

Origins of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement:

John Livingston Nevius

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ABSTRACT

This is a historical analysis of the missionary methods introduced to China during the nineteenth century by John Livingston Nevius and his work's influence on the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). This study covers the old system of missions and why Nevius sought to change them. It also discusses the three-self idea as implemented by Nevius as a means to strengthen the Church in China. The paper then addresses how the TSPM later used many of the same ideas introduced by Nevius. Finally, this study demonstrates that Chinese Protestants adopted the three-self idea with the goal of reinforcing the church's position in China while the new communist government hoped the same ideas would hasten the decline of Protestantism in China.

Origins of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement: John Livingston Nevius

Shortly after establishing the People's Republic of China in 1949, the new communist government placed the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in charge of all Protestant churches in China.¹ This organization proclaimed the idea of a three-self church, meaning it wanted the Chinese Church to become self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating, corresponding to the areas of church finances, administration, and evangelism respectively.² As the organization that, at least nominally, represents all the Protestant churches in China and supervises those churches for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the TSPM has played an important and controversial role in China's recent history.³ Its importance is most evident in the growth of Protestant Christianity in China. When the Communist government came to power, Protestants numbered approximately one million while the Roman Catholic community was estimated to have three times that amount.⁴ By the year 2000, the TSPM claimed that Chinese Protestants numbered fifteen million while Catholicism was thought to have only ten million followers.⁵ Despite the numerical success of the TSPM, its foundation rests on a hotbed of controversy. This is primarily the result of collaboration between leaders of the TSPM and Communist Party in dismantling the missionary enterprise, which they accomplished by cutting

¹ Originally called the Three-Self Reformation Movement, this was changed in 1954 to the current Three-Self Patriotic Movement; however, it is also known as the Three-Self Movement and Three-Self Church. In order to reduce confusion in this study it will be referred to as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement or abbreviated TSPM. Francis P. Jones, "The Christian Church in Communist China," *Far Eastern Survey* 24, no. 12 (Dec., 1955): 186, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3023787> (accessed September 18, 2011).

² G. Thompson Brown, *Christianity in the People's Republic of China* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 84.

³ Michael D. Suman, *The Church in China: One Lord Two Systems* (Bangalore: SAIACS, 2006), 17.

⁴ Jones, "The Christian Church in Communist China," 184.

⁵ Daniel H. Bays, "Chinese Protestant Christianity Today," *The China Quarterly*, no. 174 (Jun., 2003): 491, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20059005> (accessed September 29, 2011).

off foreign aid, denouncing foreign missions as imperialistic, and forcing foreign missionaries to evacuate the country.⁶

Since the TSPM is a significant player in China today, it has been the subject of repeated analysis and over time the historical interpretation of it has changed. When dealing with the origins of the TSPM, scholars have approached it from three perspectives: a product of the Communist government, a product of negative mission work, or a product of positive mission work. However, no scholarly work focuses solely on one of these modes of thought; instead, they give attention to each of them while emphasizing what they perceive as most relevant. Although the origin of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement has been covered from several angles, there remains a void in the scholarship relating to the mission work of John Livingston Nevius, an American missionary who spent most of his life developing self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches in China. Therefore, this study's purpose is to fill the existing gap by illustrating how Protestant leaders of the TSPM adapted the missionary methods of Nevius to strengthen the Church, while the CCP conversely sought to use the ideas of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement to hasten the Church's decline.

It must be noted that the reason John Nevius's importance to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement has been overlooked stems from the fact that forming self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches was not his creation. This idea had already been formulated by mission executives Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, although neither of them was able to apply it in the field.⁷ In an article published in the January 1990 issue of *International Bulletin of*

⁶ Wallace C. Merwin and Francis P. Jones, "Introduction," in *Documents of Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in China*, ed. Francis P. Jones, iii-v (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1963), iii; Jones, "The Christian Church in Communist China," 185.

⁷ Henry Venn was the "leading secretary of the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1872." Rufus Anderson was the "senior secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

Missionary Research, author Wilbert Shenk points out that Anderson and Venn are frequently credited for developing the indigenous church and three-self concepts. Although he claims that the indigenous church idea did not begin with them, Shenk points out their instrumental role in using and popularizing the phrase “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.”⁸ In his book *Seeking the Common Ground*, Philip Wickeri takes this idea further claiming Anderson and Venn originated the “Three-Self formula.” However, he is quick to point out that neither of them ever served in a mission field.⁹ Since Anderson and Venn only theorized the three-self principle and never applied it in the field, the statement in Samuel Chao’s biography that “Nevius must be considered as the originator of the ‘Three-Self Principles’ in the 19th century Shantung, China,” is accurate. Still, despite the association of Nevius with self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches, the relationship between Nevius’s work and the tenets behind the Three-Self Patriotic Movement has never been drawn out.¹⁰

