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Strong faith is built upon history. Trust in God rests on the memory of what God has done in the past and the consistency of his character seen in the historical record of his dealings with humankind. Whitefield explains why knowledge and reflection on history are essential for the church in a variety of contexts. For foreign workers serving in an alien context, their willingness to learn the history of their area communicates a depth of interest in the people they are serving.

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The Chinese church's lack of historical consciousness is longstanding. While the secular world has increased its understanding of history in many areas, the church has lagged behind. Only recently has research into church history begun. As it becomes known, the church needs to recognize that history has practical applications and must learn how to apply these. When this does not happen, there are negative effects, and the author discusses some of these.

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Peregrine de Vigo

Following a brief review of the ways Chinese have viewed their history over the centuries, the author turns to the consideration of how today's PRC citizens view their history. All Chinese views of history have included "history" that is promoted nationally and directly serves the interests of the state. This approved narrative means that for most Chinese there is a nation-wide, generally agreed upon, social narrative that may well be the only one he or she knows. The author offers four items for the foreigner to remember when considering Chinese history or Chinese Christian history.

View from the Wall

[Why Believers Need to Understand Chinese Church History](#)

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Brother Liu

We must know the past to understand the present. For the most part, Chinese Christians do not understand Chinese church history; therefore, they often have no means to properly respond to changes in society. A look back at Chinese church history shows us that many of the difficulties faced by today's Chinese church have similarities to those that have confronted the church over the years. Not only can history suggest appropriate ways to respond to today's difficulties, it can help us discern God's purposes in the present.

Peoples of China

[Women in China's Protestant Church and Missions](#)

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eL

In both church and mission in China, women make up the majority of workers; however, their contributions and circumstances can sometimes be overlooked. The author looks at how God has used women of bygone days to build his church in China. She discusses three examples of women as well as a trio of women who provided leadership and greatly impacted the development of China's Protestant faith.

Book Review

[Ecclesiology, History, and the Identity of the Chinese Church](#)

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The Search for the Identity of the Chinese Christian Church: Ecclesiological Responses of the Chinese Church in 1949-1958 to the Political Changes, (中國基督教會身份的尋索) by Nan Pin Chee (池寧彬)

Reviewed by Kevin Yao

Using a historical approach, this book looks at the early stages of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and Chinese Protestant Christians' responses to changing church-state relations from 1949-1958. The author proposes that to understand the conflicts between the TSPM and Chinese church leaders, theology and Christian identity are significant factors. This work provides valuable insights to keep in mind while studying the history of Chinese Christianity.

Resource Corner

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The Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity

An essential resource, this website covers the lives of significant figures in Chinese Christianity including those who pioneered and nurtured the church, led independent Christian movements, and applied biblical values to Chinese social and political challenges.

Intercessory Notes

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Items that require your intercession.

Editorial

Understanding the Past, Understanding the Present

By Andrew T. Kaiser, Guest Editor

History matters.¹ As the Teacher writes in the first chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Today’s questions and challenges are repetitions or at least variations of things that have happened before. Knowledge of the past is an invaluable tool for understanding the present, enabling informed students of history to avoid some of the pitfalls and stumbling blocks that waylaid previous generations of servants.



Keyboard by Ash Kyd via Flickr.

In this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly* we reflect on the Chinese church’s relationship with its past. For expatriates serving in China, as Brent Whitefield explains, knowledge of the history of the local community brings not just awareness and wisdom but also humility to cross-cultural ministry. Nor should we be naïve about what it takes to understand the history of Christianity in China. As Peregrine de Vigo explains, history is a contested space in China, often with several narratives all vying for acceptance.

At the same time, Chinese Christians would also benefit greatly from a deeper understanding of their own religious past. On the one hand, as Brother Liu suggests, greater knowledge of the Chinese church’s past can provide guidance, helping Chinese believers to face current struggles with real wisdom. On the other hand, as Brother Li argues, this kind of historical awareness can also serve as a check on current impulses to pride within the church—hopefully limiting the fragmentation that pride so easily produces.

Of course, when new knowledge of the past is acquired, as we find in eL’s account of early Chinese women in ministry or Nan Pin Chee’s exploration of political and theological factors in the early days of the TSPM, expatriates and Chinese Christians alike discover newfound resources to help as they address similar (identical?) issues in the present.

Historical awareness ought to be second nature for Christians. Each time God tells Israel to “remember” he is training them to make a habit of recalling how God has cared for his people in the past in order that their faith in his provision for the present would be strengthened. May all those who serve the Lord in China embrace this habit of historical memory for the sake of God’s present and coming kingdom.

¹ Andrew Kaiser, “History Matters Today,” *ChinaSource*, *From the West Courtyard*, January 27, 2017 <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/from-the-west-courtyard/history-matters-today>.

Andrew T. Kaiser, PhD, author of The Rushing on of the Purposes of God and Voices from the Past, has been living and working in China with his family for over twenty years.

Intercessory Notes

Please pray

1. That China’s churches will come to value their history, learn about it, and discover how it can enhance and deepen their current ministry.
2. That as historical research becomes available, pastors and leaders will reflect upon it, teach it to their congregations, and apply its lessons to current situations.
3. That foreigners serving in China will not only learn Chinese history but recognize its underpinnings, the way it is taught, and how to understand it.
4. For the many women serving Christ in China’s church and missions. Pray that their achievements both historically and in the present will be acknowledged and used for discerning future service.
5. That China’s Christians will use the resources available to them to learn of their past, draw lessons from their history, and move forward in the light of what they have learned.



History: It's Essential

By Brent Whitefield

History, the act of organized remembering, is a virtue and a duty for the Christian. History is that thing upon which strong faith is built. Trust in God rightly rests on the memory of what God has done in the past and the consistency of his character borne out in the historical record of his dealings with humankind. Conversely, the surest way to distrust God's future promises is to forget his past blessings. In the Bible, God implores his people dozens of times to remember their history. The Scriptures themselves are nothing less than a record of God's faithful undertakings. The frequent failures of his people to honor him or live up to his standards are attributed as much to their forgetfulness as to their moral weakness.



