The other German colonialism? Power, conflict and resistance in a German-speaking mission in China, ca. 1850-1920

This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This is a chapter from the book, German Colonialism Revisited: Asian, African and Oceanian Responses. Except where otherwise noted, this work is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 license.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/18127

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: University of Michigan Press

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported (CC BY 3.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/

Please cite the published version.
The Other German Colonialism

Power, Conflict, and Resistance in a German-speaking Mission in China, ca. 1850–1920

Thoralf Klein

Ever since research on mission history passed from the hands of the mission societies and theologians into those of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and so on—that is, since about the 1960s—two major approaches have developed. The earlier of the two focused on the role of Christian missions within the political and cultural framework of imperialism and colonialism. Taking up anti-colonial impulses from 1920s China and 1960s Africa, its proponents pointed to the entanglement of missionaries with the expansion of imperialism, their functions within the colonial state, and their contribution to the “colonization of hearts and minds.” Since the 1990s, this approach has given way to a controversial debate on whether missions constituted a more independent force that was able to counterbalance the ill effects of colonialism. The second, more recent approach deals with the cultural dynamics of encounters between missionaries and indigenous populations, pointing to the creative processes they set in motion.

The two approaches that I have just outlined with somewhat broad strokes are, of course, not wholly irreconcilable. On the contrary, reflection on their relationship might lead to a fresh assessment of both mission and imperialism/colonialism. I suggest that both be treated as irreducible phenomena, making it impossible to make use of one to fully explain the other. Their relationship is best described as an “elective affinity.” Not only does this perspective shift attention to a comparison between the two, pointing to the intrinsic colonial qualities of the way mission societies managed their indigenous congregations. It also enables analysis of the colonial structures of Christian missions in contexts where no formal colonialism, but informal imperialism existed—as was the case in China, which is at the center of this essay. Like other states with a functioning
bureaucratic apparatus (such as the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Japan), China was never formally colonized but was subjected to a system of “unequal” treaties that granted Europeans and North Americans of different nationalities legal privileges and ensured their economic dominance. Only the British crown colony of Hong Kong and a number of leaseholds along the coast—usually acquired around 1898—such as German-occupied Jiaozhou 胶州, were ruled as full-fledged colonies.\(^5\) With the exception of these territories, Christian missions thus operated in areas under Chinese jurisdiction, but at the same time were placed under the legal protection of the treaties, which was upheld with the backing of the consuls and occasionally military forces of their home countries.

The colonial character of Christian missions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be identified in different ways. According to the German historian Jürgen Osterhammell, what characterizes colonialism is that “fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule.”\(^6\) Indeed it was the missionaries on the spot or even the headquarters of mission societies back in Europe or the United States who decided what was best for “their” Christians, and in doing so, displayed that same “beneficial ruthlessness” that Gayatri Spivak has ascribed to British colonialism in India.\(^7\) It is especially important to note that the motives behind the mission enterprise were not entirely altruistic, as it was ultimately directed toward establishing the Kingdom of God, an end that would benefit not only the receivers of the missionary message but also the mission societies and all supporters of the mission movement.

One might even go further: By trying to mold the converts according to the norms and practices of the Christian milieu from which they themselves originated (mostly rural Catholicism or the Pietist/Evangelical strand of Protestantism), the missionaries pursued what Homi Bhabha has called the strategy of mimicry: a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, \(\textit{as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite.}\)\(^8\) In this attempt missionaries subjected the neophytes to power structures that, in many though not in all mission societies, ultimately grew out of those that governed the relationship between missionaries and the directories of the mission societies. As the
American sociologist Jon Miller has shown, in centralized mission societies the authority of the home board was based on a combination of traditional, bureaucratic, and charismatic rule. This Weberian perspective ought to be complemented by a Foucauldian one, as the directories often also relied on strategies of control described by one missionary as “superintendence and subordination.” Missionaries, who had often internalized techniques of (mutual) surveillance, could in turn impose them on the indigenous Christians placed under their responsibility. In this capacity, they were expected to enforce regulations exhibiting an uncompromising stance toward all beliefs and practices considered incompatible with Christianity.