In order to illustrate how Nevius fits into the origins of the TSPM, this paper must explain three things. First, it should show Nevius’s role in introducing and implementing the three-self idea as a nineteenth-century American missionary in China. From there the paper must show the similarities between the ideas promoted by Nevius and those proclaimed by the TSPM. In order to successfully draw this connection, the reasons for establishing the TSPM must be explored through the eyes of both the Communist government and Chinese Protestant

Missions from 1832 to 1866.” Wilbert R. Shenk, “The Origins and Evolution of the Three-Selfs in Relation to China,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 14, no. 1 (January 1990): 28, <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/system/files/1990-01-028-shenk.pdf> (accessed October 7, 2011); Samuel H. Chao, “John Livingston Nevius (1829-1893): a Historical Study of his Life and Mission Methods” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991), 6-7.

⁸ Shenk, 28-29.

⁹ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China’s United Front*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 36-37.

¹⁰Chao, 305; John L. Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1958), preface to fourth edition.

leadership. To begin, this study needs to illuminate the motives of the atheist PRC in controlling religion, in this case the Protestant Church, through patriotic movements like the TSPM.¹¹ Then the position of the Chinese Protestant Church in relation to the new government must be explained with particular detail given to Wu Yaozong, founder of the TSPM, and his pivotal role in allowing communication between the communists and Protestants. Before this can be done, however, it is necessary to observe what other scholars have already contributed so it may be built upon and in some cases clarified.

Francis P. Jones wrote one of the earliest analyses of the TSPM in a 1955 article for *Far Eastern Survey*, titled “The Christian Church in Communist China.” In this article, Jones portrays the TSPM as little more than a product of the government. This is most clear in his statement that “it must be supposed that it was the Communist Party itself which chose [Wu Yaozong] for the task of remolding the thinking of Chinese Protestant Christians.”¹² Although Jones does point out how the Protestant churches in China had made headway on becoming autonomous prior to 1949 through the education and training of Chinese Christians, he spends more time covering the government’s attempt to gain control of the Church in China.¹³ Overall, the article conveys the idea that the TSPM is nothing more than the communist government’s ploy for abruptly cutting off Chinese Christians from outside influence and assistance.

By 1963, Jones had published two more books: *The Church in Communist China: a Protestant Appraisal* and *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in China*. Although Jones’s view of the TSPM had not changed, scholars who reviewed his book expressed views that varied from those Jones had established. A

¹¹ After the CCP acquired control of mainland China they established five official religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism. At that time denominational divisions were ended with the government molding a single all-inclusive Protestant Church.

¹² Jones, “The Christian Church in Communist China,” 185.

¹³ Jones, “The Christian Church in Communist China,” 184.

notably different perspective is found in Mu Fu-Sheng's review published in *The China Quarterly*. Instead of seeing the TSPM almost exclusively as the product of the communist government as Jones did, Mu points out that the TSPM's existence is partially due to poorly managed mission work by the West. Mu shows that prior to 1949, the Church in China was excessively reliant on foreign mission funds.¹⁴ He goes on to say Wu Yaorong's switching of sides was not opportunistic as it might seem, but rather Wu had stopped seeing eye to eye with missionaries well before the communists rose to power.¹⁵ Mu's advocacy of the TSPM as both a product of the religiously-opposed government and of ill-implemented mission work is clearest when he states "Chinese Christians simultaneously suffered political pressure from a *materialist government* and the *loss of foreign funds*."¹⁶

Although the interpretation of the TSPM was beginning to change direction by the early 1960's, there was little development in the following twenty years. This was a direct result of the Cultural Revolution, which forced churches in China underground. During this period of China's history, to all outside observers it seemed "nationalism and the secular state, embodied in the Chinese Communist movement" had eliminated Christianity from Chinese culture. Consequently, there was minimal academic interest in studying the history of the Church in China for two decades.¹⁷

Interest in Chinese Christianity sprang back to life in 1979 once churches across China began to reopen their doors, thirteen years after the initiation of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁸ Along

¹⁴ Mu Fu-Sheng, Review of *Documents of Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in China*, by Francis P. Jones, *The China Quarterly*, no. 20 (Oct. – Dec., 1964), 167, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/651716> (accessed September 18, 2011).

¹⁵ Mu, 168.

¹⁶ Mu, 167. Emphasis Added

¹⁷ Daniel H. Bays, "Preface," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays, vii-xii (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), vii.

