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Cover image O Chi-ho 吳之湖, *South-Facing House* (Minamimuki no ie 南向の家), 1939. Oil on canvas, 79 x 64 cm. Collection of the National Museum of Modern Art, Korea

THE BIG RED DRAGON AND INDIGENIZATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

史 Emily Dunn

“Hmmm,” a Taiwanese friend frowns upon noticing the dragon motif on the blue and white dessert bowls in my kitchen. “Christians must be careful of this sort of thing ...”

Dragons generally hold positive connotations in Chinese culture. From the Song 宋 dynasty (AD 960–1279), Chinese people prayed to the dragon god for rain. A dragon was used to represent imperial power; the emperor, thought to be an incarnation of the dragon, reigned from a “dragon throne” (*longyi* 龍椅) and wore a “dragon robe” (*longpao* 龍袍).¹ Centuries later, the Qing 清 chose the dragon to represent the Chinese nation. Today, the dragon is the most auspicious of the twelve zodiac animals, and “dragons” dance during Chinese New Year, often donned in the festive colour of red.²

The Bible does not espouse such a celebratory view of the dragon. In the book of Revelation, a “big red dragon” (*da hong long* 大紅龍) is eager to devour a male child who is destined to “rule all the nations”. The dragon does not succeed, and there ensues a battle between it and angelic forces in which the dragon is vanquished:

... there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.³

This article investigates the responses of Christians in China to these two contrasting representations of the dragon. From early on in China’s encounter with Christianity to the present day, some believers have viewed

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¹ C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp.128–29.

² On the dragon generally, see M.W. de Visser, *The Dragon in China and Japan* (Amsterdam: J. Muller, 1969[1913]), and Wang Dong, *Zhongguo long de xin faxian* [New Discoveries Regarding the Chinese Dragon] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000).

³ Revelation 12:7–9 (NIV; my emphasis). This paper addresses the Christian dragon as it appears in Revelation because it is the biblical context most commonly referred to by Chinese Protestants in their discussion of the dragon. However, the dragon-serpent also appears elsewhere in the Bible. On the dragon in the book of Genesis, see Archie Chi Chung Lee, “The Dragon, the Deluge and Creation Theology,” in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994).

⁴ Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing," in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, ed. Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (Ammonk: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2001).

⁵ Richard Madsen, "Chinese Christianity: Indigenization and Conflict," in *Chinese Society: Conflict, Change and Resistance*, eds Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp.271–72.

Chinese and Biblical dragons as distinct creatures and accepted them both, while others have drawn an equivalence between them and consequently shunned Chinese dragons, believing them to be demonic. While the material presented here does not constitute a continuous record of Christian representations of the dragon, it does suffice to show that the dragon has become a controversial and important symbol which both reflects and informs Chinese interpretations of Christianity.

Tracing appearances of the dragon throughout the history of Christianity in China illuminates the broader processes of indigenization and inculturation therein. Ryan Dunch has suggested that rather than speaking of "the" indigenization of Christianity in China, we ought to acknowledge "indigenizations" of Chinese Protestantism.⁴ The present discussion supports Dunch's view by illustrating that Christian teachings concerning the dragon have been indigenized in many and diverse ways. Similarly highlighting the multiple trajectories of indigenization, Richard Madsen has argued that they "generate much internal conflict, as well as varying patterns of cooperation and conflict with the wider Chinese society and the government".⁵ The relationship between the indigenization of Christianity on the one hand and conflict and cooperation with the state and Chinese culture on the other is particularly clear in the case of teachings about the dragon because the dragon has historically represented the state and the nation in China. Accordingly, Christians who have embraced the Chinese dragon have tended also to adopt a conciliatory approach towards the state and popular traditions, while those who reject it have frequently had a relationship of conflict with the state, and been regarded by it as heterodox. The story of the Christian dragon in China is thus the story of Christian accommodation and conflict, writ small.

The Christian Dragon Comes to China, c. 1580–1850

⁶ Gang Song, "Learning from the Other: Giulio Aleni, 'Kouduo Richao', and Late Ming Dialogic Hybridization" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2006), pp.283–84 quoting *Kouduo Richao* as reprinted in Nicolas Standaert and Adrian Dudink, eds, *Chinese Christian Texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2002), Vol.7, p.553.

The first Christians to arrive in China in the modern era, the missionaries of the Society of Jesus most famously represented by Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇 (1552–1610), became renowned for their deep understanding of Chinese culture and adaptation to Chinese traditions. In keeping with this, they were tolerant of Chinese representations of the dragon. When asked in 1639 whether Westerners believed that dragons sent rain, for example, Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 (1582–1649) elected not to deny the existence of the dragon, though he did comment that should the dragon exist, it would not have a soul.⁶

Within one hundred years of the Jesuits' arrival in China, however, priests were speaking openly of evil dragons before their Chinese audiences. From 1675, a translation of the sacramental rites from Latin into Chinese instructed priests to recite this prayer at the conclusion of an exorcism:

Almighty Lord ... Jesus Christ. Formerly you bestowed authority on your followers: *our feet could trample on poisonous dragons (dulong 毒龍) and pythons (mangshe 蟒蛇), on all the power of the evil demons (xiemozhe 邪魔者)*. ... I humbly beg you to grant that I, your insignificant servant, whose transgressions are forgiven, might, relying on your grace and ability, be brave and *attack this fiercely poisonous dragon (libai dulong 利害毒龍)*...⁷

Standaert states that liturgical manuals such as that quoted here were “hardly used after their publication” because the Vatican did not permit the celebration of the liturgy in Chinese.⁸ However, the exorcising powers of the missionaries were in high demand. Chinese people believed that a wide range of unfavourable situations—including illnesses—were caused by demons, and perceived the new religious teachers from the West as being able to perform the exorcism required to remedy the situation in the same way as their Buddhist and Daoist counterparts.⁹ Thus, several decades prior to the translation of this rite, the Jesuits were already famed as exorcists, and regarded by rural folk as “powerful masters of ritual”.¹⁰ The popularity of exorcistic practices together with lingering traces of this rite in the 1950s suggest that a considerable number of Chinese may indeed have been exposed to the Jesuits’ representation of the dragon as demonic.