How did indigenous Christians react to this missionary policy? How did they stake out a place of their own within the colonial framework imposed upon them by the missionaries? In the remainder of this essay, I will provide an answer by taking a closer look at the Evangelical Mission Society of Basel (Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft zu Basel), generally known as the Basel Mission. Founded in 1815, it was both a local, national, transnational, and global enterprise. The members of its directory board, the so-called Committee, were co-opted from among the urban bourgeoisie of Basel. Its main reservoir of financial resources and manpower, however, lay in Southwestern Germany, with the state of Württemberg alone accounting for almost one-third of its income and for almost half of the missionaries sent to China between 1846 and 1914. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the Basel Mission began to emphasize its rootedness in German culture. And since it began to send missionaries to the German colony Cameroon in 1885, its leaders officially began to designate it as a German mission. At the same time, however, Basel Mission worked under different colonial regimes—Danish and later British on the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana, since 1828) and British in South India (since 1840)—as well as the transnational informal empire in China (since 1847).

As these varying political frameworks indicate, the power relations between the Basel Mission and its indigenous congregations worked independently of the mission society’s affiliation with a particular colonial power. Rather, the authority of the society and its missionaries rested on a number of legal, social, and cultural arrangements designed to inculcate in the Basel Mission’s Christians a “Christian way of life” (christliche Lebensordnung). Foremost among these were the Church Regulations
(Gemeindeordnung), a codified set of rules drawn up to establish a uniform global standard for the spiritual—and to some extent also mundane—life of the Basel Christians that established the Basel Mission as a colonial phenomenon in its own right. In the remainder of this essay, I analyze this phenomenon in three parts: Two case studies from China will be followed by a concluding section that places my findings in a broader context.


Like all Protestant missions, the Basel Mission was a latecomer in China, which had been a target of Catholic missionary activity for several centuries. After the Vatican had forbidden crucial elements of the Jesuit strategy to accommodate Christianity to Chinese culture, the Yongzheng 雍正 emperor of the ruling Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911) in 1724 declared Christianity illegal and expelled most foreign missionaries, forcing the existing congregations underground. Frustrated in their attempts to circumvent this ban, both Catholic missionaries and their Protestant counterparts—who arrived in China from 1807 onward—eventually threw in their lot with imperialism.

In this respect, the Basel Mission is quite a typical case. In sending its first missionaries to China in 1846, it responded to the favorable conditions for evangelization opened up after China had been forced to sign the first of the so-called unequal treaties in the wake of the disastrous Opium War (1839–42) against the British. In these treaties, China unilaterally granted foreigners a number of legal and economic privileges, extraterritoriality and consular jurisdiction being the ones from which mission work benefited the most. In addition, the Qing government also issued toleration edicts, allowing Catholics to openly practice their religion—a privilege that Protestants were quick to claim for themselves.

Like other German missions, the Basel missionaries strongly preferred the rural hinterland as a field of work to the treaty ports China had had to open to free trade and foreign residence. By concentrating on the southernmost province of Guangdong 廣東
and on one particular linguistic group—the Hakka (Mandarin: *Kejia* 客家)—the Basel Mission sought to lay the foundation for establishing formalized church structures. In the years prior to 1860, however, this strategy was hampered by a number of limitations. As foreigners had no right to travel in the interior, and the German consular representation lacked a legal basis, the first Basel missionaries had little opportunity to venture far inland; moreover, they lacked the necessary linguistic and cultural skills, as well as sufficient numbers. This is why they had to rely on Chinese catechists and evangelists who could make use of their local ties to gain a foothold in remote places. On the other hand, the necessity of inculcating a “Christian way of life” in assistants and new believers required that they be placed under the control of the missionaries. The two elements of the Basel mission strategy were in conflict with each other and must of necessity lead to tensions. The best-documented controversy involved one of the Basel Mission’s most prominent Chinese Christians, a man named Zhang Fuxing 張復興.