¹⁸ Brown, xii.

with this revived curiosity came a new perspective on the TSPM. This change in perception is evident in George Thompson Brown's 1983 book, *Christianity in the People's Republic of China*. Even though he dedicates the majority of his book to the political and governmental events surrounding the evolution of the Church in China, Brown raises the new question of "What went right?" in China missions prior to the communist revolution. He seeks to answer this question in light of finding out that the Church in China had survived against all expectations under the oppressive rule of the PRC.¹⁹ In his attempt to explain what went right in China, Brown looks at the institutions missionaries established, especially schools and medical centers. Through these institutions, the missionaries were able to educate Chinese Christians and help them become leaders in their churches and communities; however, he points out that the transfer of authority to Chinese Christians had not been happening fast enough. Brown also suggests that the same institutions that promoted Christianity before the revolution were likely responsible for hampering indigenous growth because they relied extensively on "foreign grants, experience, and administration."²⁰ So even though his book implies that there were positive mission works that influenced the Church in China, Brown still supports the idea that the negative impact of western missionaries and the government were responsible for the establishment of the TSPM.

In 2006, Michael D. Suman provided a more complete picture in *The Church in China: One Lord Two Systems*. This book takes a more comprehensive look at the Church in China, providing insight on how the Communist government and pre-revolutionary mission work both positively and negatively influenced the TSPM. Suman gives several examples of early missionaries who promoted self-supporting churches in China, while at the same time explaining that many of the Chinese Christians had become dependent on the services of the mission

¹⁹ Brown, 12.

²⁰ Brown, 34, 36, 41.

compounds. He goes on to point out that foreign missionaries were seen as the “cultural vanguards of imperialism,” and that many of the Chinese people believed them to be the paid agents of their respective governments.²¹ Despite expanding upon the influences of missionaries, Suman still claims that it was not the Chinese Christians but the communist government that created the TSPM, so it could serve as a connection between the Church and the state.²² By fully illustrating all three aspects that helped bring about the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Suman provides the clearest view of its origins. Despite thoroughly explaining the political and religious factors involved in the creation of the TSPM, *The Church in China*, along with the rest of existing scholarship, fails to mention one of the earliest and loudest voices to promote the three-self idea: John Livingston Nevius.

Although there is not currently any academic work covering the importance of John L. Nevius to the formation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, three distinct modes of thought demonstrate the nature of its origins. However, none of these modes is the exclusive reason behind the founding of the TSPM; rather it is a combination of the PRC’s desire to control the Church, the mistakes made by the missionaries, and the good works of the missionaries that brought about the creation of the TSPM. This study will build on the existing literature of all three lines of thought, but will contribute new evidence supporting the idea that pre-revolutionary mission work positively influenced the TSPM. More specifically, it will look at the life of John Livingston Nevius and examine the relationship between the mission methods he promoted and the foundational ideas of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

To better understand the importance of Nevius’s mission methods, a brief examination of his life and work environment is in order. In March 1854, John L. Nevius and his wife of nine

²¹ Suman, 146.

²² Suman, 214.

brief months arrived on the shores of China.²³ Ningbo, their first assigned station, was a port city that the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing had opened to foreigners.²⁴ While in Ningbo, Nevius used the standard mission methods of the time, which involved paying “the more advanced and intelligent of the native church members,” to spread the Gospel by preaching and distributing tracts of scripture.²⁵ However, he gradually came to the realization that these methods not only were ineffective but occasionally “worked evil.” Nevius later used the experience gained at Ningbo to portray the flaws of what he eventually referred to as the old or employment system of missions.²⁶

Nevius’s view of the employment system is best summed up in his following statement.

Now we readily admit that whatever course we may take, the Chinese in general will still regard us as foreign emissaries, our religion as a feint and our converts as mercenaries. What we deprecate is, gratuitously furnishing what will be regarded as conclusive evidence that these unfavorable opinions are well founded. Our enemies are sufficiently formidable without our giving them an unnecessary advantage.²⁷

The PRC eventually capitalized on these fears expressed in Nevius’s writings in order to drive a wedge between foreign missions and Chinese churches. However, in his time, Nevius tried to introduce a new method of missions to prevent such an outcome. Ironically, but not coincidentally, the principles of self-support, self-governance, and self-propagation that Nevius promoted in the nineteenth century, later became the three-self idea behind the TSPM.

The old method of missionary work that Nevius began using in Ningbo, but later sought to reform, had grown out of several practical factors. First, missionaries were naturally eager to

²³ Chao, 42.

²⁴ Chao, 46.

²⁵ Nevius, 8.

²⁶ In his writings Nevius refers to the Old System, Old Method, and Employment System interchangeably. Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 5-6, 9, *passim*.

