# Introduction

## Why Study the History of the Protestant Church in China?

The history of the church in China is a gripping story filled with unexpected turns no one could foresee. Beyond its fascinating content, there are many reasons to study this story, four of which are particularly germane. First, the sheer magnitude of the roughly 70-90 million[[1]](#footnote-0) evangelicals in China begs an answer to the question, “how did this come about?”[[2]](#footnote-1) How did Mao’s Atheist Republic become home to so many evangelicals? Second, the significant geopolitical influence of China coupled with the sheer number of Christians in China indicate that in the decades to come, the Chinese church will likely shape global Christianity in significant ways. Third, missionaries played an outsized role in founding and developing the Chinese Protestant church during its first 140 years and there is much we can learn for future missionary endeavours from this. Fourth, we as Capitol Hill Baptist Church are inextricably linked to Chinese Protestants through the roughly one dozen of our members born in China, the Pastoral Interns who returned to China, the missionaries we send to China, the International Student Ministry among Chinese students, and the dozens of participants in the 9Marks Weekender from China.

A brief note before we continue. The scope of the history discussed here is limited to Chinese Protestants for purely pragmatic reasons. Consequently, references to “the Chinese church”, “Christians in China”, etc. are references confined to Protestants unless otherwise noted.

# The History of the Protestant Church in China

## Robert Morrison

By the early 1800s, the Qing dynasty had ruled China for 150 years.[[3]](#footnote-2) During this time, China had effectively been closed to foreigners and especially to missionaries.[[4]](#footnote-3) The Chinese government forbade outsiders from visiting most of the country and punished via strangulation foreigners who proselytized inside the country.[[5]](#footnote-4)

Despite this bleak background for missionary work, the conspicuous lack of a single Protestant in a country of 300 million began stirring some Western Christians to consider moving to China for the spread of the gospel. In 1803, a working-class British man named Robert Morrison attended the Missionary Academy at Gosport, England, with the goal of moving to China.[[6]](#footnote-5) Upon graduation, he found a Chinese man living in London who agreed to tutor him in the language for two years.[[7]](#footnote-6) This proved a remarkable provision for Morrison as learning Chinese in China would have been immensely difficult since the Qing government forbade its people from teaching foreigners Chinese on pain of death.[[8]](#footnote-7) By 1807, Morrison sought passage to China with the British East India Company yet it refused.[[9]](#footnote-8) As a result, Morrison would need to sail 80 days to New York and then 113 days to Guangzhou, China.[[10]](#footnote-9)

Shortly after his arrival on September 7, 1807, Morrison faced an extraordinarily significant decision: evangelize or translate the Bible?[[11]](#footnote-10) He reasoned that evangelism would result in his rapid deportation and any converts would need Scripture.[[12]](#footnote-11) Consequently, within a few months of arriving in China, Morrison began translating the Bible.[[13]](#footnote-12) For the next 27 years, Morrison labored diligently toward publishing content in Chinese that would lay a strong foundation for future gospel work. By the time he died in 1834, Morrison had only baptized about 10 Chinese converts[[14]](#footnote-13) yet his life proved immensely productive. He published the first systematic grammar of the Chinese language, a three-volume Chinese-English dictionary, a 103 question Catechism[[15]](#footnote-14), and a Bible in Chinese.[[16]](#footnote-15)

## First Opium War

During the last decade of Robert Morrison’s life, tensions began to mount between the British government and the Qing dynasty over the rapid growth of illegally imported yet highly lucrative opium from British India.[[17]](#footnote-16) By the time of Morrison’s death, opium addiction ravaged upward of two million Chinese and brought vast social ills.[[18]](#footnote-17) The conflict boiled over in 1839 with the onset of military conflict that became known as the First Opium War. By 1842, British military superiority humiliated the Chinese and extracted a settlement in the first of the so-called Unequal Treaties.[[19]](#footnote-18) This document contained two provisions that would alter the course of Christianity in China: (1) Christianity became legal.[[20]](#footnote-19) (2) Five coastal cities, including Shanghai and Guangzhou[[21]](#footnote-20), opened up for trade and permanent residence by foreigners, including missionaries.[[22]](#footnote-21)