Born in 1811 or 1812 as the son of an itinerant merchant and laborer, Zhang had settled in Hong Kong in the mid-1840s. While working as a peddler, he converted to Christianity and made contact with the Basel missionaries, who appointed him as a preaching assistant (*Predigt-Gehilfe*). In 1852 he returned to his ancestral village of Gaoqi 高磜 in Changle 長樂 district to evangelize there, making use of his local ties. Although his family background was rather modest, his position as a salaried preacher and his mediating skills seem to have earned him the recognition of the Zhang 張 lineage, culminating in his becoming an elder of that lineage in 1859. Lineage ties, based on patrilinear descent from a common ancestor, were a structuring principle of local society in much of China, but especially in the south, and overlapped with village organization in a fluid relationship.

In the early years, the emerging congregation in Changle district—more than 200 persons in 1859—was pretty much left to its own devices, developing into a network of laypeople under the leadership of Zhang and his associates. Communication with the Basel missionaries depended on Christians occasionally traveling to Hong Kong, where the missionaries had retreated after the outbreak of the Second Opium War in 1856. The position of the Changle Christians was volatile, however, as they suffered greatly from feuding, which was a characteristic feature of social life in nineteenth-century South
China. Lineages and villages fought with each other—and occasionally among themselves—over scarce resources as well as matters of honor. The small Christian congregations were caught amid these conflicts: Sometimes Christians were persecuted by their own kin or neighbors, sometimes (as in the village of Zhangcun 章村, which became the center of the new congregation) they were harassed by outsiders and defended by their own relations. In Changle, therefore, much depended on Zhang’s leadership not only in spiritual but also in secular and financial matters, into which he was increasingly drawn.21

Zhang’s entanglement with local society was probably also the reason for his taking a concubine sometime in the late 1850s. His first marriage was childless, and therefore Zhang became the object of much derision, which affected not only his own prestige as a lineage elder, but also—he reasoned later—that of the Christian congregation. However, Zhang’s decision constituted a clear violation of the Church Regulations, which explicitly outlawed polygamy after conversion to Christianity.22 Apparently, Zhang had no qualms about his action, since his own reading of the Bible provided a perfect justification. As he explained to the elders of the Changle congregation, polygamy was a practice condoned by the Old Testament, if not by the New.23

The situation of the de facto independent Changle congregation changed after the end of the Second Opium War in 1860. As a consequence of military defeat, the Qing government had to conclude new treaties, which allowed all foreigners to travel and missionaries to acquire real estate in the interior of China. After Prussia, acting on behalf of other German states, had become a treaty power in 1861, the Basel missionaries enjoyed the full protection of Prussian (and since 1871 German) consuls, the Swiss among them becoming “protégés” (Schutzgenossen) of Prussia and later of the German Reich. It is no coincidence, then, that the first Basel missionaries ventured into Changle district in 1862 and 1863, taking the first steps to incorporate the congregation there into the organizational fabric and power structure of the Basel Mission. Apart from baptizing converts and thus formally admitting them to the church (a prerogative of the missionaries that allowed them to prevent uncontrolled growth of the congregations), the missionaries also began to enforce church discipline. This meant that they would have to
deal with Zhang’s bigamy. Because of Zhang’s influence over the congregation and his importance as its protector, the missionaries proceeded cautiously, first excluding him from Holy Communion, then dismissing him from the service of the mission, and finally expelling him from the congregation. In his communication with the missionaries, Zhang was rather submissive and seems to have accepted his excommunication, referring to himself in his Hakka vernacular as a “fui ngoi nyin” or “person outside the church” (hui wai ren 會外人 in Mandarin). This may have been an example of what Bhabha has called “sly civility.” In his talks with fellow Christians, Zhang, whose “frank and determined language” the missionaries had remarked upon earlier, adopted a more aggressive posture. He was also slow in changing his ways. Significantly, he seems never to have renounced his position as lineage elder. In the case of Zhang’s bigamy, however, the Basel Mission was uncompromising, insisting on his separating from his concubine and on a public confession of his sins, after which he was readmitted to Holy Communion in late 1863. In the following year, two missionaries were permanently stationed in Zhangcun, in order to better control the congregation. As Zhang’s first wife died the same year, he was permitted to officially marry his concubine.