²⁷ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 18.

see the fruits of their labor, and being able to report back to churches at home that native assistants had been obtained for the purpose of spreading the Gospel helped sustain or increase support from abroad.²⁸ Another reason for the popularity of this system of missions was the limitations placed on the missionaries due to language barriers which native speakers did not face.²⁹ The final cause for the widespread use of the employment system was a result of the early restrictions on foreigners, including missionaries, from traveling outside the vicinity of port cities that opened after the aforementioned Treaty of Nanjing. Again, this was a problem that could be worked around by hiring converts to preach and distribute scripture in areas inaccessible to missionaries.³⁰ Even after mission stations had become securely established, missionaries had mastered the language, and the whole of China had opened to foreigners, the practice of using paid native agents continued to be the standard among missionaries in China until the CCP forced their exodus.³¹

John L. Nevius was eventually able to stray from the old methods and experiment with his own as new unequal treaties allowed missionaries greater access to China. The 1858 Treaty of Tianjin allowed British subjects to travel freely in China and build churches; it also required Chinese officials to protect them and their property. Although this treaty was specifically for the British, other Western nations, including the United States, claimed the same rights.³² In 1860, the unequal Treaty of Peking allowed missionaries not only to travel into the interior of China, but also to live in the major cities. The significance of these treaties can be seen in one of Nevius's letters, in which he writes, China has been "opened so far as treaties can open it, and

²⁸ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 11.

²⁹ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 11; Chao, 57.

³⁰ Daniel H. Bays, "The Rise of an Indigenous Chinese Christianity," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays, 265-268 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 266; Chao, 62-63.

³¹ Chao, 52, 58-59.

³² Chao, 84-89.

the rest of the opening must be done by missionaries themselves.”³³ Shortly after writing this, Nevius began to implement his new system in Shandong province, where he stayed until his death in 1893.³⁴ However, since many missionaries, like Nevius, took advantage of the various unequal treaties, the Communists would later find it easy to draw connections between the missionaries and the imperialist actions of Western nations in order to steer Chinese Christians away from foreign influence.³⁵

In *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, Nevius lays out his new mission methods along with how he came to change them.³⁶ He is quick to point out that the new system of missions came gradually as the result of “many cases of difficulties and discouragements in connection with the previous one.”³⁷ However, once he was assigned to the frontier of Chinese missions in Shandong, he began to deviate from traditional methods with increasing boldness. This is evident in the 1863 budget Nevius submitted for the Shandong Mission, which does not include any paid Chinese evangelists.³⁸ Nearly twenty years later, a letter Nevius wrote to a secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions shows that he had not changed from this method of operation, pointing out that a fellow missionary asks for money to employ Chinese Christians for ministerial positions. Nevius, on the other hand, states that he could quickly hire an equal amount of Chinese Christian laborers but “doubts the desirableness” of such an action. He goes on to explain his intent to continue working “on the principle of self-support and self-propagation,” which had exceeded his expectations. It is interesting that in both this letter and in

³³ Chao, 98; Coan, 207.

³⁴ Chao, 92-96, *passim*.

³⁵ H. H. Tsui et al., “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China*, ed. Francis P. Jones, 14-18 (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1963), 15.

³⁶ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 3.

³⁷ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 7-8.

³⁸ Chao, 103.

his book, Nevius regards his methods as experimental and subject to change; however, Nevius's wife Helen Coan states in the biography of her late husband that once he adopted this new system it "never did change in the very least."³⁹ Although these sources do an adequate job of showing the trailblazing work of Nevius, they do not clarify the reasons for his departure from the established path of missions.

Nevius's "objections to the Old Method" are laid out clearly in the first part of *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, and can be boiled down to four basic points. The first objection that Nevius raises is that by using the employment system, mission stations lose their ability to successfully promote Christ because many who might have been interested in the religious aspect of Christianity become more excited about their pay and their place within the Church. He goes on to claim that this results in an increase in mercenary Christians who see Christianity only as a means to an end, while simultaneously preventing those with sincere interest from learning about Jesus and the Church because those who had to be paid to proselytize did not exemplify the true nature of Christ.⁴⁰ According to Nevius, the old system also injured those who were hired. He states that by employing new converts to evangelize, the converts consequently lose the respect of their peers because they are forced out of the careers for which they are best equipped. Nevius points out that too often those hired are either unqualified or become complacent and arrogant in their new positions of authority.⁴¹ Nevius also shows that by raising a select few of the converts to paid positions, those who are not employed lose their motivation to volunteer their efforts. He explains that many of the unpaid converts come to the conclusion that the job of spreading Christianity should be left to those who are paid

³⁹ Coan, 402-404; Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 8.

⁴⁰ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 12-13, 15.

⁴¹ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 13.

to do so.⁴² The final problem that Nevius saw with the old method was that it produced the idea among both Chinese and Westerners that the mission churches only converted those who desired the material benefits associated with membership in a church.⁴³ Nevius sums up the employment system's effect on the Chinese Church by stating that "the injudicious use of money and agencies depending on money have retarded and crippled our work and produced a less self-reliant and stalwart type of Christian than we otherwise should have had."⁴⁴ Although some of Nevius's specific objections are unique to him, Communist and Christian leaders alike would echo his broader criticisms of dependence on the West in the years following the 1949 Communist revolution.