When I teach history courses in a Christian context, I normally start my classes with the observation that two very important Christian virtues, humility and gratitude, are nearly impossible to cultivate without any knowledge of history. Study of history inspires humility by helping us recognize that the world did not start with us, that nearly every idea or initiative we can dream up has antecedents or precedents, that efforts and sacrifices were made, battles fought, and lives lost to secure for us nearly every good thing we enjoy, and that vigilance is required to maintain those good things that are so easily and swiftly lost. Those who do not know history, and are thus prisoners of the present, default to pride in their own knowledge, creativity, and goodness. Lacking a longer yardstick by which to measure, they make moral judgments based on what feels right rather than what can be demonstrated to work and produce human thriving. Our particular historical moment in the West suggests that the absence of historical study and reflection has resulted in the tendency to make it up as we go along in the realm of moral reflection, and in the exaltation of the subjective. What is this but another definition of pride?

Gratitude is a learned trait that owes much to attentiveness to history. Knowledge of and reflection on history allows us to understand that our present circumstances are not an accident. We understand the agency of other people and, more importantly, of God. In fact we are a gift, of our creator and of our forebears, and like all gifts, it calls for thankfulness. If we do not know history, we can but compare ourselves to the ideal of how we believe the world should be. Such a comparison is likely to produce frustration and dissatisfaction. If we do understand history, we compare ourselves and our lives to the struggles of those who have gone before us. Such a comparison is likely to produce gratitude.

For those of us who are interested in best practices in evangelism and cross-cultural ministry, historical reflection is critical. Before settling on a course of action, the history of past efforts must be surveyed. Most of British, Baptist, pioneer missionary, William Carey's groundbreaking "Enquiry" of 1792 that helped to launch the modern mission movement, was devoted to a recounting of missionary history up to that point. Yet, most books on ministry strategy today devote little or no time to the history of missions. Thus, without the benefit of historical reflection, we are left to ponder what sounds or feels right.

The study of history opens us up to fresh ideas and to serendipity. It is not that those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it (though there is truth in the old adage); it is that they do not have the privilege of repeating it. There is so much collective wisdom in the example of those who have gone before us. Many ideas that are new to us are only that: new to *us*. There are few things that are truly unprecedented. Reading of history is liberating: we are freed from the obligation to reinvent the wheel. We ignore history at our peril but are rewarded for our veneration of its lessons.

Nowhere is this more true than the mission context that I have studied most: China. In China, and indeed in all Confucian-influenced societies, arguments from history carry special weight. Where the Westerner might be impressed by the novelty of an idea, it is the antiquity of an idea that commends itself to the Chinese mind. The past is a repository of wisdom to be mined and full of examples to be emulated. It is an interest in historical continuity that has inspired some Chinese Christians to seek for connections between the biblical message and ancient China. To root the Christian message in an older narrative is to give it greater legitimacy. For Westerners, Christianity might be appealing if presented as something new. For Chinese, Christianity has more appeal if presented as something old and time honored.

For Christian strategists engaged in cross-cultural work, it is not only mission history that is important, but general history as well. To take just the example of China, there are many errors or misconceptions that Westerners make that lead to mistakes in practice. Many Westerners do not understand and, consequently, do not take seriously enough Chinese sensitivities about past imperialism and suspicions of neo-imperialism in the form of real or imagined Western meddling. To the Chinese mind, the wounds and humiliations of the imperial era, from the opium wars, the unequal treaties, the Boxer Rebellion, the Treaty of Versailles, etc. are catastrophic and recent. Therefore, presenting Christianity as an exciting new idea from the West, packaged in the English language and idiom, seems a strategic error at best.

In the West, the enterprise of history is the formulation of arguments about past events and their interpretations. Investigation into the facts of every event and period of history is encouraged, and even the most unlikely or offensive theories are entertained. Holocaust deniers can be granted tenure in a Western university. Very few pieces of the historical record are beyond further scrutiny and the admission of new interpretations. Western students of history may wrongly assume that this view of history is shared everywhere. It is not. For example, on any number of sensitive issues: the Rape of Nanjing, Taiwan, Tibet, some aspects of Communist Party history, and so on, there is one, and only one, set of facts and interpretation of those facts that can be admitted into the Chinese conversation about history. There are settled facts, and implications from those facts, that no serious scholar would revisit without danger to career or reputation.

This point was reinforced to me early in my career teaching history at the college level. One summer, I taught a seminar class for visiting Chinese students. In the course of my lecture, I offered a path to possible future friendly relations between the Chinese and the Japanese, while acknowledging the history of enmity between them and some of the historical events that caused it. One student stood up and politely, but firmly, announced that he knew that he spoke for everyone in the room when he said that he hated the Japanese and would never imagine or desire friendly relations with them. As far as I could tell, every head nodded in agreement. For the students, the facts and implications regarding Sino-Japanese history were settled once and for all. Westerners do not have to share the Chinese view of history or approach to its study, but it is important that they be aware of the differences if they seek to be winsome and effective witnesses to the truths of the Christian faith.

For Christian workers in, or interested in, a foreign field, the imperative to study history is heightened. It is not enough to observe what a people are like; it is necessary to understand the forces that shaped them. The inexplicable or distasteful aspects of another culture are often rendered more palatable by an understanding of history. The perspective of history makes cultural idiosyncrasies seem less idiosyncratic. Students of history recognize that while politics or technology may change rapidly, cultures evolve far more slowly. Superficial changes at the surface do not necessarily reflect a radically transformed culture. For example, those who visit Asia and observe a veneer of rapid Westernization make hasty conclusions about accompanying cultural change. Those who know the history recognize culture evolving at its own pace and direction, influenced by an array of historical factors. Knowledge of history helps us to process the things we see around us more responsibly.

Most importantly, as a foreigner working in an alien context, your willingness to learn the history of your field communicates a depth of interest in the people you are there to serve. While language acquisition, also important, signals a desire to communicate with a people, a knowledge of history indicates a desire to understand them. It is hard not to grow in compassion and respect for those you have endeavored to understand at a deeper level. All humans share a common desire to be known and understood. Understanding is essential in the cross-cultural Christian ministry, especially as we consider the lengths to which our God of mission went to be understood by us.