Having solved the case of Zhang’s bigamy, the missionaries took a final step that symbolized their takeover of authority over the Changle congregation, turning the house that served both as chapel and as Zhang’s private residence into a mission station. Zhang had purchased the impressive three-storey building back in 1859 on behalf of the Changle congregation; he himself had contributed about one-quarter of the purchase price and made considerable investments in the renovation of the house.

Part of the story is contained in a number of legal documents in Chinese and German preserved in the Basel Mission Archives. What the missionaries were aiming at is best captured in a paragraph in one of the German drafts that was later to be included in the official Chinese land deed:

It goes without saying that the congregation established by the Basel Mission [...] will accept the church regulations of the Basel Mission, entrust itself to the direction of its missionaries [...] and honor the [members of the] Committee in Basel as its spiritual tutors.

This passage makes it clear that the missionaries wanted to establish some sort of
legal authority that would ensure their control over the lives of the Chinese Christians. This aim was underscored by the changes made by the missionaries, who had moved into the building in 1864, to give the building a more “European” character. These changes were partly motivated by concerns for the health of the missionaries, but they were also the outgrowth of a deliberate policy on the part of the Committee to separate the lifestyles of missionaries, on the one hand, and Chinese catechists and Christians, on the other.33

Owing to these circumstances, there was a lot more at stake than the simple transfer of real estate. The missionaries’ standpoint was that Zhang had never legally owned the building but ought to receive compensation for his investments. However, Zhang proved reluctant to evacuate the house, partly because he felt his authority was being threatened, partly because the compensation offered fell short of his expectations. He even went out of his way to lose his temper in the presence not only of a number of leading parishioners but also of two missionaries before he could be prevailed upon to make way for the missionaries. The final settlement symbolically underscored the racial hierarchy within the Basel Mission congregations, which separated Europeans from Chinese assistants and ordinary Christians.

In the Zhang Fuxing case, the Basel missionaries successfully asserted their authority over the Changle congregation and secured its incorporation in the power structures of the Basel Mission, forcing Zhang to make all concessions. Paradoxically, their victory was far from complete. Although they had coercive measures at their disposal, these were never fully sufficient to mold Chinese Christians according to the Pietist ideals of the Basel missionaries. Despite many tensions and conflicts, lineage and village ties continued to connect Chinese Christians to local society. The problem was aggravated by the dynamics of mission work itself, which constantly brought new converts into the church. In some of the most controversial issues—continuation of certain “heathen” practices, polygamy, infant marriages, and consumption of sacrificial meat—the missionaries either glossed over transgressions or slowly but gradually began to work out compromises with local practices. Thus the resilience of the Chinese Christians shaped the Basel Mission’s Chinese church as much as did the input of the missionaries.
Challenging the Power of the Missionaries: The Independence Movement in Songtou, 1887–1913

Given the strong missionary bias in the archival record left by the Basel Mission, any materials of Chinese origin deserve particular attention. Among these are a few documents relating to the independence movement in the congregation of Songtou 嵩頭, a village in Guangdong Province. The most comprehensive among these is a booklet describing the history of that congregation.38 Written in the early 1920s, it appeared not under the auspices of the Basel Mission, but in Shanghai 上海, illuminating the ways that Christians had become able to organize outside of their mission society.

The driving force behind the independence movement was one Zhong Qingyuan 鐘清源, a catechist and later a pastor in the Basel Mission. According to the Basel Mission’s rule of avoidance, he was never stationed in his native village of Songtou, but he wielded considerable influence in the congregation owing to his lineage and village ties.