It should not be inferred from this, however, that the Jesuits were insensitive to the Chinese understanding of the dragon as beneficent, or unaware of the cultural implications of evil dragons. Rather, they translated their ritual in terms consistent with pre-existing religious traditions. From the fifth century, Chinese Buddhist texts taught of a “poisonous dragon” which eventually escaped his dragon form by accepting the commandments.¹¹ This tradition was also noted by Western visitors to China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1886 a reverend of the Southern (USA) Presbyterian Mission in Suzhou 蘇州 recounted Chinese Buddhist miracle tales that mentioned a “bad dragon” and “poisonous dragons that sent pestilence and disease”.¹² In 1922, E.T.C. Werner noted the association of evil dragons with mountain-dwelling *nagas*, or deities which take the form of a snake.¹³ In introducing the Christian dragon to China, then, the Jesuits adopted a vocabulary which was already familiar and acceptable to many Chinese, and not offensive to the imperial house at which some of them served.

The Jesuits’ sensitivity towards the imperial house in their depiction of the dragon is additionally reflected in the work of Giuseppe Castiglione 朗世寧 (1688–1766), a Jesuit missionary who became a painter for the court under the Kangxi 康熙 emperor in 1715. Castiglione was well aware of the association between the dragon and the emperor—he painted the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor in dragon robes seated on a dragon throne in 1748.¹⁴ Consequently, when he set out to paint the archangel Michael defeating

⁷ Ludovico Buglio, trans., *Shengshi lidian* [Rituale Romanum]. Originally published in Peking, 1675; Chinese text reprinted in *Chinese Christian Texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus*, eds. Nicolas Standaert and Adrian Dudink (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2002), Vol. 11. Translation here is from Thomas H. Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p.38 (emphasis added). Standaert notes that Buglio’s translation omitted the rites of confirmation, ordination and matrimony but dealt extensively with burial rites and exorcism, reflecting the importance of these rites to Chinese audiences. Nicolas Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, Vol.1: 635–1800, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p.627 n.47.

⁸ Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, p.627.

⁹ Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1985), pp.89–90.

¹⁰ Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp.95, 97.

¹¹ William E. Soothill and Lewis Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (London: Routledge Curzon, 1995), p.265, citing *Dazhidulun* [Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra] Vol.14.

¹² Hampden C. DuBose, *The Dragon, Image, and Demon, Or: The Three Religions of China: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism: Giving an Account of the Mythology, Idolatry and Demonolatry of the Chinese* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1886), p.175.

¹³ E.T.C. Werner, *Myths and Legends of China* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1984 [1922]), p.208.

¹⁴ Michel Beurdeley, *Peintres Jésuites en Chine au xviiiè siècle* (Anthese: Arcueil, 1997), p.69.



Figure 1

Giuseppe Castiglione, *Michael Defeating the Demon*, 18th century. Courtesy of Amity Christian Art Center

the big red dragon as recorded in Revelation, he followed European artists in using a human-like form and appending a dragon's tail in preference to depicting a Chinese-style dragon (Figure 1).¹⁵

The Jesuits' accommodation of Chinese attitudes towards the dragon was not shared by all Westerners, however, and later visitors to China were perturbed by the dissonance between Chinese and Christian representations of the dragon. The remark of a British interpreter in 1856 that the Chinese imperial dragon was "a most excellent animal with which to astonish an admiring, uninitiated, European audience" merely hints of bemusement. Other commentators were less tolerant, and censured Chinese celebration of the dragon as a form of Satanic worship.¹⁶ One British naturalist was troubled by the use of a dragon in a procession on the island of Macao 澳門 in 1838, complaining:

... the pleasure of contemplating such [processions] is strongly marred by the thought, that the choicest gifts of Providence, the graces of human life, and the refinements of art, are made to move in procession to the honour of the Devil; for there he was under the semblance of a huge dragon, "the old serpent," just as he appeared to our first parents when he persuaded them to break their pledge with their Maker.¹⁷

¹⁵ The Christian monogram which appears on Michael's shield here was used widely by the Jesuits; the inscription along its rim reads "Soli Deo Honor et Gloria" [To God Alone be Honour and Glory]. Contemporary Chinese Christian artist He Qi (see discussion later in this article) attributes the painting to Castiglione and argues that its depiction of the dragon reflects cultural sensitivity. He Qi, "Four Historical Stages of the Indigenization of Chinese Christian Art", 28 March 2000 (Asian Christian Art Association), <<http://www.asianchristianart.org/articles/four-historical-stages-of-the-indigenization-of-chinese-christian-art>>, viewed 20 October 2009. A painting of the "Arcangelo Michele" is /OVER

"Our first parents" here refers to Adam and Eve, who were tempted by the devil in the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden; Revelation (12:9) tells us that this serpent is one and the same as the big red dragon. Hence, G. Tradescant Lay ruefully concluded:

The Chinese are faithful in retaining their heritage of moral learning, and in keeping many of their handicrafts from the contagion of improvement, but they have been still more faithful in handing down from father to son the abominable worship of Satan, with all its insignia and ostentatious parade.¹⁸

It is not clear to just what extent attitudes toward the Chinese dragon were divided along Protestant and Catholic lines. However, at least some Protestants were critical of Catholic toleration of the creature. Hampden C. DuBose expressed his dismay that French priests adopted "*the heathen*

rites of the Chinese ... on a Catholic altar in Shanghai the dragon and cross are united",¹⁹ and on the basis of such accommodation dismissed Roman Catholicism as "Buddhism prepared for a foreign market".²⁰ Soon after the arrival of Protestants in China, the dragon had become an issue of contention amongst Christians.