With the hindsight of history, the Unequal Treaties would be a mixed blessing. The fact that missionaries gained access to China through a treaty largely forced upon the Qing dynasty by the governments of those missionaries after decades of highly destructive opium trade by fellow citizens of those missionaries would prove to be an albatross around the neck of Christians in China that continues even today. It is a sad yet unavoidable fact of history that the same treaty that essentially opened China for legal opium also opened the Chinese coast for legal missionary activity.[[23]](#footnote-22) While many Western Christians in China had long denounced[[24]](#footnote-23) the opium[[25]](#footnote-24) trade[[26]](#footnote-25), total separation from it proved nearly impossible as opium boats represented the only means to the Chinese interior. Just as Western Christians found it impossible to entirely separate from the opium trade, so the Chinese they sought to convert often could not separate the message of Christianity from the immorality of Western Christendom. The great Protestant missionary to China, Griffith John (1831-1912), once aptly wrote that the Western involvement in the opium trade “speaks more eloquently and convincingly to the Chinese mind against Christianity ... than the missionary does or can do for it.”[[27]](#footnote-26)

## Taiping Rebellion

As a part of the Unequal Treaties, the Chinese government ceded Hong Kong to the British.[[28]](#footnote-27) A number of missionaries began taking up residence there, including the Baptist Issachar Roberts. In 1847, Roberts spent a few weeks with a psychologically unstable man named Hong Xiuquan[[29]](#footnote-28) who had failed the civil service exam three times.[[30]](#footnote-29) As a result of interacting with Roberts and reading a tract from Liang Fa, the first ordained Protestant minister in China[[31]](#footnote-30), Xiuquan made a profession of Christ.

In the late 1840s, Xiuquan established the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom which instituted communal land policies, food quotas, gender segregation, and many other stringent regulations.[[32]](#footnote-31) At first, Western missionaries celebrated over the Taipings and their rapid growth. But by 1852 when the Taipings added to Scripture with *The Book of Heaven-Commanded Edicts*, it became clear that the Taipings were not orthodox Christians.[[33]](#footnote-32) As more of the Taiping practices emerged, this further crystallized. For example, the Taipings insisted on pain of beheading that new members memorize the Ten Commandments within three weeks. Similarly, individuals caught being noisy during worship, committing adultery, or smoking tobacco three times faced beheading.[[34]](#footnote-33)

By the mid 1850s, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had become not only a religious group but also a violent political and military uprising. Between 1851 and 1864, the quasi-Christian Taiping Rebellion against the Qing Dynasty and the vicious civil war it incited cost between 20 and 30 million lives.[[35]](#footnote-34) Ironically, it took the forces of a Christian British General to save the non-Christian Manchu Qing empire from the pseudo-Christian Taiping warriors.[[36]](#footnote-35) While the First Opium War and the Unequal Treaties proved to be an albatross laid upon Chinese Christianity by Westerners, the Taiping Rebellion would become perhaps an even greater weight for indigenous Christians to bear as two centuries of Chinese leaders who craved stability above anything else saw the destructive potential of unregulated religion.

## Hudson Taylor

One year after the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion, a badly ill British man who had returned from missions work in China[[37]](#footnote-36) aimed to organize Christians to evangelize China on a scale previously unseen. Despite 50 years of missionary activity in China, by 1860, there were only 351 Chinese Protestant church members[[38]](#footnote-37) and 91 Protestant missionaries in China.[[39]](#footnote-38) In late June 1865, J. Hudson Taylor took a step that would change these numbers dramatically before the close of the 19th century when he founded[[40]](#footnote-39) the China Inland Mission (CIM).[[41]](#footnote-40)

This organization espoused some largely unprecedented policies in the history of Protestant missions: (i) Being a “faith mission,” Taylor argued against appeals for money, whether at a church[[42]](#footnote-41) or in person.[[43]](#footnote-42) (ii) Taylor mainly sent out lay working-class people[[44]](#footnote-43) and not ordained clergy.[[45]](#footnote-44) (iii) Taylor insisted on wearing native dress[[46]](#footnote-45) as a general policy.[[47]](#footnote-46) (iv) Taylor accepted a large number of single women as missionaries and sent some of them to work in the countryside alone.[[48]](#footnote-47)