To correct the problems he saw with the old system, Nevius encouraged fellow missionaries to adopt the idea of creating self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches. In contrast with the prevailing system of missions, Nevius thought that church buildings along with paid native pastors should only be added when Christian communities wanted them and had the means to support them financially. Thus, these churches would be self-supporting from the start rather than dependent on foreign money.⁴⁵ Nevius also taught that churches should not rely on Western leadership. Instead, they should be self-governed by local members as soon as the missionary had trained them in church management and development.⁴⁶ The final idea Nevius proposed was self-propagation. In a letter Nevius wrote to the Executive Committee of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in 1862, he states "it is generally admitted that the main work of preaching the gospel in China must eventually be performed by

⁴² Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 16.

⁴³ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 16-17.

⁴⁴ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 91.

⁴⁵ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 34-35, 64-65.

⁴⁶ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 32, 59-61.

natives.”⁴⁷ However, he took this idea a step further than his contemporaries, believing that Christianity should be spread through the volunteer efforts of converts to influence their own circle of acquaintances instead of through the labors of missionaries and paid agents.⁴⁸ The most significant aspect of the ideas Nevius promoted is that he not only taught them but applied them to his own work. His example eventually became the model in mission fields around the world, most notably in nearby Korea.⁴⁹ The ideas Nevius promoted in the nineteenth century would once again gain global attention in the middle of the twentieth century with the establishment of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

Although the stated objectives of the TSPM revolved around the three-self principle Nevius had introduced to China, its reasons for implementing the idea were not entirely the same. While Nevius had hoped his mission methods would prevent the Church from being labeled as imperialist, the TSPM adopted the same ideas with the intention of bringing imperialism within the Chinese Church to a halt. However, the core motives of the TSPM were anything but straightforward because the Three-Self Patriotic Movement served as the principal mediator in a complicated relationship between an atheistic government and the Protestant Church in China. Therefore, to fully understand the end goals of the TSPM and how they relate to the work of John Livingston Nevius, it is necessary to explore the perspectives of its two creators: the communist government and Chinese Protestant leadership.

Communism is known to be deeply rooted in the idea that there is no god or higher power in the universe; thus, it sees religion as the opiate of the people which retards the progress of mankind. As a result, Communism and religion have been at odds since Marx first established his ideology. Therefore as the CCP worked to consolidate its power in Mainland China, many

⁴⁷ Coan, 231.

⁴⁸ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 42-44.

⁴⁹ Chao, 296; Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 3.

people were dubious of the promised “freedom of religious belief.”⁵⁰ However, once the communists had seized control of China, there was little religious believers could do except fall in line with the new regime. Of the five official religions allowed in the PRC, the Christian faiths of Catholicism and Protestantism had the least favorable standing with the new government. Philip Wickeri does an excellent job illustrating this, stating that unlike the two Christian religions “Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims organized associations,” but “not ‘patriotic’ associations.”⁵¹ He further states that although the CCP had other issues with non-Christian religions, only Catholicism and Protestantism were tainted by ties to “foreign colonial and imperialist forces.”⁵² Mu Fu-Sheng summed up the situation of the Church in China following the revolution stating that “When the Communists overran the country, every sensible person waved the red flag and pledged support to the new government so as to avoid liquidation, and the Church did the same.”⁵³ Since the Chinese Church was willing to cooperate with the new government, the communists were able to take a relatively moderate approach in dealing with Christianity.

Although the CCP was able to work with the Church, the tension in the relationship remained. Wickeri stated, in China, like all socialist countries, there was a contradiction in religious policy. On one hand, the communist government tried to passively tolerate religion, while on the other hand, it sought to actively resist religion’s counter-progressive influence on society.⁵⁴ In order to deal with the two Christian faiths, the CCP eventually set forth a religious policy with a twofold solution. First, it wanted Christianity to break all ties with imperialism and imperialist nations; second, the CCP encouraged the churches to form mass patriotic

⁵⁰ Jones, “The Christian Church in Communist China,” 185.

⁵¹ Wickeri, 94.

⁵² Wickeri, 94.

⁵³ Mu, 167.

⁵⁴ Wickeri, 78.

movements.⁵⁵ For the Protestant Church in China, both of these would eventually be embodied in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

As the government prodded the Protestant Church towards the creation of a patriotic organization, it relied extensively on the efforts of one man: Wu Yaozong. For simplicity's sake, the creators of the TSPM have been divided into two camps: the communist government and the Chinese Protestant leadership; however, not all the actors fall neatly into these two categories, with Wu being the most prominent exception. Although many of the Protestant Chinese were willing to cooperate with the communist government, Wu stands out because he fervently supported both Communism and Christianity.⁵⁶ Wu was not always a follower of Communism; in fact, the autobiographical confession he wrote in 1951 states "more than twenty years ago...I was anti-communist" and tried to correct those with "leftist tendencies." He goes on to say "the cannon shots of September 18 (1931) awakened me," referring to the Manchurian Incident and Japanese aggression as what turned him onto the path of accepting the Communist Party.⁵⁷ Despite his eventual conversion to Communism, Wu did not abandon his Christian faith but instead rationalized his acceptance of both and tried to integrate them. In his book *No Man Has Seen God*, Wu writes "If dialectical law is right, how do we know that these two ideological systems, belief in God and materialism, which seem to be contradictory, could not have a new synthesis?"⁵⁸ Although his concurrent belief in theism and dialectical materialism appear contradictory, it allowed Wu to relate with both the Protestant community and the communist government making him the perfect candidate for leading the re-organization of the Chinese Protestant Church.