The Dragon and the Taipings, 1851–64

The mid-19th century witnessed the drawing of an equivalence between the Chinese and biblical dragons not only by religious figures from the West, but also by Chinese individuals. Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–64), leader of the Taiping 太平 Rebellion, viewed himself as having been "specially dispatched" by God to slay the big red dragon-serpent of Revelation,²¹ and depicted the Manchu 滿州 rulers as serpent-demons.²²

His equation of the dragon of Revelation with the Chinese dragon is evident as he condemns popular veneration of the dragon of the Eastern Sea, which was traditionally credited with bringing rain:

... in recent times there have been heretics who falsely declared that the dragon devil of the Eastern Sea can produce rain, however, this dragon devil of the Eastern Sea is nothing more than a transformation of the devil of Hades.²³

Hong Ren'gan 洪仁幹 (1822–64), cousin and second-in-command to Hong Xiuquan, also appeared to recognize the potential for controversy surrounding the dragon as he decreed that:

... during the present founding period of the state, all memorials and public notices have special political significance ... in the preparation of memorials, such demonlike expressions as "dragon virtue," "dragon countenance," ... must not be used ... on one matter there may be two different views, making it difficult to distinguish between right and wrong. If one reads without understanding, the consequences may be serious.²⁴

Both Westerners in China at the time and later scholars attributed the Taipings' negative representations of the dragon to Christian influence.²⁵ The dragon does not grace the pages of Liang Fa's 梁發 *Good Words to Admonish the Age*,²⁶ the Christian tract which made an infamous impression on Hong. However, passages in the book of Revelation concerning the dragon were among the portions of the Bible which Hong annotated, suggesting that his attitude towards dragons was indeed connected to his exposure to Christianity.²⁷

This said, Hong's condemnation of the dragon was not universal, but selective and pragmatic. Citing visions of golden dragons in heaven, he deemed that the "precious dragon" used by the Taipings to adorn

/also attributed to Castiglione by George R. Loehr, *Giuseppe Castiglione 1688–1766: Pittore De Corte De Ch'ien-Lung, Imperatore Della Cina* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed estremo Oriente, 1940), p.117. An article on the website of the Amity Christian Art Center likewise mentions a painting of the Archangel probably painted by Castiglione, and speculates that it may not have been signed because court painters were not permitted to paint outside the court: <<http://www.acac.org.cn/llwx-23.htm>>, viewed 24 June 2008.

¹⁶ Thomas Taylor Meadows, *The Chinese and Their Rebellions, Viewed in Connection with Their National Philosophy, Ethics, Legislation, and Administration* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1856), p.60.

¹⁷ G. Tradescant Lay, *The Chinese As They Are: Their Moral, Social, and Literary Character; A New Analysis of the Language; With Succinct Views of Their Principal Arts and Sciences* (London: William Ball & Co., 1841), p.201. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ DuBose, *The Dragon, Image, and Demon*, p.290.

²⁰ DuBose, *The Dragon, Image, and Demon*, p.291.

²¹ See Hong Xiuquan's annotations to Revelation 12 in Franz H. Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion. History and Documents* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), Vol.2, p.236.

²² Vincent Y.C. Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), p.12.

²³ In "An Exhortation on the Origin of Virtue for the Awakening of the Age," which was written between 1844–46 and forms part of the Taiping Imperial Declaration (太平詔書) reprinted in Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*, Vol.2, pp.24–46. Quote at Vol.2 p.39.

²⁴ Quoted in Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, p.78.

²⁵ Meadows, *The Chinese and Their Rebellions*, p.420; Eugene Powers Boardman, *Christian Influence Upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion, 1851–1864* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), p.82.

²⁶ Liang Fa, *Quan shi liang yan* [Good Words to Admonish the Age] (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1965 [1832]).

²⁷ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*, Vol.2, p.236.

²⁸ “Book of Declarations of the Divine Will Made During the Heavenly Father’s Descent to Earth [II],” in Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*, Vol.2, pp.217–18. In Hong’s visions, God wore a “black dragon robe” and dignitaries were dressed in dragon gowns, marking them as men of importance in the traditional manner. See Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, pp.8–9.

²⁹ Jessie Gregory Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F.A. Gutzlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827–1852* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), p.259.

their imperial seal, utensils and vestments was acceptable. He thereby retained that representation of the dragon which could bolster his authority (namely, the imperial dragon), and discarded that which might serve as an alternative source of devotion (namely, the dragon deity), ruling that:

... the precious dragon is truly a dragon and truly not a demon; but beyond these ... all the snakelike demons which delude the souls of men; these, while called dragons, are really demons.²⁸

The Taipings succeeded in taking control of large areas of southern China and enlisted three quarters of a million soldiers in the movement. While it is not clear to what extent these recruits helped to propagate their leader’s view of most dragons as devils, individuals’ religious affiliations were frequently transferred between Christianity and the Taipings, especially after the defeat of the latter, providing opportunity for the diffusion of these beliefs.²⁹ In any case, we see in the remarks of Hong Xiuquan the “dragon-as-devil” theme evolving from a largely foreign teaching into one espoused and developed by Chinese religious actors. This trend was to continue during the 20th century.

The Dragon in Chinese Protestantism, 1900–60

³⁰ On these movements and the growth of Protestantism during this time, see Daniel H. Bays, “The Growth of Indigenous Christianity in China 1900–1937,” in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

³¹ Watchman Nee, *Study on Revelation*, Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Set 1, Vol.16 <<http://www.ministrybooks.org>>, viewed 24 June 2008. Nee founded the Little Flock in the mid-1920s.

³² Witness Lee, *The Experience of Life*, <<http://www.ministrybooks.org>>, viewed 24 June 2008. Witness Lee went on to found the Local Church in the USA, which is often referred to as the “Shouters” and labelled an “evil cult” in contemporary China. The church reprinted Lee’s talk in 1968 and 1998. Witness Lee, “The Experience of Life: Regeneration & Clearance of the Past,” *Affirmation and Critique*, 3.1 (January 1998): 21–26, at p.26.