Brent Whitefield is pastor of missions and outreach at Northpoint Evangelical Free Church in Corona, California. His work takes him to Asia several times a year. He has also taught East Asian history (Valparaiso University, Biola University) for fifteen years.

Fragmented and Complacent: The Chinese Church that Lacks Historical Consciousness

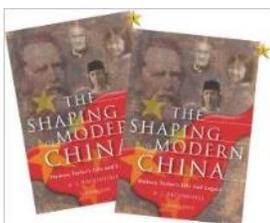
By Brother Li

The present Chinese church's lack of historical consciousness is longstanding.* This is related to the form of the Chinese church. Organizationally, the Chinese church is fragmented; temperamentally, the church is complacent.

The rapid growth of the Chinese church was based on the situation in the previous century, when, following the loosening of the centralized system of state power and the granting of the economic freedoms of the bourgeois economy without corresponding political freedoms, everyone's beliefs acted as a quick/convenient filler for their spiritual void. Accordingly, among the mass of believers there naturally was a limited interest in academic research and historical reflection—in some cases even a conscious opposition to systematic thought.

The church does not attach importance to the various types of historical research, including the history of the Chinese church, the history of the global church, and world history in general. In fact, these kinds of historical research have expanded extremely quickly within Chinese society and Chinese universities. Even Chinese official historical research has moved beyond its original exclusive adherence to the Marxist perspective on history, with now a variety of aspects as evidenced by the consistent calls from officials to resist "historical nihilism." The Chinese church, ever underground or under control, remains unconscious of its need to use faith to respond to this current age, to send forth a conscious voice—indeed, to undertake a faith-based analysis and understanding of history and culture.

In fact, Chinese research on Christianity has already seen great development. From 1980 to 2000, Chinese Christian studies were primarily focused on philosophical and literary background research. In the past ten years, with the increasing participation of many historians, research on Chinese Protestantism has gradually produced a good deal of fruit. However, the church still does not know how to apply these results.



The Chinese church not only overlooks 2000 years of church history, even including the Reformation movement and the complicated apostolic age, but directly diving into the words of the Bible, the church cannot recognize that history has practical application. Because the church feels that having the Bible is enough, the church cannot see that historical reflection is an urgent matter. We recently undertook to translate *The Shaping of Modern China: Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy* by A. J. Broomhall, and it has been extremely hard to raise funds for this project. Perhaps it is because while the church likes the story of Hudson Taylor, they do not necessarily hope to do the hard work like he did, taking up his commission of suffering.

I believe that if the church were to engage in historical reflection, we would probably soon discover that we are "poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). First, the early gospel workers who evangelized village by village have already become lead pastors, suggesting that the Chinese church is no longer growing. Many of the overseas students who have returned to become pastors, are absorbed in caring for their church members or denominationalizing their own church, suggesting that the knowledge and wisdom of the Chinese church is no longer developing: these are the believers who naturally would have the opportunity to raise the level of understanding of the Chinese church.

What kind of moment is the development of the Chinese church currently facing? From experiencing the previous century's rapid growth we have already fallen to a standstill. The rural church, in accordance with the economic changes that are affecting the entire nation, increasingly resembles an empty shell. The urban church is busy with pastoral care and incorporating new believers, but these "new" believers either come from traditional, rural churches or they are returnees from overseas. The urban church has not planted seeds of its own but is doing the harvesting—and as a harvester, is the urban church demonstrating maturity? It does not look like it!

Also, the Chinese house church has been calling for mission. In the past we had the "Back to Jerusalem" BTJ slogan, now upgraded to "2030," but nowhere in all this can be seen substantial reflection or criticism. Even a cursory look at the history of mission reveals that in order to understand just the last 100 years of mission theology and mission anthropology we cannot restrict our understanding of mission to the work and inspiration of missionaries to China of a hundred years ago (especially Hudson Taylor).

We know that before the disorderly image of the Chinese house church, the global church has always chosen to remain silent. Why? Perhaps they are painstakingly protecting and cultivating the growing maturity of the Chinese church. However, if we wish the Chinese church to mature, then we must allow the Chinese Church to think, to begin to develop her understanding/knowledge/wisdom, to begin to learn how to view history, to see God's role in history and reality. To speak to the root of the issue, the Christian faith is not a faith of a historical vacuum: that is Buddhism.

Under these circumstances, because we ignore history, the Chinese church has become extremely fractured, composed of countless little churches. In significant ways, this has caused the Chinese church to become somewhat complacent, believing that each church can individually obtain all its knowledge straight from the Bible, with no need for common ground with other believers in matters of history.

It is our special wish that the Chinese church will have the ability to listen to the voice of God and to analyze the revelation of Jesus in history, all in order that the Chinese church might have some gifts to contribute to the world that are well-founded.

Brother Li runs a small Christian publishing house in a coastal Chinese city and serves as lay missions mobilizer for his church network. Translated from Chinese by Andrew T. Kaiser.

* "Present Chinese church" in this essay refers to the church in China born of the revival movement that arose after the Cultural Revolution.

Traditional Chinese Views of History and Contemporary Chinese Christianity

By Peregrine de Vigo

The Chinese peoples, meaning those clans, tribes, and kingdoms that throughout time have inhabited the Yangtze River and Yellow River basins and beyond, were assiduous history buffs. However, that does not mean that traditional Chinese views of history were static, or that they all held to one historical view. One common view of history, popular at various periods, held to a cyclical understanding of human time (such as the 500 year cycle that gave rise to Mengzi's (孟子) anxious expectation for a king that would unite the various states battling for supremacy (see the *Mengzi* 2B:13). Another view saw history as a patterned repetition that followed the Five Phases theory (*wuxing* 五行), each dynasty replacing the next in a predictable, repetitive pattern, often identified with certain colors (yellow, blue, white, red, and black). Other views of history were more progressive, one of which held to three main "ages" of "disorder" (*juluanshi* 據亂世), moving through "rising peace" (*shengpingshi* 升平世) and culminating in "great peace" (*taipingshi* 太平世).