⁵⁵ Wickeri, 95.

⁵⁶ Beng-Kuan Mak, "A Study of Wu Yao-Tsung's Change of Attitude Towards Communism," (master's thesis, Regent College, 1990), 1-2, *passim*.

⁵⁷ Mak, 81.

⁵⁸ Mak, 129-130.

After the revolution, with Wu Yaozong leading the way, Chinese Protestant leaders began working with the communist government towards the creation of an organization to be used in reforming the Protestant Church along Communist Party lines. With clear understanding of the situation they faced, several Protestant leaders who were later instrumental in the formation of the TSPM, wrote a message to foreign mission boards explaining the changes that would be implemented. In this message, the problems and misunderstandings facing the Chinese Church were laid out as follows:

...there does exist some deep-rooted feeling on the part of the communists that the Chinese church has been intimately related to imperialism and capitalism. It is a fact that the Christian Church in China in the past has been entangled with the unequal treaties imposed upon China under duress, it did enjoy certain special privileges accruing from them...Much of the church administration is still in the hands of missionaries, and in many instances church policies are still determined by the mission boards abroad.⁵⁹

Although seemingly a harsh criticism of pre-revolutionary missionary methods, they further explain their position stating:

We do realize and so wish to assert that missionary work in China never had any direct relationship with governmental policies; mission funds have always been contributed by the rank and file of common ordinary Christians and church members; missionaries have been sent here for no other purpose than to preach the Christian gospel of love...The central Christian motivation will not and can never be questioned, but these other social implications can very easily give rise to misunderstanding and accusation.⁶⁰

Understanding that the CCP saw the Church's connection to capitalist nations like Britain and America as a threat, the Protestant leadership knew they must cut ties with foreign influence to survive under Communist rule. To achieve this end, the Protestant leaders enumerated several "points of future policy" which reflect the three-self idea that Nevius

⁵⁹ H. H. Tsui, "Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad," 15.

⁶⁰ H. H. Tsui, "Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad," 15-16.

introduced. Notably, the first point states “The authority of policy determination and financial administration must pass over to Chinese leadership,” and “The principle of self-support must be reiterated and steps taken for its final consummation.”⁶¹ In addition to the motivation to appease governmental demands, Protestant leaders also sought to enact the principle of self-support because, like Nevius, they believed it would “clear away some of the unnecessary obstacles,” and aid in making the Chinese Church “stronger and purer in quality.”⁶²

Knowing changes were unavoidable, the Chinese Protestant leadership decided that three-self reform was the best option for cooperating with the communists. Although the aforementioned letter to mission boards abroad only alluded to the three-selves, Wu Yaozong stated them outright in his article for *Ta Kung Pao*, titled “The Reformation of Christianity: On the Awakening of Christians.” In it Wu writes, “Chinese churches must carry out their former avowed principle of becoming self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating, and thus become really Chinese churches.”⁶³ Another document which reinforced the idea of promoting the three-self principle was “The Christian Manifesto.” This document was a significant step towards the official formation of the TSPM because Wu Yaozong wrote it, with input by several of the Protestant leaders, who had written to the mission boards, along with guidance from Premier Zhou Enlai, and it eventually “became the basic guideline of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.”⁶⁴ Although the document was clearly written with a communist pen, making it

⁶¹ H. H. Tsui, “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” 17.

⁶² H. H. Tsui, “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” 18.

⁶³ Wu Yaozong, “Y.T. Wu on Reforming Christianity,” in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China*, ed. Francis P. Jones, 12-14 (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1963), 14.

⁶⁴ Bishop Kaung et al., “The Christian Manifesto,” in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China*, ed. Francis P. Jones, 19-20 (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1963), 19-20; H. H. Tsui, “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” 18; Mak, 18; Wickeri, 129.

extremely controversial to Western observers, Chinese Protestants had charted a course for the Church to follow if the government was willing to accept it.