Few sources directly address the dragon in Chinese Christianity in the early 20th century. However, there are some signs that teachings on the dragon were disseminated by the independent Protestant movements which flourished during this period.³⁰ Watchman Nee 倪托聲 (1903–72), leader of the popular Little Flock (*Xiaoqun pai* 小群派) or Local Assembly (*Juhui chu* 聚會處) denomination, identified the big red dragon with murder and cruelty when preaching on Revelation in the 1930s.³¹ One of his disciples, Witness Lee 李常受, fled to Taiwan in 1949, where in 1953–54 he denounced “ornaments, furniture, and clothing with the image of the dragon” as “evil and unclean” and exhorted followers to do away with them. He related the following anecdote:

Once, there was an elderly sister in whose home were two things: a silk lamp shade embroidered with dragons and a tea set also printed with a dragon design. Long after her salvation she did not sense anything. Then she was enlightened by the Lord and became possessed of a deep inner feeling toward these things. She had no peace whenever she saw these items with dragon designs. She then proceeded to destroy them according to her inner feeling.³²

There is evidence, too, that indigenous denominations continued to invoke the dragon in the context of exorcism. In the late 1950s, one Ceng Aiguang 曾愛光 publicly accused “reactionary elements” in the True Jesus Church (*Zhen yesu jiaohui* 真耶穌教會) in Wuhan 武漢 of having per-

formed an exorcism upon her in 1950.³³ She alleged that during the ritual, conducted when she was just fifteen years old, church members referred to the demon as a “python spirit” (*mangshe jing* 蟒蛇精), using a term reminiscent of the Catholic rite quoted above.³⁴ At the turn of the communist revolution, then, the dragon had been integrated into configurations of Protestantism that were independent of foreign control.

The dragon—and Christians’ attitudes towards it—became highly politicized in the early days of the People’s Republic. During the anti-rightist campaign of 1957–58, members of the nascent registered Protestant association known as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*San zi aiguo yundong* 三自愛國運動) (hereafter TSPM) accused preachers who refused to join the movement of encouraging the destruction of “idols” such as vases, teapots and quilts bearing the dragon totem.³⁵ In so doing, they indicated that the equation of Chinese and biblical dragons was now deemed to be heterodox by constituents of the United Front. Indeed, with the advent of “Red” China, the big red dragon took on a new significance for some Chinese Christians, and they identified the creature with the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo gongchandang* 中國共產黨).³⁶ In Liaoning 遼寧 province in 1957, for example, one Sun Xipeng 孫翕鵬 was criticized in both Protestant and secular media for labeling the CCP the “big red dragon”, and preaching that the Party’s rule was the Great Tribulation that precedes the final judgment in the book of Revelation.³⁷

In light of the political excesses of this period, we may doubt the veracity of such accusatory reports. However, studies of Chinese religious movements in the 1940s and 1950s, including studies of Protestantism, have noted the prevalence of apocalyptic and chiliastic ideologies during this time, and so it is credible that some Protestants interpreted the Communist victory through the lens of Christian millenarianism and the dragon of Revelation.³⁸

Such an interpretation was undoubtedly encouraged by the CCP’s suppression of religious expression. Written against a backdrop of the persecution of Christianity at the end of the first century, the book of Revelation depicted the dragon as recruiting oppressive political powers to its assault on the church. While apocalyptic and millenarian movements have often interpreted worldly political events as fulfilling this prophecy, the notion no doubt resonated with particular strength in the Chinese context given the association of the colour red with Chinese culture and the CCP, and the importance of the dragon in cultural traditions.

Associating the big red dragon with the CCP was, and remains, offensive to the Party not only because the dragon is an incarnation of the devil but also because it is eventually defeated in Revelation. After battling angels and persecuting the church, the dragon-devil is eventually “thrown into [a] lake of burning sulfur” and “tormented day and night for ever and

³³ The True Jesus Church is an indigenous and millenarian Pentecostal denomination which was formed in 1917 by Paul Wei.

³⁴ Ceng Aiguang, “Xue yu lei de kongsu” [An Accusation of Blood and Tears], *Tianfeng* [Heavenly Wind], 10 (consec. 553) (1958): 8–9. For a critique of this source, see subsequent comments in main text. Members of the True Jesus Church were, however, instructed to “seek the power of healing and of exorcising demons”. Daniel H. Bays, “Indigenous Protestant Churches in China, 1900–1937: A Pentecostal Case Study,” in *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, ed. Steven Kaplan (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p.134.

³⁵ See for example Qi Dao, “Shanghai Jidujiao nei de yiban niliu” [An Adverse Current in Protestantism in Shanghai], *Tianfeng*, 10 (consec. 553) (1958): 19, 21.

³⁶ For Protestant accusations of such behaviour, see Xu Rulei, “Jianjue fandui feifa weifa huodong” [Resolutely Oppose Illegal Activities], *Tianfeng*, 28 (consec. 555) (1957): 20; Zhejiang sheng Jidujiao Sanzi Aiguo Weiyuanhui, “Jielu Zhejiang sheng jidujiao nei de yixie feifa weifa huodong” [Exposing Some Illegal Activities Among Protestants in Zhejiang], *Tianfeng*, 28 (consec. 555) (1957): 18–19, at p.18; Wang Shenyin, “Shi ren haishi shou? Yincang zai Shandong jiaohui nei de fandong fenzi de zuixing lingren fazhi” [Man or Beast? The Crimes of Reactionary Elements Hidden in the Shandong Church Give Rise to Indignation], *Tianfeng*, 10 (consec. 553) (1958): 13–14, at p.14. See also Lydia Lee, *A Living Sacrifice: The Life Story of Allen Yuan* (Kent: Sovereign World, 2001), p.144.