The common stereotype in the modern era has been that Chinese people are "backward-looking," often meaning that Chinese culture and people only value repeating old ideas and place no value on new ideas or ways of thinking. Because of this, they cannot make technological or "scientific progress" (in Anglo-European, post-Renaissance, and Industrial Revolution terms). This was a criticism held by Chinese and foreigners. The solution to this supposed backwardness, offered in the mid-1960s, was to discard the "Four Olds" (*sijiu* 四旧), that is, old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas.¹ This marked a significant break with traditional views of history, the impact of which will be discussed later, though it should be mentioned that the sprouts of this break with traditional views began much earlier, in the late Qing dynasty with the "evidential studies" school (*kaojuxue* 考據學).

The founding of the People's Republic of China opened up a new way for Chinese people to think about Chinese (and world) history. It was another form of progressive history, this time based on a Marxist account of progress that claimed human history is moving from a slave society to a feudal society, then through bourgeois-capitalist and socialist societies to culminate in a classless communist society. Chinese scholars struggled to impose this framework on historical evidence in Chinese sources that did not fit the theoretical description, but the impact of Mao's "Total Propaganda"² has gone a long way to rewriting and reframing history in the minds of the majority of citizens in the PRC. Even young people, who think they are returning to "tradition" by studying classical Chinese texts or try to bring back various traditional views on any particular topic, are quite surprised when their superficial knowledge is exposed. They discover that they are far more "modern Marxist-Maoist-Dengist-Xi Jinpingist" than they had thought. This leads to our consideration of how citizens of the PRC today view their history, both Christian and non-Christian.

A salient feature among all these very different views just presented is a pronounced "state-centeredness."³ That is to say, the subject of "history" that is promoted nationally directly serves the interests of the state (whatever form the state may take). This is not a new invention or the result of Marxist influence, as some might think, and may sound strange to foreigners for whom education in history focuses on people, events, and their interpretation, with sometimes widely divergent perspectives debated by both the layperson and scholar alike. That does not mean there are no voices producing alternative narratives in the PRC, but they tend to receive little media or scholarly attention, and their influence on society at large is marginal. Members of these state organs take necessary precautions when publicly promoting a particular historical narrative, through either self-censorship or overt silencing of views that depart from the approved narrative. What this means for the "Chinese person on the street" is that, a minority of dissenting voices aside, there is a nation-wide, generally agreed upon social narrative that is at least given lip-service. While a common person may have doubts about certain aspects of what is learned, very few people have taken up the arduous and risky task of investigating and rewriting a new narrative for themselves or others. What this means for the "foreigner on the street" is a need for awareness of the likely one-dimensional historical view of most mainland Chinese people, Christian or not. It is not that a person has weighed various views and prefers this perspective; it may be the only one he or she knows.

With this knowledge, there are a few things to keep in mind when considering Chinese history and Chinese Christian history.

First, history is not singular. There is "History," meaning the vast web of all of the aggregate events, people, institutions, letters written, gunshots fired, rallies held, births, deaths, and so on that make up reality, and which no one can fully fathom, explain, understand, or write down in a library of books. Then, there are "histories." These are the smaller narratives that people tell and retell as a way of locating themselves in that vast web of History, including personal histories, family histories, community histories, national histories, and international histories. It is the way human beings make sense of all of life. It includes the things we talk about and the taboos that we grow up learning not to talk about. Histories can include facts as well as "alternative facts." Chinese Christians who endured intense persecution are going to remember the '60s and '70s very differently than a leader of the Red Guard at that time. A millennial university student may very well have absolutely no knowledge of a series of nationally significant events from the spring of 1989. We should immediately be wary when someone says, "We Chinese believe..." about history. Be prepared to sensitively challenge the "argument from ubiquity," but make sure you are informed!

Second, having an awareness of multiple histories does not invalidate one or the other history, nor does it imply historical relativism (the idea that history is utterly subjective, unverifiable, and immune to judgment). People experiencing the same event and retelling it differently does not mean that one is wrong and the other right. At the same time, this does not imply that histories cannot be revised, and errors corrected through dialogue. Each historical narrative is an interpretation. Listen to those narratives. What do they

tell you about the people who have fit themselves into that narrative? Or have they fit themselves into it? Are they “at home” in it, or do they seem somewhat uncomfortable with it but unaware of alternatives? How do you fit into that narrative? (You may be shocked to find out.) Narratives about Christianity abound in contemporary PRC. Do you know them? How does that shape the receptivity of the person you are speaking with? Which “orthodox” narratives have they accepted or rejected? Be prepared for pushback when an alternative is presented.

Third, be aware of “historical amnesia.” This was alluded to earlier. As Galadriel says in the *Fellowship of the Ring*: “And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost.” Some subjects are taboo by force, others by shame and pain. When the memory of them fades, our histories can become distorted, and the narratives we live by can lead us astray. As Whitefield says in his article in this issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly*, this can lead to arrogance and ingratitude, both toward God and toward other people. What do the Christian young people today know of what the generation before them endured? A few years ago I interviewed an elderly woman who managed to live through the terrible years of the mid-20th century by disconnecting from fellowship with brothers and sisters. A short time prior to our conversation she had made a tremendous return to the Lord (in her 80s!). Being a nationally recognized voice teacher, she was now directing the church choir. The privilege of privately hearing her confession (for it was almost at that level) with two or three other people is very uncommon. If these stories, due to shame or other reasons, are not shared from generation to generation, people eventually become disconnected from their own histories. The tether that keeps us grounded is cut loose and we are blown around like a helium-filled balloon.

Lastly, recent church history in China is fraught with historical pitfalls. In some places there is still a great divide between house and registered churches, but in others there is cooperation. Have you spent some time learning the spiritual lay of the land in your local area before charging in (Numbers 13)? Do you know the history of the churches in your area—both registered and unregistered? Has there been harmony between or within congregations, or are there theological or social contentions?

Whether you have recently arrived in your adopted home, or have lived there for many years, proactively acquaint yourself with the histories of the people around you. Based on this new knowledge, is there anything you should do differently? Any practices or patterns of ministry that should be changed to better meet people where they are (and where they perceive themselves to be)? Be aware of your own histories as well: cultural, spiritual, political, familial. How does that impact what you do, the decisions you make? As the horizons of your life and the lives of the people you meet intersect, new histories will be formed. You will become a part of other people’s stories, and they will become a part of yours.