As the CCP worked with the Protestant Church, its primary concerns were eliminating foreign interference from the Christian community and ensuring that Chinese Protestants would become loyal to New China.⁶⁵ Although indifferent about religious reform, the communist government was interested in the strength of Protestantism in China; however, unlike Nevius and Chinese Christians, the communists hoped to see what little strength the Church had gained prior to the revolution simply dissolve. The government never explicitly stated this desire but Wu Yaozong depicted the CCP's view of religion in his address to the National Christian Council (NCC) on June 28, 1949. As he spoke, Wu assured his audience that the new government would not use coercive measures to combat Christianity because Communism assumed that as society developed, religion would fade out on its own.⁶⁶ Even Nevius had believed that if Chinese churches were suddenly cut off from foreign aid, the Church in China would “inevitably disintegrate and eventually disappear”; however, he also taught that the practice of self-support would prevent this tragedy.⁶⁷ So even though the foreign missionary John Nevius had introduced the three-self idea, the communists did not perceive it as a threat because as materialists they assumed that with or without the three-selves, the Protestant Church, and all other religions, were doomed to fail. Therefore, the CCP's opinion of the three-self principle was similar to the vast majority of foreign missionaries' view, believing it improbable the Church could survive in China without external assistance. With this in mind, the communist government was willing to lend credence to the idea of self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches which the Chinese Protestant leadership had put forth.

⁶⁵ Wickeri, 94-95.

⁶⁶ Wickeri, 93.

⁶⁷ Chao, 92.

Once both the Chinese Protestant leadership and the communist government had accepted the Manifesto, it circulated in churches across China, where individuals were encouraged to sign their names to declare their support.⁶⁸ In the wake of its release, many people in China and around the world argued that the Chinese government had written “The Christian Manifesto” and coerced prominent leaders into signing.⁶⁹ Premier Zhou dismissed these charges in a January 1951 address, saying:

Of course, if I had drafted the manifesto and brought it out for them to sign, they would have agreed to it. But what use would there have been in that, for everyone would have said that so-and-so had drafted the statement for them? It is better for them to speak about reform on their own. As long as they are close to our national policy and correct in their general orientation, there is no need to interfere.⁷⁰

By allowing Protestants to write up their own reforms, the communist government showed it was willing to allow a level of religious freedom, despite its inherent contempt for religious beliefs. The communist government chose cooperation over coercion because its objective was not to disenfranchise religious believers but to gain their support in establishing a communist society. Again Wu illustrated this Communist perspective in his address to the NCC, stating that the Communist Party realized the need for all people, including religious believers, to work towards the reconstruction of China into a socialist state.⁷¹ Although the CCP gave Protestants some leeway in their method of reform, it was unwilling to compromise its goals of terminating imperialist influence and reinforcing patriotism.

Regardless of its promise to uphold freedom of religious belief, the government began to take more concrete measures to solidify its grip on the Protestant Church after the publication of

⁶⁸ Suman, 218-219.

⁶⁹ Wickeri, 130.

⁷⁰ Wickeri, 130.

⁷¹ Wickeri, 93.

“The Christian Manifesto” in July 1950, and even more so after the PRC’s entry into the Korean War at the end of 1950.⁷² The government’s first direct attack on foreign influence in the Church came with the expulsion of all foreign missions immediately after the signing of the Manifesto.⁷³ The Peking Edict of December 29, 1950, which followed the government’s decision to intervene in Korea, further accomplished the goal of severing the Chinese Church’s ties with the West. This edict discontinued all foreign aid directed to Chinese churches; at that time the communists also seized control of the health and educational institutions which missionaries had established prior to the revolution.⁷⁴ The final measure the government took to shatter the Church’s link to imperialism and encourage patriotism towards New China was the initiation of denunciation meetings.⁷⁵ The pattern of denunciation meetings followed a nearly universal format of singling out a foreign missionary or Chinese Christian and having former colleagues criticize them for either intentionally or unintentionally assisting in the imperialist oppression of China, ending with the accuser’s own admission of complicity.⁷⁶ Although the government put the denunciation meetings in motion, Wu Yaozong and other Protestant leaders actively encouraged local churches to take the initiative by investigating past missionary activities and church members who did not support the three-self ideas.⁷⁷ In *Seeking the Common Ground*, Wickeri summarizes the denunciation movement as “a period of open trials, mass arrests, and public executions, during which the state started to set up its extensive public security apparatus.” He goes on to explain that the government had legitimate security concerns due to the Korean War and

⁷² Gao Wangzhi, “Y.T. Wu: A Christian Leader Under Communism,” in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays, 338-352 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 343-345 *passim*; Jones, 185.

⁷³ David Aikman, *Love China Today*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1977), 43.

⁷⁴ Jones, “The Christian Church in Communist China,” 185; Jones, “Introduction,” iii.

⁷⁵ Wickeri, 133-135, 137, 140.

⁷⁶ Brown, 85; Wickeri, 134.