³⁷ “Liaoning sheng tongdao jihui baolu youpai fenzi Sun Xipeng” [Meeting of Protestants in Liaoning Exposes the Rightist Sun Xipeng], *Tianfeng*, 26 (consec. 535) (1957): 3–5. Originally published in the newspaper *Liaoning ribao* [Liaoning Daily] 14 August 1957.

³⁸ Ownby makes this observation of the Way of the Temple of Heavenly Immortals, and Gao of Protestantism. David Ownby, “Imperial Fantasies: The Chinese Communists and Peasant Rebellions,” *Comparative Studies in Society & History* 43.1 (2001): 65–91, at p.75ff; Gao Ying, “God’s Promise and Eschatological Hope,” *Chinese Theological Review* 20 (2007): 31–55, at pp.48–50.

³⁹ Revelation 20:10 (NIV).

⁴⁰ Harold H. Martinson, *Red Dragon Over China* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1956). On racial prejudice and foreign depictions of Chinese dragons in the early twentieth century see John Fitzgerald, "When Did the Dragon Become Chinese?" (Unpublished paper presented to Melbourne Chinese Study Group, March 2004). There do not appear to be any significant references to the dragon in issues of the major missionary journal *Chinese Recorder* in the years surrounding the revolution, however.

⁴¹ Geng Weizhong, "Dragonizing Over Creatures in the Bible," *Amity News Service* 7, 8 (2004); Wan Ge, "E'dude "Dongfang Shandian" (Malicious 'Eastern Lightning')," *Tianfeng* 11 (1997): 24–25; Wang Kuilin, "Must Everything with a Dragon Be Destroyed," [sic] *Religion in the PRC: Documentation* 18 (1985): 37–38; Zhao Zhi'en, ed. *Jianchi zhenli, didang yiduan* [Hold Fast to the Truth, Resist Heresy] (Shanghai: Zhongguo Jidujiao Sanzi Aiguo Yundong Weiyuanhui, Zhongguo Jidujiao Xiehui (T.S.P.M. Committee & C.C.C.), 1996), p. iv.

⁴² Wang Tongzhang, "Dizhi xiangcun jiaohui de yiduan xieshuo" [Resist Heretical Teachings in Rural Churches], *Tianfeng* 5 (2005): 24.

⁴³ Zhao Zhi'en, "Shengjingguan yu 'long' de wenti" [Biblical Hermeneutics and the Dragon], *Jinling shenxue zhi* [Nanjing Theological Review], 3 (2006): 50–67, at p. 64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Wang Shenyin, "Bixu zhizhi jiajie Jidujiao mingyi jinxing de weifa fanzui huodong [Criminal Activities Carried Out Under the Name of Protestantism Must Be Stopped]," *Tianfeng*, 2 (1983): 31. For an English translation of the article, see Wang Shenyin, "We Kust [sic] Put a Stop to Criminal Activities Carried out in the Name of the Church," *Religion in the PRC: Documentation* 12 (1983): 16–17. Note that Wang had voiced criticism of "reactionary" depictions of the dragon in the 1950s (see note 36).

⁴⁶ Xu Shengyi, "Jingti pi zongjiao waiyi de fandong zuzhi" [Beware of Reactionary Organizations Wearing the Cloak of Religion], *Tianfeng* 5 (1992): 24. For an English translation of the article, see Xu Shengyi, "Beware of Wolves in Sheep's Clothing," *China Study Journal* 7.2 (1992): 64.

ever".³⁹ In identifying the CCP with the big red dragon, Christians effectively prophesy the demise of the regime, just as heterodox sects before them denied the emperor's Mandate of Heaven by predicting the fall of dynasties. Conversely, the TSPM's condemnation of identification between the dragon and the CCP in the 1950s reflected its support for the new political regime and its commitment to the United Front.

Chinese believers were not alone in depicting the CCP as the big red dragon; some exiled missionaries evidently shared their view.⁴⁰ However, the fact that the reports discussed here appeared in the Chinese Protestant press only after the exodus of missionaries from China suggests that it was not solely the political prejudices of foreigners, but also indigenous agency and innovation which took the dragon from being a general symbol of evil to one that was frequently associated with the CCP and its persecution of religion.

The Dragon in Post-Mao Chinese Protestantism

The equation of the Chinese and biblical dragons by some Chinese Protestants survived the Cultural Revolution, and flourished alongside unregistered ("house") churches and new religious movements loosely related to Protestantism during the early 1980s. Since then, some Protestants have been reported to believe that the historical misfortunes of the Chinese nation and of individuals are a consequence of God's displeasure at veneration of the dragon, and to proclaim that as "descendants of the dragon" (*long de chuanren* 龍的傳人), Chinese people are particularly sinful.⁴¹ As in previous decades, tales abound of pious Christians smashing house wares that bear the dragon totem,⁴² and warning that anyone who uses a quilt embroidered with a dragon is "sleeping with Satan" (*baozhe Sadan shuijiao* 抱著撒旦睡覺).⁴³ Contrary to more customary Chinese preferences, today's young Protestants may avoid marrying and giving birth during the Year of the Dragon, change their name if it includes the "dragon" character, and even shun the Dragon Credit Card (*longka* 龍卡) issued by the China Construction Bank.⁴⁴

Identification of the dragon with the CCP also persists. In early 1983 a pastor in Shandong 山東 province reported that some Protestants were "using the dragon for counter-revolutionary purposes".⁴⁵ In 1992, an article in the national Protestant magazine again lamented that "[the term 'big red dragon'] is employed by reactionary elements both in China and abroad to denigrate the New China, and to slander the Chinese Communist Party".⁴⁶ The shunning of the dragon and the identification of it with the CCP has thus become notorious in contemporary Chinese Protestantism.

