practice of Christianity. ¹⁵ In order to avoid trouble from their superiors and the foreign diplomats, the local officials tended to favor the Christian converts. Some converts simply bullied the neighborhood with this advantage. Some other Chinese were converted to Christianity merely for the financial aid that the churches gave them. These made the non-Christian people despise and hate the missionaries and the Chinese Christians.

In relation to the common people and the officials in the local scene, "the gentry occupied a strategic middle position." ¹⁶ Being an influential group, they could balance the tension between the officials and the commoners with their own leverage. They were also able to mobilize the two groups. When the gentry lost most in face of the Christian expansion, when the officials (many of them actually came from the gentry) and the common people also found their interests undermined, the anti-Christianity attacks came warranted. In fact, most of the attacks and riots were initiated by and headed by the local gentry.

Compared to violence, the rumors were mild; however their repulsiveness was still astonishing. Different from their origin in reality, they were

largely imaginary. People with some literacy and education, mostly those in the gentry, produced those anti-Christian pamphlets and tracts like the ones I cited at the beginning of this article. These writings and their content were well-received by the common people and other groups of people as well. The local officials tended to turn a blind eye to them unless pressured by their superiors. All these contributed to the wide circulation of the rumors. When rumor was repeated many times, it became a common belief.

Imperial China had always been self-centered. When the new concepts and things from the West entered the sight of the Chinese, they readily fit them into the existing frames according to their seeming similarity. They interpreted the diplomatic requests of the foreign countries as appeals for the heavenly kindness (籲請天恩). They dismissed the western sciences as Chinese astrology (術數) and western technology as craftsmanship (機巧). The conservative mindset, together with superstition and ignorance, prevented the Chinese from perceiving the real situation and responding properly.

The missionary doctors preserved dead fetuses or human body parts in bottles as specimen for research, an uncommon practice in the Chinese traditional medicine. The church also baptized the dying children so that they could go to heaven after death. Then rumor had it that the missionaries used the dead corpses or eyeballs for medicinal or alchemical purposes. When the bodies of orphans died of an epidemic were found to have decayed in an abnormal fashion at a church and a kidnapper confessed that he sold the children he stole to the church, this popular false belief translated into violence and resulted in the Tientsin Catastrophe (天津教難)¹⁷

The church buildings usually had a very distinct architectural style. The halls were dark and deep and the ceilings were high. The windows and doors were usually closed. A mysterious atmosphere was thereby generated which induced the Chinese people to doubt and imagine what was going on there.

A significantly large proportion of the rumors is about sex, and mostly perverse sex at that. Some missionaries did seduce/rape women but to equate the religious practices to such personal behavior is apparently unjustified. In the rumors, the sole purpose of Christianity seemed to be the spread of carnality. Sex, although an instinct, was traditionally considered evil and filthy and the solution was segregation of men and women. Since male and female went to the same church, it was assumed that there could only be sex. The taboo on sex had reduced people to reticence therefore many people lacked basic knowledge of human body and sex. That was one reason why there was so much absurdity in the rumors. On the other hand, some people were psychologically suppressed in their sex desire and found great release in being especially imaginative and active in describing such affairs in elaborate details. The logic was: Sex was bad and the missionaries and their followers were so shamelessly devoted to it, so their wickedness was totally intolerable in the Chinese society.

The China in late Qing was a society undergoing great turmoil and people in such a situation tended to be vulnerable and susceptible to rumors. The major themes of the rumors were children, women and human body, which were immediately related to everyone. When personal safety and fundamental relationships were in danger of the sex devils, i.e. the missionaries, people got especially disturbed and indignant.

Rumor cannot catch on if its audience does not accept it. Although some officials like Zeng Guofan did question the validity of the rumors in the Tientsin Catastrophe, they quickly gave up when all the others firmly believed the rumors.¹⁸ Here the group thinking mentality came into play.

The Christianity missionaries also did something good for China. They brought about advancement in sciences, medicine, publication and education. They also promoted social progress such as activities against opium, bound feet and infant abandonment. Their charity relief was beneficial to the poor. However, since the interests and values of the Chinese people were impinged upon, they hated the missionaries and the foreigners as a whole. According to mass communication theory, people are exposed to a large amount of information of different positions everyday. But people respond to the information selectively. They tend to select the information that echoes and confirms their beliefs and evade what challenges their positions. In interpreting the same information, people tend to understand it as they can and as they wish.¹⁹ According to Sigmund Freud, people are also more likely to remember the information they are willing to accept and forget/ignore what sounds inharmonious. Therefore the Chinese ignored the benefits of Christianity, sometimes even at the expense of common sense, and chose to believe and circulate the anti-Christianity rumors to their taste.

In late Qing, the Chinese people often referred to Christianity as Foreign Religion (洋教), without differentiating the Catholic Church from the Protestant Church. It means that they paid more attention to its characteristic as being foreign, rather than to its doctrines. This also signifies that the Chinese anti-Christianity attitude was closely related with the attitude against foreigners during the Western intrusions.

But simply labeling the Chinese anti-Christianity attitude “anti-foreignism” or “xenophobia” will be a little too hasty. The rulers of the Yuan and the Qing were both non-Han (漢) people, and in a sense they were foreign (夷). But with the adaptation to the Han culture and after many years, the Qing Court, the former foreign people, had been governing the Han China generally in harmony. Buddhism came from India, also a foreign religion. It was well adapted to the native culture; even some Buddhas became female figures in China. Therefore the adaptation over a long period of time and an appropriate pace along the social development mattered very much in how the foreign interacted with the indigenous. Supported by the gunboats, Christianity took a radical and forceful strategy in its advancement in the Qing Empire. The cultural, social, economic, political and psychological forces it disturbed and encountered worked together to put Christianity and the missionaries under attack. However, these anti-Christian rumors and riots, no matter how vehement and violent they were, did not save the imperial dynasty from its downfall.

Notes

1. Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism 1860-1870* (Harvard University Press, 1963) Illustrations following P.140
2. Dong Conglin 董叢林, *Dragon and God: Christianity and Chinese Traditional Culture 龍与上帝: 基督教与中國傳統文化* (Life Reading Knowledge Sanlian Press 生活.讀書.新知 三聯書店, 1992) P. 230
3. Ditto, P.12
4. Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) P.15
5. Ditto, P. 43
6. Zhang Li 張力, Liu Jiantang 劉鑒唐, *History of Chinese Christian Cases 中國教案史* (Sichuan Province Academe of Social Sciences Press 四川省社會科學院出版社, 1987) P.146
7. Gu Weimin 顧偉民, *Christianity and Modern Chinese Society 基督教与近代中國社會* (Shanghai People's Press 上海人民出版社, 1996) P. 75-76
8. Ditto, P.101
9. Zhang Li, P. 275
10. Dong Conglin, P. 136-141
11. Zhang Li, P. 286
12. Ditto, P. 288
13. Paul A. Cohen, P.77
14. Dong Conglin, P.179
15. Paul A. Cohen, P.132-133
16. Ditto, P.83
17. Ditto, P.230
18. Xiao Gongqin 蕭功勤, *Dilemma of the Confucian Culture 儒家文化的困境* (Sichuan People's Press 四川人民出版社, 1986) P.204
19. Ditto, P.205