⁷⁷ Mak, 18; Wickeri, 135.

continuing tensions with the Nationalists located in Taiwan, but the search for counter-revolutionaries became an excuse for “indiscriminate violence, political repression, and the settling of old scores.”⁷⁸

In spite of Chinese Protestant leaders’ efforts to work with the new government, they experienced their share of harsh treatment at the hands of the communists. Although some Christians were undoubtedly surprised by the actions of the CCP, the Protestant leadership had expected it and regardless chose to cooperate. The Chinese Protestant leaders demonstrated their preparedness in the previously mentioned letter to mission boards abroad, in which they stated:

We are not unmindful of the challenges and difficulties lying ahead in a more fundamental way. Just how the Christian gospel can be witnessed to in a clime that is, by virtue of its ideology, fundamentally materialistic and atheistic presents a challenge stronger than ever before.⁷⁹

They go on to explain their plan for dealing with the situation, saying:

In areas of social service and education we shall have to accept the leadership of the government and conform with the general patterns of service, organization, and administration. Just how these new adjustments are to be made, is for the Chinese churches to determine.⁸⁰

Understanding the trials ahead of them, the Protestant leaders saw reform founded on the three-self idea as the most desirable option. They believed as Nevius did, that by supporting and governing themselves, Chinese churches would not only survive, but more firmly establish themselves in China. In closing their letter, the Protestant leaders made the prophetic remark:

The Chinese church will not emerge through this historical change unaffected. It will suffer a purge, and many of the withered branches will be amputated. But we believe it will emerge stronger

⁷⁸ Wickeri, 134.

⁷⁹ H. H. Tsui, “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” 16.

⁸⁰ H. H. Tsui, “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” 16.

and purer in quality, a more fitting witness to the gospel of Christ.⁸¹

Indeed the Protestant Church in China would undergo numerous changes following the communist revolution and the establishment of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. A few of the most notable changes include the withdrawal of foreign monetary support, the transfer of administrative duties to the Chinese, and the propagation of the Christian faith exclusively by native evangelists. Although the church did experience a purge in the early years of the PRC, the implementation of the three-self principle proved a success in China, as evident in comparison of church statistics for the years 1949 and 2000. In half a century, the number of Protestants had increased from one million to fifteen million, while the Catholic community had only expanded from three million to ten million.⁸² In his writings, Nevius also predicted a similar outcome if foreign support of churches suddenly ended. He wrote that in 1868, the foreign missionary society supporting the London Mission in Amoy had to sever its ties due to financial concerns, but the struggle “developed the strength, independence and self-respect of the native Christians,” resulting in a “new era of progress.” Nevius further speculates that in churches across China “the withdrawal of foreign funds would prove in the end a blessing rather than a misfortune.”⁸³

Chinese Protestants believed, like Nevius, that if the Church became self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating, it would become stronger. However, the CCP, as a materialist organization, did not have faith in the three-self principle; rather, it assumed that by removing foreign funds, foreign administration, and foreign evangelists, the Church would rapidly deteriorate without the use of overly coercive measures. Therefore, it gladly endorsed the formation of the TSPM and systematically ended the connections between Chinese churches and

⁸¹ H. H. Tsui, “Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” 18.

⁸² Bays, “Chinese Protestant Christianity Today,” 491; Jones, “The Christian Church in Communist China,” 184.

⁸³ Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 65.

imperialist influences. As a result, the CCP unwittingly repeated the experience of the London Mission in Amoy on a national scale. The loss of all foreign support in such an abbreviated amount of time caused a painful transition, but was able to produce a truly Chinese Church of greater strength than would have been possible if foreign missions had remained in China after the 1949 revolution.

The communist government's desire to control the Church and diminish its presence in China along with Protestant Christian leaders' need to escape the suffocating effects of the umbilical cord of Western support were two of the instrumental factors in the formation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The final piece of the equation was Nevius's legacy of implementing and promoting self-support, self-government, and self-propagation in nineteenth-century Chinese churches. Nevius had begun to separate from the old method of mission work shortly after his arrival to China in 1854, and by 1863, Nevius had firmly established himself and the three-self principle at the Shandong Mission.⁸⁴ Although few of his contemporaries possessed the same enthusiasm for self-supporting churches, Nevius continued to promote the idea to his fellow missionaries with ever increasing conviction until his death in 1893. As fate had it, Wu Yaozong, the man responsible for organizing the TSPM, was born in the same year of Nevius's death. Wu, a devout follower of both Communism and Christianity, worked both sides of the fence and proved invaluable in the formative years of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.⁸⁵ The Chinese Protestants, with Wu as their leader, used the three-self idea Nevius had introduced in order to obtain their long awaited autonomy while simultaneously appeasing the government's demand that imperialist ties be severed. Despite cooperating with the CCP, the Chinese Church was not immune to suffering at its hands; however, the Church's shared faith

⁸⁴ Chao, 42, 103; Coan, 402-404; Nevius, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 5-6, *passim*.

⁸⁵ Mak, ii-iii.

with Nevius in the ability of the three-self principle and its integration into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement allowed Protestantism to survive in China in the shadow of an atheistic government inherently opposed to religion.

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