The Songtou independence movement manifested itself twice: first in the late 1880s and again in 1912. In 1887, Zhong Qingyuan launched an initiative to raise money in order to prepare the congregation for self-government, which was then the avowed policy of the Basel Mission.39 Since about the 1840s and thus much earlier than administrators in the colonial bureaucracies, prominent leaders of the transnational Protestant missionary movement had advocated self-governing, self-financed, and self-propagating churches.40 In China, the Basel Mission had embarked on a similar policy since about 1875, promising congregations self-administration if and when they were able to pay the salary of the local preacher. Until about 1910, however, the Committee in Basel as well as the missionaries in the field were focused on setting up structures for a future (Hakka) Chinese church and pressured the congregations for ever higher church taxes.41 Their one-sided exactions made self-administration a rather unattractive option for catechists and congregations, the more so as the latter hardly had a say in the matter. Most congregations therefore remained passive and reluctant to comply with the missionaries’ demands, and the move of the Songtou congregation was an unusual one.
By 1888, the congregation had collected a sum of more than $33,000^A$ cash. In June of that year, five Songtou Christians went to see the local missionary, Otto Schultze, and offered to pay the salary for a pastor or catechist. The missionary would continue to oversee the latter’s work, but the congregation would take financial administration into their own hands. Schultze’s reply is very typical for the attitude of the Basel missionaries toward their Chinese Christians and toward the self-government of congregations. He declared that although the congregation was able to attain self-sufficiency, it was not yet ripe for self-government; he also suspected dubious motives behind the Christians’ desire to control the church property. Although some missionaries saw their authority threatened, the Christians did not seek an open conflict with the missionaries. Rather, tensions simmered down, only to resurface in the early 1910s.

By the time the self-government movement in Songtou reemerged, both the political framework and the Basel Mission’s policy on indigenization had undergone profound changes. In the years after 1905, the mission had stepped up its attempts at introducing church self-government. By ordaining Chinese pastors from 1906, it had created an indigenous high-level clergy that performed the same functions as the missionaries, although it was placed under their supervision and hence still marginalized. For the Chinese Christians, however, the distinction between European missionaries and Chinese pastors was hardly obvious, as members of both groups were referred to as mushi ("shepherd," the literal translation of "pastor"). At the political level, the Republican revolution of 1911 for the first time officially recognized Christianity, the revolutionary government having granted religious freedom in its provisional constitution of 1912. Moreover, the revolution fueled hopes for a speedy liquidation of imperialism that would help China to attain international equality within a new world order. Although these hopes were later thwarted, many people shared them at the outset of the Republic. It is therefore hardly a coincidence that in late 1912, a movement for self-government emerged within the Basel Mission’s Chinese churches.

In contrast to the 1887 initiative, which was purely local, the new movement encompassed a greater number of congregations. But again Songtou took the lead, as

---

^AU: check editing (thirty-three thousand?); add name of currency (Marks, dollars, pounds? Chinese?)
Cash here refers to the smallest Chinese copper coin; it is an accepted term among China scholars – TK
Zhong Qingyuan was the guiding spirit behind the movement and had mobilized his kinship and village ties. Half of the twenty-two signatories of the manifesto outlining the aims of the movement were from Songtou. The text, issued in November 1912, criticized the “spirit of dependence” prevailing in the Basel Mission’s congregations and declared “full Chinese responsibility for all matters of the church” as the goal of the movement. As in 1887/88, the most immediate objective goal consisted of raising money to pay a pastor’s salary, with any surplus to be invested in a hospital or a business venture. In January 1913, Zhong Qingyuan was elected pastor of the independent congregations and became one of eight directors of the independent church. Impatient with the sluggish progress toward self-government in the Basel Mission, Zhong and the other directors made it plain that their initiative was the first step toward complete independence of all its Chinese congregations. Zhong himself was reported as saying that according to the policy of the Basel Mission, the Chinese Christians would have to wait for self-government “till Doomsday.” On the other hand, the manifesto had expressed a desire to collaborate with the European missionaries, and Zhong’s activities were not intended to provoke them: He preached in the chapel of the independent church, went on some evangelization tours, and founded a girls’ school.

Somewhat naively perhaps, the leaders of the independence movement seem to have counted on the support or at least acquiescence of the missionaries. But although some missionaries were indeed sympathetic, the majority, and especially those in leading positions, expressed their disapproval of the independent churches. While suspecting xenophobia as the driving force behind the independence movement, they themselves employed sinophobic arguments, declaring it impossible to strike a compromise with Zhong and other leaders, who, being Chinese, would not honor an agreement. Owing to the lack of support from the missionaries and probably also to the shortage of funds, the independence movement soon lost its impetus and dissolved in late 1913, about one year after its reemergence. Zhong Qingyuan was especially bitter at the hostility of the missionaries, who had even rejected his financial claims on the grounds that he had quit the mission on his own initiative. Left with no alternative, Zhong, like most of his associates in the independence movement, eventually returned to serve the mission.