Peregrine de Vigo, MA, lived in central China for nine years and is a student of philosophy, sinology, and several other “-ologies.”

¹ Exactly which customs, cultures, habits and ideas were “old” was never fully made clear, and in fact, changed with the whims of leadership.

² See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 9-15. “We are here in the presence of an organized myth that tries to take hold of the entire person. Through the myth it creates, propaganda imposes a complete range of intuitive knowledge, susceptible of only one interpretation, unique and one-sided, and precluding any divergence” (p. 11).

³ David S. Nivison, “Philosophy of History,” *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2003). This essay was immensely helpful for the earlier summary of Chinese historiography.

View from the Wall

Why Believers Need to Understand Chinese Church History

By Brother Liu

In the book of Ecclesiastes it is written: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes. 1:9)

History is like a mirror. For many things that are happening today, countless similar things have occurred repeatedly throughout history—and the church is no exception. If the church can draw lessons from history, then the church can better influence the world. If not, then the church will only be like Israel, ceaselessly wandering in the desert, to the point of being swayed by the world. For believers, familiarity with history makes it possible to understand scriptural truth more clearly, to better understand God’s will, and to better live out our faith. Chinese Christians generally do not understand Chinese church history, and so we often have no means to properly respond to changes in society.



[Through the Mirror by Lyle Vincent via Flickr.](#)

Know the Past to Understand the Present

In recent years, the Chinese church has faced several difficulties, from the “controversy of cross removals” to the “sinicization of Christianity.” Faced with these sudden external pressures, Chinese believers have made some mistakes. Actually, if we look back on Chinese church history, it is not hard to discover that this is nothing new. Through an examination of this history, it should be possible to find appropriate ways to respond to these pressures. Two difficult incidents within Chinese church history are particularly significant for the church. The first was the consequences of the anti-Buddhist persecution of the Wuzong Emperor during the Tang Dynasty of the Nestorian church. The second was the Kangxi Emperor’s proscription of Catholic Christianity during the Qing Dynasty.

During the Tang Dynasty, the Nestorian church followed a strategy of appealing to elites, vigorously soliciting the good opinion of the imperial court and officials in order to attain the Emperor’s support. In terms of evangelism, they chose to follow a path of indigenization. A large number of their translations of Nestorian classics employed commonly used Buddhist terms in order to seek broad public acceptance. These methods were driven by necessity, but they also made it difficult to separate the doctrine that was being spread from Buddhism—to the degree that at the time of Emperor Wuzong’s anti-Buddhist persecution, the Nestorian church also disappeared from history.

During the reign of the Kangxi Emperor of the Qing dynasty, the Catholic church had a major breakthrough in their missionary work. The Christian faith was accepted from the upper classes to the general public with a substantial increase in the size of the believing community; Luo Wenzao was even ordained as a bishop. At just this time when the mission work was so positive, internal disputes within the church led to the well-known “Rites Controversy.” The resulting one hundred year proscription of the church during the Qing dynasty caused irretrievable loss to the Chinese church.

Looking at these two periods of church history together, the Nestorian church made the mistake of excessive indigenization and thus lost its own identity, while the Catholic church made the error of excessive doctrinal nitpicking that resulted in forfeited opportunities to further evangelize. As today’s Chinese church faces its own set of difficulties, history tells us that we must not blindly indigenize, nor should we simply resist. On the contrary, we should actively unite, seek consensus, and find the essence of the *missio dei* for today’s Chinese Christian church; then, with one heart strive to complete that mission.

History Is Full of “Nutrients”

If these “nutrients” can be extracted from church history, then the church will be able to continue developing in a healthy manner. In the closing years of the Qing dynasty, Chinese church history encountered the heart-saddening church tragedy of 1900.¹ This tragedy, however, did not bring the Chinese church to a standstill; on the contrary, the appropriate response of Timothy Richard and many other missionaries had a positive effect on the later development of the church. At that time, they discerned that the cause of the persecution was the ignorance of the people as a result of the backward educational system. Accordingly, they actively promoted the establishment of schools, driving the reform of China’s educational system and helping China escape isolation and ignorance. I believe that was God’s intention for that time.

For believers, familiarity with church history can increase our faith in the Lord. Similarly, familiarity with history can also help us see more clearly God’s purposes in the present. Hardship has never been absent from the history of the church. The Lord Jesus, however, has promised: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Brother Liu is pastor in an inland, second-tier Chinese city. His congregation is one of the first urban professional churches in that city.

Translated from Chinese by Andrew T. Kaiser.

¹ Boxer Uprising of 1900.

Peoples of China

Women in China's Protestant Church and Missions

By eL

In the smothering heat of a Wuhan summer, she was garbed in the full black robes of an ordained minister and preached as hundreds of worshippers sat, squatted, and stood in the multi-story, Three-Self church building. As the reverend led the service, she paused as if on impulse and called to the audience, "Come up, friends. I know many of you have been brought here by your family or friends for the first time to church. Come up to the front, I want to talk to you!" At her unrelenting prompting, between twenty and thirty people made their way to the pulpit. There, the minister proceeded to present the gospel in no uncertain terms: "You must believe in Jesus!" This woman steered the thriving Three-Self church in one of China's largest cities for many years. She illustrates the powerful leadership women have given to the development of China's Protestant faith.



Mr. and Mrs. Wang Mingdao, 1940s, photo of unknown origin

Today on mission fields where mainland Chinese missionaries are active, more than sixty percent of those workers are female, and on some fields the number may exceed ninety percent. Thus, while most senior leaders are men, women make up the majority of workers both in home churches and on the field. Their contributions and circumstances can sometimes be overlooked. Dana Robert edited a collection of essays on women in modern missions and observed that while "...women missionaries have represented the cutting edge of much of Western Christian involvement in non-Western cultures... Probably the most significant ambiguity in the work of 20th century missionary women has been their lack of recognition."

Writings, both academic and popular, do exist which uncover some of the legacy of women in missions and the Chinese church prior to 1950. Perhaps, with the exception of the section below about Mrs. Wang Mingdao, other sources in English give valuable information about the women we look at here; thus, this article is an attempt to share what has touched me personally in learning how God used women of bygone days to build his church in China.