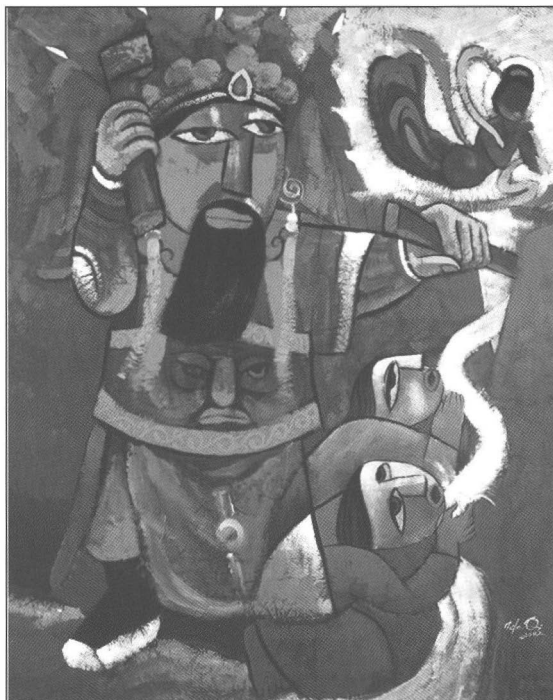
Figure 2

He Qi, *Moses Striking the Rock*, 2005. Courtesy of Dr He Qi

Nevertheless, it is far from universal. The registered Protestant organizations—the TSPM and the China Christian Council (*Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui* 中國基督教協會)—continue to condemn animosity towards the dragon, and pastors and theologians associated with these bodies continue to argue that the drawing of an equivalence between the Chinese and biblical dragons is theologically “erroneous”.⁴⁷ Representative of these arguments is an article which was published in the journal of the national Protestant seminary in 2006 by Zhao Zhi'en. Reverend Zhao contends that the dragon as it appears in Revelation is a “symbolic description”, and that the devil is an intangible “evil spirit” rather than a physical animal.⁴⁸ He questions some Protestants' negation of Chinese culture, and implores them to consider the cultural background against which Revelation was written, in forming their view of the dragon. In April 2009 Reverend Ni Guangdao similarly related the story of a young woman married to an intellectual who burned precious artworks adorned with dragons in order to improve her chances of falling pregnant. Ni described this as an example of “extremism” and reflected that “In fact, everyone who understands the Bible knows that the idols that God opposes are objects of worship, not things that people collect, appreciate or use every day”.⁴⁹

Such accommodation of Chinese dragons is reflected in the work of He Qi, an artist who was formerly a professor at the TSPM's Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (*Jinling xiehe shenxueyuan* 金陵協和神學院). Dr He's website states that he “hopes to help change the ‘foreign image’ of Christianity in China”.⁵⁰ Accordingly, his paintings depict Old Testament patriarchs as high-ranking officials in the Chinese style. David, an Old Testament king, wears the image of an imperial dragon,⁵¹ and Moses and Joshua also wear the face of the dragon on their outer garments (Figure 2).⁵²

He intentionally uses the dragon both due to its traditional association with power and the emperor, and also to signify the anointing of the Holy Spirit.⁵³ Both He's work and reproductions of Castiglione's painting (Figure 1) are sold in the Amity Christian Art Center (*Aide wenhua yishu zhongxin* 愛德文化藝術中心) opposite the national theological seminary in Nanjing,⁵⁴ representing the TSPM's tandem acceptance of Chinese and



⁴⁷ Cao Shengjie, “Theological Reconstruction in Shanghai,” *Chinese Theological Review* (2002): 92; Zhao Zhi'en, “Shengjingguan yu ‘long’ de wenti”.

⁴⁸ Zhao Zhi'en, “Shengjingguan yu ‘long’ de wenti,” p.65.

⁴⁹ Ni Guangdao, “Lun jiao nei de yixie jiduan xianxiang” [On Some Expressions of Extremism Within the Church], *Tianfeng*, April (2009): 48–49, at p.48.

⁵⁰ “About Artist”, <<http://www.heqijarts.com/about/about.html>>, viewed 14 June 2008.

⁵¹ He Qi, *Look Toward the Heavens: The Art of He Qi* (New Haven: OMSC Publications, 2006), p.47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp.29, 37, 43. Figure 2 from *Ibid.*, p.38. Also available online: He Qi, *Moses Striking the Rock*, <<http://www.heqigallery.com>>, viewed 6 May 2009. The title of the painting refers to Exodus 17:1–7, in which Moses strikes a rock with his staff and water comes out of it for the Israelites to drink as God had promised him.

⁵³ Susan Wunderink, “The Dragon in the Belly: Patriarchs, Judges, and Kings,” /OVER

Christianity Today, <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/aprilweb-only/117-51.0.html>>, viewed 25 June 2008.

⁵⁴ The Amity Foundation is a Chinese Protestant charity founded in 1985; proceeds from the Amity Christian Art Center's store support the Foundation's aid programs. See <www.amityfoundation.org> and <www.acac.org.cn>.

⁵⁵ While the registered church is most vocal in questioning Christians' hostility toward the Chinese dragon, other Christians have done likewise. Despite its reservations about the TSPM, the Hong Kong-based *Bridge* magazine attributed allegorical readings of the red dragon to lack of theological training and "questionable interpretations of the Bible" amongst rural churches. Staff reporter, "Some Further Observations on Rural Churches," *Bridge* 28 (1988): 15–16, at p.16.

⁵⁶ Moses Tsuo Kun 左坤, leader of Jesus Christ's Full Gospel of Blood, Water and the Holy Spirit Evangelistic Mission, is said to have exorcised the demon from Sister Liu. The exorcism, complete with conversation between Zuo and the "dragon", was formerly recorded on the group's website. "A Miracle to Bind the Ancient Dragon," (Rebuilt Church by the Holy Spirit, 21 July 2001), <<http://web.archive.org/web/20010803231531/www.church.org.tw/english/index.html>>. viewed 10 October 2006.