It would seem that the attempts of the Songtou congregation at achieving
independence had been a failure. Both in 1887/88 and in 1912/13, the independence movement gave in at the least token of resistance on the part of the missionaries, testifying to the degree that the Chinese Christians, both laymen and clergy, had internalized the principle of obedience despite the many tensions and grievances between them and the missionaries. But this impression is somewhat misleading. In fact, the abortive initiatives at achieving self-government profoundly influenced subsequent developments in two ways: First, they brought together a group of people committed to the cause of an independent church, initially on the basis of lineage and villages, later on a churchwide basis. In terms of personnel (and to some extent also resources), the movement of 1887/88 paved the way for that of 1912/13, while the latter formed the nucleus of a future independent church. Second, they fundamentally altered the relationship between Basel missionaries and Chinese Christians. Again, the alarm with which some missionaries greeted the initiative of 1887 anticipated the shock wave that the independence movement of 1912/13 sent through their ranks. This shock convinced them that the mission could not unilaterally impose self-government on the church but needed the active participation of the clergy and church elders, who represented the congregations while the clergy were employees of the mission.\textsuperscript{52} As early as September 1913, three synods that were held simultaneously and included Chinese delegates had elected mixed European-Chinese directorates and agreed on organizational guidelines for a self-governing church. It is impossible here to trace the tortuous and conflict-ridden process that led to the establishment of that church, the Chongzhenhui 崇真會, in 1924 and to its attaining full independence in 1932. What is of importance here is to note that the actions of Zhong Qingyuan and his fellows in 1912/13 had changed the course of the entire process, testifying to the agency of Chinese Christians even in failure.

**Conclusion**

In the preceding sections, I have presented, so to speak, case studies within a case study, selecting two specific moments in the development of one particular mission society. However, the findings of these case studies have implications for our understanding of power structures not only in other mission areas of the Basel Mission but in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian missions in general.
To begin with, it should have become clear that the hierarchy of power within the Basel Mission in China was in no way influenced by any of the imperialist powers on the spot, including the German Reich. There can be no doubt that imperialism, both as a transnational and a German national enterprise, backed the presence of the Basel and other missionaries in the Chinese hinterland, but it neither fostered nor interfered with the growth of the Chinese Christian congregations. This lends credibility to my argument that the power structures within Christian missions must be viewed not as an extension of secular colonialism but as a kind of colonialism in its own right.  

This is why I refer to the power structures within the Basel Mission—a “German” mission by its own definition—as an “other” German colonialism. Without denying the multifaceted interactions between Christian missions and imperialism/colonialism, what I want to point out in this essay is the structural parallels between the two. They existed because both Christian missionaries and the agents of imperialism/colonialism met with the same local conditions and, in confronting them, exhibited a similar sense of superiority. To the extent that there was an ideological difference between the two, it lay in the source that this sense of superiority was derived from—a secular idea of progress on the one hand, the perceived necessity of spreading the Kingdom of God and the claim to a better understanding of the Christian doctrine on the other.

With this in mind, I go on to argue that as historians, we must understand the development of Christian missions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like that of imperialism, as a long-term process stretching in a long arc from the gradual establishment of authority over indigenous people to the gradual dismantling of that authority and the establishment of independent indigenous institutions. Its specific temporal structure would vary from place to place and from one mission society to the next.