Jennie Faulding

Hudson Taylor scandalized Victorian Christendom by accepting, even encouraging, single women to join the China Inland Mission. Just as their male counterparts did, eventually CIM women travelled into remote provinces as pioneers in their own right. Thirteen years after the mission's founding, Hudson Taylor's second wife, Jennie Faulding, in 1878, led the first group of female CIM missionaries to an inland area—famine-stricken Shanxi. Her expedition made it acceptable for single women to penetrate into hitherto unreached areas.

Under Jennie's leadership, two single women and a married one, joined later by four more women, devised strategies to rebuild lives after a ghastly famine. Men from various agencies were already in Shanxi, but the female team reached swathes of the population that men could not. They expanded the orphanage that was already there and hundreds of orphans were taken in. A similar number of widows and aged were cared for. Thanks to Jennie's practical wisdom, young and old were taught work skills (plaiting straw, spinning cotton, embroidery, and so on) while also being taught to "gossip the gospel" using the five-color "wordless book."

This ground-breaking effort came at no small personal cost; Jennie had to leave her husband, at his request, with their young children while she spent over a year in Shanxi. Married to Hudson Taylor for three decades, Jennie Faulding's name nevertheless is not widely recognized. Her better-known predecessor, Maria Dyer Taylor, was Hudson's first love and is celebrated in Taylor biographies. Research remains to be done to uncover the contributions of both these women toward the developing of the Taylor dynasty.

Dora Yu

Christians, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, usually recognize the name of Watchman Nee, but how many know of the woman whose preaching led Nee to Christ? The name of Dora Yu (Yu Cidu) is barely remembered, even among Chinese believers just a generation younger than her. Born to a doctor who had been pressed into service with the armies of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom but who later found true Christianity and served as a pastor in Hangzhou, Dora followed in her father's footsteps and was one of the first two female graduates of Suzhou Medical College in 1896. At age 19, her parents both deceased, Dora declined a marriage offer for the sake of ministry. Within a year after qualifying, Dora was asked to accompany her mentor, Mrs. Josephine Campbell of the American Southern Methodist Episcopal Mission, to Korea; thus Dora became one of the earliest Chinese to go cross-culturally. The two women practiced medicine and preached very effectively to the Koreans and founded Baewha Girls' School, forerunner of Baewha Women's University in Seoul. Dora threw herself into ministry and her health collapsed; she left the mission field permanently in 1903, yet sure of God's leading for a new phase of service to him.

Initially Dora worked as a doctor while continuing evangelistic preaching around Zhejiang and Jiangsu. Revival was stirring, and in 1907 Dora felt led to trust God wholly, retiring her medical practice and eschewing defined support to become the first "faith mission" worker of the modern Chinese church. For the next two decades, Dora's prominence as a revivalist, teacher, and mentor to younger preachers left a lasting legacy for the newly indigenizing church. Jiangwan Bible School in Shanghai resulted from Dora's faith and fund-raising; many female Bible teachers were sent out from there. Silas Wu notes Dora's impact on younger revivalists such as Peace Wang (Wang Peizhen) who gave herself to full-time ministry under Dora's preaching, and likewise, in the Shanghai Revival of 1925, Andrew Gih (Ji Zhiwen) was profoundly influenced. The 1927 Keswick Convention invited Dora as a keynote speaker, the only Chinese person to receive such an invitation.

Against the backdrop of China slowly being reunited by the Chiang Kai-shek Nationalists, the late 1920s saw a turning away from

women leaders in the church. Dora died in 1931, and the next decades of church development fell to men. It is interesting to compare what happened then with what has been taking place in the church in China over the past few years—from the times of trial and repression under Mao, when “house churches” were born and commonly led by women, to the period of openness (1980s through the early 2000s) when women served equally with men, to an increasingly influential Reformed perspective today that once again discourages women from leadership and public ministry.

“The Trio”

In the 1920s, a unique threesome of doughty female explorers and fearless evangelists—the French sisters, Eva and Francesca, and Mildred Cable—put missions and the importance of neglected frontiers before the world’s eyes as never before. Beginning in 1923 and through the 1930s, they ventured deep into the vastness of western China and Central Asia with quantities of Christian literature, their sleeping bags, a tent, and pots and pans but with no arms nor male escorts. Their contemporaries, Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin, and Albert von Le Coq, were explorers with well-provisioned caravans, financed by the colonial powers of the day, commissioned to seek treasure along the old Silk Road. Mildred Cable’s records (along with those of her co-author Francesca French) of their encounters with local peoples, their travels, and the landscape earned them international acclaim and awards from prestigious societies—and also an invitation to tea with the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

Beyond the physical courage of “the Trio,” their unconventionality also jolted theological and missiological norms of the day. They were criticized for serving communion to a small congregation in Xinjiang, and their strong views on female leadership in missions were ahead of their time. Linda Benson has delved into the lives and significance of “the Trio” and speculates that differences with leaders of the CIM may have contributed to their leaving the relative ease of the established mission station in Huozhou, Shanxi and striking out for the unknown.

Benson also notes that, though CIM records are silent, nevertheless it took a year before permission was granted for the women to go west. Actually, the French sisters and Mildred Cable had invested nearly two decades of ministry in Shanxi, teaching in a girls’ school and working in a dispensary (Mildred had studied pharmacy in London), while seeing the church grow and eventually be led by Chinese pastors. In their desire to move on, they adhered both to Hudson Taylor’s spirit of wanting to preach the gospel where it had never been proclaimed, and also to today’s church-planting mantra of “model, assist, watch, leave.”

It is harder to trace the legacy of “the trio” regarding converts in China’s Muslim areas. Their calling was to scatter gospel seed as widely as possible. Undoubtedly, they touched many lives, especially those of Muslim women sequestered from contact with male missionaries, and among the general populace the three women were known as “the Teachers of Righteousness.” Their Shanxi sojourn may have been more significant from the standpoint of women and Chinese church development. In 1904, Eva and Mildred opened a girls’ school in Huozhou, and for over twenty years prayed in funds to open other schools to train women as Bible teachers and church leaders. The thousand or more graduates of the school ministered in different parts of China; 130 of them went on to train thousands of other women. Cable and her cohorts may not have been unique among missionaries to spot the need to raise up local church leaders, especially females to minister to other women, but by gifting, personality and persistence they carved a singular niche in the annals of China’s church.