⁵⁷ "The Heretical 'Established King Cult' Is Brought to Trial," *China Study Journal* 10.2 (1995): 59–61, at p.60.

⁵⁸ Jing Xing, "Yiduan 'Mentuhui' de neimu" [Inside the Heretical "Disciples"], *Tianfeng*, 1 (2008): 28–31, at p.30.

⁵⁹ "Announcement from the First Division of the Shijiazhuang Public Security Bureau," *Chinese Law and Government* 36.2 (2003 [2000]): 65–73, at p.66. For more on Eastern Lightning, see Emily C. Dunn, "'Cult', Church and the CCP: Introducing Eastern Lightning," *Modern China* 36.1 (2009): 96–119.

⁶⁰ "The Real God Cult," *Chinese Law and Government* 36.2 (2003): 79–80, at p.80.

biblical dragons, and Protestants' reconciliation of their own identities as both Chinese and Christian.⁵⁵

Eastern Lightning and the Big Red Dragon

Teachings regarding the big red dragon are found not only within Protestantism, but also in contemporary new religious movements that are regarded as heterodox by the Chinese state and Protestants alike. In 1989, the leader of a Taiwan-based movement active on the mainland claimed to exorcise the "ancient dragon" from a female Christian.⁵⁶ In the mid-1990s, the Established King (*Beiliwang* 被立王) movement was reported to describe the CCP as the great red dragon and "able to grow only by drinking dry the blood of the faithful and the prophets";⁵⁷ in 2008, the national Protestant magazine reported that The Association of Disciples (*Mentuhui* 門徒會) demanded the destruction of images of snakes and dragons.⁵⁸ Since these movements are indigenous, the appearance of the dragon in their ideologies would indicate that biblical or "Western" depictions of the dragon have been appropriated, indigenized and developed by Chinese religious actors.

In many cases, it is difficult to independently assess the role of the dragon in these new religious movements because their teachings are seldom recorded in written format, or if they are, they are inaccessible to researchers. In the case of a movement known as Eastern Lightning (*Dongfang shandian* 東方閃電) or Church of Almighty God (全能神教會), however, sources can be downloaded from a website. Eastern Lightning emerged from Henan 河南 province in the early 1990s, and teaches that Jesus Christ has returned to earth in the form of a Chinese woman to judge humankind and end the present age. It was formally identified as an "evil cult" by the Ministry of Public Security (*Gong'an bu* 公安部) in 1995, and has been described by CCP officials as "another evil force next to the Falun Gong cult".⁵⁹ Eastern Lightning's references to the dragon have been among the reasons for its suppression. Around the year 2000, a secret internal government document reported that:

[Eastern Lightning claims that] "Currently China is a decadent emperor's large family, which is dominated by the Big Red Dragon." It incites "all of God's people and sons to launch a decisive combat with the Big Red Dragon in the Dragon's country under God's leadership, to destroy the Big Red Dragon and not allow it to corrupt human beings".⁶⁰

Like adherents of other Protestant and quasi-Protestant movements, Eastern Lightning believers connect the big red dragon with CCP suppression of their religion. In an essay entitled "What Does it Mean to Hate

the Big Red Dragon?” (*Shenme jiao hen'e da hong long?* 甚麼叫恨惡大紅龍?) we read that the dragon-devil of Revelation has become incarnated as “despots”—presumably, CCP leaders and public security organs—who are persecuting Eastern Lightning members (“saints”):

... the devil Satan is using the despots to corrupt humanity, brutally persecuting and devouring people's souls. It is precisely these Princes of the Devil who wield power and tyranny on earth, using their power and influence to rob people of freedom. ... *This gang of fiends is indeed the incarnation of the big red dragon*; they are its representatives. How many saints have died under their sword! Today many are still in their custody, spending their lives in dark dungeons.⁶¹

The big red dragon is not the only manifestation of evil in Eastern Lightning's cosmology. Eastern Lightning sources speak of “being saved from the power of Satan,” being “corrupted by Satan” and “breaking free from Satan's influence”. In these cases, however, Satan refers to a kind of evil which is not attributed to a worldly or political power. As the quote above attests, the “big red dragon”, in contrast, refers chiefly to the CCP's repression of Eastern Lightning through imprisonment, alleged murder and other forms of persecution. Repression—in particular, the activity of the Public Security Bureau—is understood as an act of the Devil in the “end times” (*moshi* 末世) and reinforces Eastern Lightning's demonization of the government.

This dynamic is reflected in the testimonies of Eastern Lightning adherents. Li Huiqin of Weinan 渭南 city in Shaanxi 陝西 province, for example, writes that personal experience of persecution dispelled her initial hesitation to embrace Eastern Lightning's hatred of the CCP/dragon. After joining the movement, she continued to receive her government salary and did not initially incur any trouble as a result of her religious affiliation. She therefore bore no ill will towards the “dragon” and was perplexed by God's desire to annihilate it. All this changed in April 2003, however, when she and six other female believers were allegedly detained and beaten by police. Li writes that as a result of this incident:

... I silently confessed to God in my heart: O God! I was so ignorant and blind ... I always had doubts about the words by which you expose the essence of the great red dragon, and I even couldn't figure out why you want to thoroughly exterminate this devil. I was really so ignorant! ... Today, only under such circumstances have I clearly distinguished between good and evil, seen your beauty and kindness, clearly seen the ugly features of the great red dragon⁶²

While we cannot be certain that the events which Li recounts did in fact take place, Eastern Lightning's publication and dissemination of her testimony reflects and perpetuates the view of persecution as confirming

⁶¹ “Shenme Jiao Hen'e Dahonglong” [What Is ‘Hating the Great Red Dragon?’] (Church of Almighty God, 2 September 2005), <http://chinese.hidden-advent.org/truth_and_com/truth_and_com190.php>, viewed 11 September 2005. My emphasis.