In the case of the Basel Mission, the two episodes related above were crucial stages of that process. As the Zhang Fuxing case shows, what I call the colonial strategy of the missionaries consisted in establishing themselves as the only source of authority and suppressing any competing claims within the mission congregations and sometimes even in society at large. There were other cases—less prominent, but similar—in the Basel Mission in China. And the same pattern is discernible in the other fields of work.
of the Basel Mission as well as in other mission societies in China and other parts of the world, with the specifics varying according to local circumstances. In the official discourse of Christian missions, missionary authority was spiritual and served the higher purpose of expanding the Kingdom of God. But there was a more worldly aspect to it, as the missionaries, most of whom originated from what has been called the “middling classes”—peasants, artisans, merchants, and the like—certainly climbed up the social ladder to wield power over a group of dependents—their congregations—in such a way as they would never have been able to at home. On the other hand, indigenous catechists or Christians could derive authority from a number of sources. Combination of an official function in the mission with local and kinship ties as well as membership in a social elite, as in Zhang Fuxing’s case, was not unusual and particularly threatening to the missionaries, which is why they sought to confine such persons to an inferior rank in the colonial and racially constructed hierarchy of the mission. In the majority of cases known to me, the missionaries were quite successful at this, as the outcome of the Zhang Fuxing case clearly shows.

However, although Christians usually found it difficult to question missionary authority, that authority was in fact rather circumscribed—a fact that I have not been able to examine in much detail, but that I want to draw attention to in passing. There were two reasons for this: The Christian congregations were often spread over a vast area, so the missionaries were unable to constantly monitor their conduct. Like the seats of colonial administration, mission stations constituted “islands of rule” (Inseln von Herrschaft), from which an understaffed administration tried in vain to control its social environment. This problem was exacerbated by a second factor, the dynamics of the mission enterprise itself, which constantly added newly converted members to the Christian congregations. It reinforced local ties that knit together Christians and non-Christians and enhanced in the converts a willingness to accommodate their new belief to the pre-Christian concepts and practices in which they had been raised and that their conversion could not simply eclipse. However, the very fact that the colonial power structures created by the missionaries were not all-encompassing created tensions between them and the Chinese Christians, with missionaries convincing themselves that spiritually, the congregations were not fit for self-government.
The Songtou case, on the other hand, marks the beginning of a process that led to the decline of missionary authority and to the establishment of an independent church with a distinctly local flavor. This was a dynamic that unfolded elsewhere in China, in other fields of work of the Basel Mission, throughout the German colonies, in the colonial world in general, and in countries under the sway of informal imperialism—in other words, practically everywhere Christian missions were active. Of the different forms that process might take on,⁵⁸ the takeover of the mission churches by the indigenous clergy and Christians—as in the Basel Mission in China and elsewhere—is perhaps most similar to processes of decolonization because in both cases the advocates of independence had to take over the institutions that had governed them and use them to their own ends.

As an example in what might be called the decolonization of mission churches, the Songtou case points to the difficulties inherent in that process, especially in its initial phases. Although several decades had elapsed since the Zhang Fuxing case, the Songtou Christians exhibited the same difficulties to stand up to the missionaries to pursue their own interests. Several factors enhanced the ongoing colonial power structure of the Basel Mission: the almost total dependence of the congregations on financial assistance, the volatility of the Christians’ position within local society, the credibility of the missionaries’ claim to a better understanding of the Christian doctrine, and, last but not least, the spiritual bond created by a shared belief. On the other hand, the Songtou case shows once more how the kinship and village ties in which the Christians remained enmeshed provided them with an alternative source of power from which to challenge the authority of the missionaries. It is interesting to note, however, that as the indigenization of the Chongzhenhui gained momentum, these ties became increasingly irrelevant for the leadership of the new church. The professional clergy that took over from the missionaries had been trained by them and came to share their outlook on local institutions such as lineage and village. Like the postcolonial bureaucracies in the newly established states in Africa and Asia,⁵⁹ the clergy of the independent churches became a link between postcolonial developments and the colonial past, but it was but one factor in an independent Christianity that displays varying degrees of mixture between the legacy of colonial missions and the influence of local cultures.
Notes


16. Jessie Gregory Lutz and Rolland Ray Lutz, “The Invisible China Missionaries: The Basel Mission’s Chinese Evangelists, 1847–1866,” Mission Studies 12 (1995): 204–27. The Basel Mission strictly distinguished between the two groups: Catechists were employees of the Basel Mission, received a salary and received instruction from the missionaries (since the 1860s in the Basel Mission schools), whereas evangelists worked without pay and lacked formal training. “Revidirte Katechisten-Ordnung vom Jahre 1863”, § 3, BM/A A-9–1/II-1. In addition, there were other groups of assistants, such as the missionaries’ language instructors, schoolteachers, and medical personnel.

