

# Foreword

Travelling along a tiny road in a remote area of north central China in 2003, my vision was suddenly captivated by the sight of a massive church rising out of a cornfield, with a mural of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Nothing else but humble cottages and farmlands could be spied for as far as the eye could see. Clearly a structure built by Western Catholic missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century, the church was both a consolation and an anomaly to me, for it warmed me with comforting images I had seen and loved so often in my Catholic upbringing, but which seemed so out of place in this bucolic Chinese setting. An impromptu visit revealed that the Catholic faith had been practiced in the village for centuries, surviving the prohibitions of the Kangxi Emperor, the Taiping Rebellion, the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, the incursions of warlords, the Japanese invasion and occupation, Mao Zedong's early purges, and the Cultural Revolution. Yet I was looking upon this church at a time when many international scholars were confidently asserting that *Communist* China already had the largest Christian population in the world. Iconic and ironic as the mural of the Sacred Hearts may have been, it was also a fitting symbol of the symbiosis between East and West that has been Christianity in China.

In *Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China*, Dr. Ambrose Mong takes us on a fascinating journey that is the history of Christianity in China as seen through the prism of Western missionary activity. The fruit of many years of reflection and research, Dr. Mong's work offers wonderful insights into the process of how Western missionaries brought Christianity into China by attaching themselves to Western diplomatic, economic, and military expeditions; at first an expedient means of gaining entrance into the nearly impenetrable mainland, but which later proved to be an impediment to the faith's acceptance by the majority of the Chinese people. His analysis, which focusses on the Protestant missionary enterprise, does not disappoint as it considers the Jesuit project of evangelisation that flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the successes of which inflamed

the hearts and imaginations of Protestant missionaries from Britain and the United States with the hope of one day bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Chinese masses. Sadly, the disastrous debacle of the Chinese Rites Controversy and the consequent demise of the Jesuit adventure in the Middle Kingdom made obvious the greatest weakness in the Western missionary project – the plague of cultural hubris – which, as Dr. Mong ably demonstrates, was, and continues to be, the supreme barrier to the effective preaching of the Person and Gospel of Jesus. It was the infrangible bond between this cultural hubris and the rise of Western national and religious imperialism that, when enacted on the world stage, yielded nothing less than unbridled political, military, and economic expansionism. While seeking to take advantage of the movements and protection of diplomatic, naval, army, and commercial ‘missions’ – an irony to which he calls our attention – Christian missionaries also accepted the heavy burden of being identified with the best and the worst of these entities.

In an interesting examination of the causes of the widespread rejection of Christian missionaries by the majority of Chinese, Dr. Mong explores the ways in which the Christian message inspired one of the most serious uprisings in Chinese history, the Taiping Rebellion. A volatile mix of Christian doctrine, racial resentment, and messianic megalomania, the bloody fourteen-year revolt led by the self-proclaimed ‘Brother of Jesus’, Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), engendered widespread disapproval of Christianity by people in every corner of Chinese society. Dr. Mong traces how and why Christian thought was identified as the ideology that not only animated Hong to undertake his ruinous quest but also galvanised revolutionary forces that were composed of what powerful and influential Chinese viewed as the most disreputable elements of the social spectrum.

Equally intriguing is his study of the Boxer Rebellion, which, conversely, was in large measure organised in face of perceived Western attempts to destroy traditional Confucian culture. More to the point, Christian missionaries were viewed as an extension of the foreign powers that increasingly encroached on Chinese territory, flouted Chinese law, pressed for increasingly unequal concessions, and abused Chinese citizens. The general belief that Christian missionaries were also responsible for these ills, however unfounded they might have been, further contributed to a rejection of the Christian message as simply an extension of Western attempts to dominate and eventually conquer China.

Dr. Mong does not speak in generalities but takes us into the lives and thought of four Protestant missionaries – Robert Morrison, Charles Gutzlaff, James Hudson Taylor, and Timothy Richard – as well as into the world of one of the most celebrated and beloved novelists of the twentieth century, Pearl S. Buck, who spent forty years in China. In each case, he skilfully presents the tensions, toils, and tribulations of these evangelists,

who sought to impart those Western values they considered essential to a 'civilised' way of life, and which would lead to the acquisition of the material and spiritual benefits enjoyed by the developed nations of the West. At the same time, these evangelists, who were often dependent on Western governments and economic institutions to sustain their ministries, were also forced to suffer the outrages Westerners perpetrated against the Chinese people. Dr. Mong paints a detailed and colourful picture of the countless abuses Westerners committed, all of which incited the rage of Chinese of every class and status against both foreigners from the West and the Manchu interlopers of the Qing dynasty, who were deeply resented due to their inability to halt foreign aggression.

*Guns and Gospel* concludes with a consideration of the place of Christianity in contemporary China, an officially Marxist state that embraces atheism. I write this as a Professor of Romance and Classical Languages, a Professor of Asian Studies, a Roman Catholic priest of the Jesuit Order, and a 'Scholar of the People's Republic of China'. When I was notified of my reception of this highest award in the field of education conferred upon a foreign scholar, it struck me that a Communist state – which I have come to love and admire deeply – should so honour a Jesuit priest! As Dr. Mong, himself a Roman Catholic priest of the Dominican Order, so clearly proves, the Good News of Christianity and the good works performed in its name have not been the problem. Rather, what has caused bitterness, resentment, and, in many cases rejection, have been attempts by some Westerners to link the message of Jesus with Western imperial hegemony, to equate meaningful worship with unquestioned acceptance of curial structures, and to insist that religious inculturation be understood as abandonment of the Chinese cultural heritage and adoption of Western paradigms.

Dr. Mong argues that dialogue and cooperation with the Communist regime are essential for a continued flourishing of Christianity in China. Indeed, his many books on inter-religious dialogue, his propounding of the need for openness, and his scholarly inquiries into the ways in which Christianity might be made more understandable and attractive to Asians of all stripes make him one of the foremost inter-cultural theologians in China today. If China does, in reality, have the largest number of Christians in the world, the faith appears to be following along a good path. Nonetheless, as he stresses, the work of continuing to develop a Christian Church with Chinese characteristics that is ever more responsive, as he states, to the 'crying out of the people', can only enrich the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese. Further understanding of the past through thoughtful and probing studies, such as we find in *Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China*, will surely be facilitated through the efforts of scholars like Ambrose Mong. This book serves as both a cautionary tale and an invitation. We can only hope that all of us will become more aware of our cultural assumptions,

and more sensitive to the beliefs and concerns of others. As he makes abundantly clear, the continued flourishing of Christianity in China – and the world over – depends on the grace of God, our desire not to commit the mistakes of the past, and our willingness to seek the goodness in others.

It was my great pleasure to meet Dr. Mong at an international conference held at the Hong Kong Baptist University in 2013 entitled ‘The Catholic Church in China from 1900 to the Present’. The topic of his paper at the time was ‘Challenges and Opportunities for the Church in Secular Societies’. *Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China* surely provides us with deep insights into many of the ‘challenges’ that Christian missionaries faced as they sought to spread the Christian message in China. Given that one in every five faces on our earth is Chinese, this clear, detailed, considered, and highly accessible study is not only timely, but essential reading for us all. We now anxiously await further considerations by Dr. Mong on what dimensions of ‘opportunity’ lie ahead for the Christian Church in China.

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