Mrs. Wang Mingdao

If Mr. Wang Mingdao was the “man of iron,” then Liu Jingwen, his wife, surely could be known as the “woman of silk.” Silk complements the hardness of iron with beauty, fluidity, and a gentleness interwoven with steely strength. Mrs. Wang, like Dora Yu, was a pastor’s daughter from Hangzhou, possessing the refinement attributed to women of that region. Mr. Wang (he never used the title “pastor,” much less “reverend”) is renowned for his uncompromising stand against theological liberalism. The new Communist powers saw Mr. Wang as both the embarrassing embodiment of “Three Self” principles and particularly as a threat to their ultimate control of the church. From the 1930s until the end of their public ministry, the Wangs saw God grow mightily their household fellowship into the largest, independent, evangelical church in the capital.

Mrs. Wang was a self-effacing part of her husband’s success. Her tact and attention to detail offset her husband’s bluntness. Her pastoral heart expressed itself in practical care for members of the congregation. She noted individuals’ needs and sought ways to supply them, often passing on presents intended for the Wangs themselves. Mrs. Wang’s own gifts of encouragement and discernment would identify a person’s abilities or gift, and she always warmly affirmed that person in developing those gifts in the body of Christ. Besides the role of pastor’s wife, at home Mrs. Wang overcame the sadness of seeing their only child, son Tianduo, reject Christ, while leading her daughter-in-law and granddaughter to the Lord.

It was not just Mr. Wang whose theological convictions cost a grim price. Indeed, after their first arrest in 1955, the authorities canily released Mr. Wang first, knowing that Mrs. Wang would exert a strong, steadying influence on him if they were together. They kept her in detention, and having manipulated him into accepting the Three-Self position, upon his release he obediently attended some of their meetings. But after Mrs. Wang rejoined her husband, and he regained his mental and spiritual equilibrium, he went back to the authorities, recanted his “confession” of being wrong in opposing the Three-Self Church, and was of course promptly re-imprisoned, the second time for 22 years. When asked before she also was re-imprisoned, Mrs. Wang averred that she never had anything to recant or repent of, for subjected to pressures which had defeated the man, this slender woman had stood resilient and unyielding as iron.

It is impossible to speculate what Mr. Wang’s life and ministry might have been without Liu Jingwen. But as someone who had the privilege of observing them together in their final years, free in Shanghai after decades of harsh treatment and separation, it was clear that the bond between husband and wife was one of shared call, commitment, and love of Christ. With her own health also fragile after prison, Mrs. Wang continued to supervise the household and care for Mr. Wang who continually received a parade of visitors who had come to admire the hero. She devoted time and care each day to writing to the many former church members with whom she diligently sought to follow up. Nearly blind, she used a cardboard stencil to frame each line so she could write characters in the

space between. Her memory for names and personal concern for each one spoke vividly of the value she placed on each brother and sister. Thus, in talking with those who were close to the Wangs, clearly it was she who left the imprint of “body life” indelibly in the lives of those she knew.

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eL has been engaged with China since the 1970s— in hands-on ministry herself and in getting others to pray, give, send, and go. Now she seeks to develop more programs for deeper discipleship among women.

¹ Personal observation, around 2003.

² Personal conversation with the head of a Chinese sending agency, 2014.

³ Dana Robert, ed., *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers* (NY: Orbis, 2002).

⁴ Reading list – see Bibliography of Resources.

⁵ Fundamentalist/evangelical women were hardly the only ones working in China in the heyday of Protestant missions. Non-evangelical women were also making contributions. This fact was especially true in medical ministries pioneered by women. Margo S. Gewurtz, Professor of Humanities at York University, Toronto, has written much on the contribution of Canadian women and recounts the life of Dr. Jean Isabel Dow of the Canadian Presbyterians. For most of the first two decades of the 20th century, Dr. Dow was one of the few physicians, and perhaps the only woman doctor, in Henan. She supervised the hospital at Changde and trained Chinese Christian women as assistants. Dr. Dow is also unrecognized for her pioneer research into Kala Azar disease (from the bite of sand flies; only malaria is more deadly). Professor Gewurtz notes that Dr. Dow was a very pious young woman who from her teen years felt called to missionary service. If women doctors are hardly mentioned in mission’s history, then, according to Sonya Grypma (Professor of Nursing, Trinity Western University, British Columbia) female nurses are all but invisible. Grypma sheds light on their unknown stories in her volume, *Canadian Nurses at the North China Mission, 1888-1947* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008).

⁶ Andrew T. Kaiser, *The Rushing on of the Purposes of God* (OR: Pickwick, 2016), 19, 33.

⁷ John C. Pollock, *Hudson Taylor and Maria* (McGraw-Hill, 1962).

⁸ G. Wright Doyle, “Nee Watchman (Ni Tuosheng) 1903 ~ 1972” *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/n/ni-tuosheng.php>, 2016.

⁹ Silas H. Wu has written most of the English material on the woman he calls the “foremost female evangelist in 20th century Chinese Revivalism.” See his book, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival in 20th-century China* (Pishon River Publications, 2002).

¹⁰ Dana Robert, ed., *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers* (NY: Orbis, 2002), 95. Peace Wang’s preaching at Yantai in 1925 converted Li Changshou (“Witness” Lee) who later founded the “Local Church.” Andrew Gih founded the Bethel Evangelistic Band and preached to hundreds of thousands before, during and after World War II. After 1949 his extensive ministry continued across the Chinese world until his death in Los Angeles in 1985. www.bdcconline.net.

¹¹ Linda Benson, “Missionaries with Attitude: A Women’s Mission in Northwestern China,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, v. 29, no 4 (October 2005), 183-188. The Queen Consort of George VI, late mother of the current monarch, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and the Royal Central Asian Society were among those that honored “the Trio.”