⁶² Li Huiqin, “The Great Red Dragon is Really Detestable,” in *The Experience of Accepting the Judgment and Punishment of the Word of God* (Church of Almighty God, 24 April 2009), <<http://english.hidden-advent.org/experience/0037.php>>, viewed 20 October 2009.

⁶³ “Di shi pian shuohua” [The Tenth Talk], in *Hua zai roushen xianxian* [The Word Has Appeared in the Flesh] (Church of Almighty God, 3 March 1992), <<http://chinese.hidden-advent.org/shenhua/section2a/0010.php>>, viewed 20 October 2009.

⁶⁴ Xu Shengyi, “Jingti pi zongjiao waiyi de fandong zuzhi.”

⁶⁵ Emily C. Dunn, “Netizens of Heaven: Contesting Orthodoxies on the Chinese Protestant Web,” *Asian Studies Review* 31 (2007): 447–58, at pp.451–52.

⁶⁶ *A Brief Introduction to the Background of the Lord’s Coming to China in a Hidden Way to Do the Work*, (Church of Almighty God, 4 September 2006), <http://english.hidden-advent.org/about_us.php>, viewed 5 September 2006.

⁶⁷ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pp.146–47. Nor is this a uniquely Chinese problem; a house church in Ho Chi Minh city was shut down in part because its “extremist” pastor criticized the popular Vietnamese “cult of the dragon”. Mark Galli, “ANewDay in Vietnam,” *Christianity Today*, 4 May 2007 <<http://ctlibrary.com/ct/2007/may/24.26.html>>, viewed 22 May 2008.

⁶⁸ “Options on English Version for ‘Chinese Dragon’ Suggested,” *People’s Daily Online*, English edition, 12 December 2006, <http://english.people.com.cn/200612/12/eng20061212_331596.html>, viewed 25 August 2007. In an apparent negation of these fears, the foreign architects of the new Beijing Airport celebrated its “dragon-like form”. Foster + Partners, “Beijing Airport,” <<http://www.fosterandpartners.com/Projects/1235/Default.aspx>>, viewed 16 September 2007.

⁶⁹ “Options on English Version For ‘Chinese Dragon’ Suggested.”

the satanic nature of the CCP. Further, Eastern Lightning scripture urges followers to mobilize against the Party-dragon, though it does not explain precisely what believers should do to help fight the big red dragon in either the spiritual or mundane world. Its God asks:

The people of my kingdom hate the big red dragon in their bones, and want to please me by their behaviour, and so oppose the big red dragon. Do you really hate the big red dragon? Do you really feel that it is the enemy of the “kingdom prince”? Do you really have the courage to bear good witness? To defeat the big red dragon?⁶³

The dragon has occupied a prominent place in Eastern Lightning’s ideology from the movement’s early days. In May 1992, the national Protestant magazine reported that beginning in March of the previous year, materials distributed by the organization in Neixiang 内乡 county, Henan province had linked the great red dragon with CCP oppression, and threatened to “mount a powerful counter-attack against the Great Red Dragon”.⁶⁴ The dragon is indeed mentioned in the earliest section of Eastern Lightning’s scripture. As I have detailed elsewhere, however, there is some indication that its rhetoric regarding the dragon has escalated.⁶⁵ An “About Us” statement published on Eastern Lightning’s website in early 2006 refers repeatedly to the CCP as the “great red dragon”, and warns that the Church will overcome it.⁶⁶ While Eastern Lightning’s rebellion has been largely symbolic to date, its literature—and the state’s response to it—reflects the power of the symbol of the great red dragon to unite religious dissenters, and to subvert the image of the state.

Conclusion

In recent times, Eastern Lightning’s teachings on the big red dragon have captured the state’s attention and the interest of scholars. Yet they are not new, and the big red dragon is more than a provocative symbol in the present day. From early missionaries to the Taiping rebels to popular Protestantism to Eastern Lightning, the identification of dragons with devils has been woven into the tapestry of folk Protestantism and is now well on the way to becoming a component of at least one version of a Chinese Christian culture.

Such indigenization of the biblical dragon is regarded as heterodox and superstitious by political authorities, and some Protestants. However, the remarks of my Taiwanese friend—who is a well-travelled university graduate in her thirties—and the controversy surrounding the dragon in Chinese Christian communities in the USA indicate that the dragon taboo is to be found across a broad spectrum of Chinese believers.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the dissonance between the Chinese and biblical dragons continues to pose a dilemma not just for Christians, but also for

also for the broader Chinese community. The dragon was reportedly rejected as the mascot for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics for fear of alienating Western audiences,⁶⁸ and in late 2006, Chinese media seized on the suggestion of a Shanghai professor that the character 龍 be rendered “Chinese dragon” or “long” in English translations so as to avoid misunderstanding and cultural conflict.⁶⁹ The issue of using the dragon to symbolize China became a “hot topic” on the Strong Nation BBS Forum, and the popular SINA website, <sina.com>, conducted a survey which saw 90 per cent of one hundred thousand respondents voting to keep the dragon as a national icon.⁷⁰ Most Chinese, then, continue to identify as “descendants of the dragon”, while for some Chinese Christians, religious beliefs render their relationship to the dragon somewhat more complicated.⁷¹

⁷⁰ “Dragon Debate Stirs Public’s Imagination,” *People’s Daily Online*, English edition, 12 December 2006, <http://english.people.com.cn/200612/12/eng20061212_331381.html>, viewed 25 August 2007.

⁷¹ While not clearly connected to Western or biblical representations of the dragon, Chinese popular sources also expressed ambivalence towards the Chinese dragon in the 1980s. Hou Te-chien’s pop song “Descendants of the Dragon” (*Long de chuan ren* 龍的傳人) depicted the dragon as oppressive; the 1988 production *River Elegy* similarly vilified the symbol. Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.227.

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