17. There exist different versions of Zhang Fuxing’s early biography in the Basel Mission Archives, some of which may have been tailored to fit his later status as one of the founding fathers of the Basel congregations. The earliest account of Zhang’s life is in a report by Theodor Hamberg, 1852, BM/A A-1,2 (1852)/23. It is far less elaborate than the later ones, especially Zhang’s obituary, in BM/A A-1,14 (1880)/70: Heinrich Bender, “Lebensskizze des verstorbenen Tschong Fuk hin, in Verbindung mit der Gründung der Tschonglok Mission,” 18 June 1880, A-1,14 (1880)/70. This text, in turn is based on an manuscript that was compiled anonymously around 1865 but is in the handwriting of Bender and his wife: “Aus der Chronik der Station Tschongtshun,” A-10.1/9,5.


24. For an overview of the process cf. “Aus der Chronik der Station Tschongtshun,” For the missionaries’ justification and more details cf. Philipp Winnes to Joseph Josenhans, 10 July 1862, BM/A A-1,4(1862)/7; Winnes to Josenhans, 12 November 1862, A-1,4 (1862)/15; Rudolf Lechler to Josenhans, 23 December 1862, A-1,4 (1862)/16; Minutes of the Committee of the Basel Mission, 4 February 1863 (hereafter cited as Minutes of the Committee).
26. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 141–42.
29. Minutes of the Committee, 8 April 1863; Lechler to Josenhans, 5 December 1863, A-1,5 (1863)/10.
30. Heinrich Bender to Josenhans, 31 October 1864, BM/A A-1,5 (1864)/12.
31. Draft agreement between the Committee of the Basel Mission, and the congregation in Changle concerning the mortgage of the house acquired by the congregation, § 4, BM/A A-1,5 (1865)/17. The more elaborate Chinese version is in the deed of the transfer, dated 9 January 1866, is in A-31.7,1 d/2.
32. According to Schultze, “Geschichte der Basler Missionsstation Tschong-tshun,” missionary Bender was sick until he had had some of the rooms and one window enlarged.
34. Annual Report by Bender, 9 January 1865, BM/A A-1,5 (1864)/13; Lechler to Josenhans, 27 November 1865, A-1,5 (1865)/16.


39. *Songtou jiaohui shi*, 15–16. According to a report by Schultze, 4 July 1888, BM/A A-1,22/159, the reason for the call for donations was that the congregation was preparing for the expiring of the mortgage on their meeting room due in 1895.


43. Report by Schultze, 4 July 1888.


45. Georg Ziegler to Theodor Oehler, 30 November 1912, BM/A A-1,52/108; *Songtou jiaohui shi*, 22.


47. The directory of the independent congregations to the Committee, German translation, 1913; Zhong Qingyuan to Georg Ziegler and Heinrich Gieß, German translation, 1913, both in BM/A A-3.20,1/H.


49. For a critical view of the movement see Heinrich Gieß to Zhong Qingyuan (in Chinese), 27 April 1913 and 18 March 1914, BM/A A-20,46; Georg Ziegler to Committee, 26 May 1913, A-3.20,1/H. For favorable comments cf. Ramminger to Th. Oehler, 19.11.1912, A-1,52/307; report by Kiehlneker, 10 April 1913; Schultze, comments on a petition by Zhong Qingyuan, both in BM/A A-3.20,1/H.

50. Annual report by Heinrich Gieß, 15 February 1912, BM/A A-1,49/109; comments by Gieß on a petition by Zhong Qingyuan, 25 February 1913; Wilhelm Maisch, Comments on report by Karl Kiehlneker, 5 July 1913, both in A-3.20,1/H.


54. For a similar case cf. the report by Piton, 1 June, 1873, BM/A A-1,8/122.


57. Michael Pesek, Koloniale Herrschaft in Deutsch-Ostafrika. Expedition, Militär und Verwaltung seit 1880 (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2005), 244–59.