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Martha Stockment, “Mildred Cable, 1878 ~ 1952” *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*. <http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/c/cable-mildred.php>.

¹⁴ The concepts of self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating were solid church-planting ideals expropriated by the Communists resulting in a severing of ties between Chinese churches and outsiders by the early 1950s.

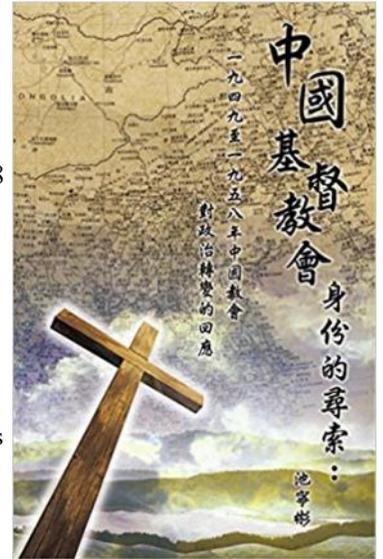
Book Review

Ecclesiology, History, and the Identity of the Chinese Church

The Search for the Identity of the Chinese Christian Church: Ecclesiological Responses of the Chinese Church in 1949-1958 to the Political Changes, (中國基督教會身份的尋索：1949-1958年中國教會對政治轉變的回應) by Chee, Nan Pin (池寧彬). Hong Kong: WEC International, 2016. Paperback, 333 pages, ISBN-13: 978-9881235930; \$10.50 at Amazon in both [English](#) and [Chinese](#).

Reviewed by Kevin Xiyi Yao

It is common sense that the 1950s are key to understanding the current state and dynamics of the Protestant and Catholic churches in mainland China today. However, in recent decades, there have not been many new publications on the Chinese Christian experience of the 1950s. Nan Pin Chee's book is a rare, recent publication, although it is not new research. The book is largely based on the author's Doctor of Ministry thesis which was finished in 2003. The work was originally written in English, and has been published in both English and Chinese. This review is based on the Chinese version of the book and evaluates the book in this context.



Following a historical approach, this study traces the origin and early stages of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and Chinese Protestant Christians' responses to changing church-state relations from 1949-1958. The first chapter is a historical review of how Chinese Christians considered the nature of church, and how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) viewed religion before 1949. In the second chapter, the author starts with a more comprehensive and deeper examination of the CCP's understanding of religion and its religious policy. Then he surveys and compares the ecclesiology of several top Chinese church leaders and theologians such as Y. T. Wu (吳耀宗), T. C. Chao (趙紫宸), Wang Mingdao (王明道), and Watchman Nee (倪柝聲). The third chapter illustrates how church leaders responded to the mounting political pressures and the demand for being patriotic and severing ties with the West. The following chapters focus more on the institutionalization of TSPM and evangelicals' responses. The origin of the house church movement is also touched on. The final chapter is assessment and conclusion.

The central theme of this work is that in understanding the responses of Chinese Christian leaders to the TSPM and the CCP's religious policy, we must acknowledge that Chinese Christians' ecclesiology is a huge factor. Chinese church leaders' different responses and interactions with the TSPM cannot be properly and adequately understood by simply reducing their actions to political and historical decisions and ignoring the crucial role played by their different ecclesiologies. When the CCP began to intensify its campaigns, and the TSPM gained momentum, different Chinese ecclesiologies clashed with one another and profoundly shaped the Chinese church's relations with the state and the TSPM. This theme is indeed what makes this book a significant contribution to the study of Chinese Christianity of the 1950s. In a field dominated by the presupposition that the TSPM's rise was largely a result of political manipulation and calculation, this book reminds us that ecclesiological considerations also played a major role. Indeed, theology matters in this field.

On the other hand, the importance of ecclesiology may be overstated. After all, the CCP and its policy quickly became a decisive force in shaping the Chinese church internally and externally after 1949. A sole emphasis on the church's ecclesiology cannot explain why so many evangelical churches eventually joined the TSPM, even though their ecclesiology was very similar to the ecclesiology of Wang Mingdao. Contrary to the author's claim (p. 105), Watchman Nee was not resistant to the TSPM from the beginning to the end. (See Fuk-tsang Ying, *Anti-Imperialism, Patriotism and the Spiritual Man: A Study on Watchman Nee and the Little Flock*, Hong Kong: The Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2005).

Overall, much of this book's content could be updated and its writing polished. Given the fact that this study was done as early as 2003, the research and publications of the past decade are not mentioned or included. All these issues should be considered within the context of the author's sudden decease in 2003 and the need for a more thorough editing of his original work.

However, this book is commendable in giving a clear narrative of the early stages of the TSPM and the church's conflicts, and in highlighting how important theology and Christian identity are in understanding the decisions made by that generation of Christian leaders. This is a valuable lesson we should keep in mind as we study the history of Chinese Christianity.

An expert on the history of Christianity in China, Kevin Xiyi Yao, ThD, is Associate Professor of World Christianity and Asian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Resource Corner

Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity

Introducing the

Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity

The life stories of significant figures in Chinese Christianity
across the centuries and around the world



Christianity has an ancient history in China, dating back at least to 635 A.D. Roman Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Protestantism had all entered China by 1807. By 1957, Chinese Christians numbered about 1,700,000. During the past 50 years, Christians in China have survived severe persecution while multiplying themselves many times, with estimates ranging from fifty to a hundred million. Christianity has spread its influence in Chinese communities around the world, where Chinese churches are growing rapidly.

Who are the persons who have played important roles in this tremendous growth? What are the names and stories of Chinese indigenous church leaders and lay persons who pioneered and nurtured the churches, led independent Christian movements, and applied biblical values to Chinese social and political challenges?

To address these questions, a group of China scholars founded the Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity (BDCC). An electronic database in both Chinese and English, the BDCC contains authoritative biographies of the foreign missionaries and Chinese church leaders, evangelists, and laity chiefly responsible for laying the foundations and advancing the growth of Chinese Christian communities and their influence in societies around the world.

Since the launching of the current site in 2009, more than 1,000,000 people have visited this rich repository of information and evaluation of God's work among his servants among the Chinese.

A redesigned website is underway and set to be launched this autumn.