In years that followed the founding of CIM, Taylor wrote and spoke in an effort to raise up missionaries to evangelize inland China.[[49]](#footnote-48) By 1880, the number of Chinese missionaries with CIM eclipsed the number of Western missionaries outside of CIM (100 to 96)[[50]](#footnote-49) and by 1893, there were 1,323 Protestant missionaries in China.[[51]](#footnote-50) Taylor would spend most of his time in China despite painful health challenges.[[52]](#footnote-51) In the final days of his life, Taylor, back in England and facing badly failing health, insisted on returning to China one final time. He arrived in Changsha, China, twice widowed and 73 years of age, on June 1, 1905. He died two days later.[[53]](#footnote-52)

## Boxer Rebellion

As the number of foreign missionaries in China surged at the close of the 19th century, many in China increasingly saw indigenous Christian converts as a dangerous and unpatriotic foreign influence.[[54]](#footnote-53) By early 1899, Westerners began observing groups of locals vandalizing towns and espousing the aphorism “Exalt the Dynasty; Destroy the Foreigners”.[[55]](#footnote-54) Many of the so-called Boxers wore banners with the following words: “By imperial command exterminate the Christian religion.”[[56]](#footnote-55) As this Boxer Rebellion spread, foreign missionaries and Christian converts alike became targets of physical attacks.[[57]](#footnote-56) Many, both in the West and in China, faulted missionaries for the violence.[[58]](#footnote-57) Foreign troops eventually squashed the rebellion and procured a treaty in September 1901, but not before the Boxers killed about 30,000 Chinese Christians and about 200 foreign missionaries[[59]](#footnote-58), with Catholics taking the vast majority of those indigenous Chinese losses.[[60]](#footnote-59) The Boxer Rebellion would sadly turn out to be a small but ominous premonition of Chinese attitudes and opposition toward Christianity that would come to full fruition a half century later under Mao Zedong.

## Indigenous Christian Movements: John Sung & Watchman Nee

The same month that Western forces procured a treaty to end the Boxer Rebellion against foreign influence, China gave birth to a man who would become the most dynamic figure in Chinese evangelism[[61]](#footnote-60) and the greatest evangelist of twentieth-century China.[[62]](#footnote-61) John Sung was born in 1901 in Fujian, China. Academically gifted, Sung traveled to the United Stated where he earned a PhD in chemistry from Ohio State University in 1926.[[63]](#footnote-62) Upon graduation and desiring to do Christian work in China, Sung went to Union Theological Seminary in New York City on a tuition-free scholarship.[[64]](#footnote-63) Between the faculty of Union Seminary and the work of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Sung became convinced of Protestant liberalism.[[65]](#footnote-64) Eventually, after an emotional, psychological, and spiritual crisis, coupled with attendance at a revival meeting led by a fourteen year old woman from California named Uldine Utley, Sung rejected Protestant liberalism, burned his theology books as “books of the demons”, and confronted Fosdick saying, “You are of the Devil. You made me lose my faith.”[[66]](#footnote-65)

In October 1927, Sung returned to China[[67]](#footnote-66) and in 1931 a Chinese Christian named Andrew Gih assembled the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band and made John Sung the lead evangelist.[[68]](#footnote-67) As the group traveled throughout China, John Sung preached with an emotional intensity and theatrical style that offended the more placid customs of many missionaries yet captivated the imagination of countless Chinese. For example, to illustrate the Biblical story of Naaman’s healing of leprosy after going into the water seven times, Sung jumped off the stage seven times.[[69]](#footnote-68) John Sung’s Bethel Band revival meetings also featured miraculous healings and preaching on faith that drew from early 20th century American Pentecostalism. For example, a missionary doctor recounted the story of a young boy ostensibly healed at a Bethel Band service in the early 1930s: “Dr. Sung had told him that he must say, ‘I can see’; otherwise, it would be a lack of faith and he would never be able to see.”[[70]](#footnote-69)

The Bethel Band’s healing and evangelistic services grew in popularity. Between 1931 and 1935, the Bethel Band traveled over 50,000 miles, visited 133 cities, and held almost 3,400 revival meetings.[[71]](#footnote-70) In one year alone, the Bethel Band conducted 1,199 revival meetings in which its members preached to 425,980 people in thirteen provinces and 65 cities, seeing a reported 18,118 conversions.[[72]](#footnote-71)

As John Sung and the Bethel Band expanded indigenous Christianity through their revival meetings, a Chinese pastor named Watchman Nee built a group of churches with his calls for holiness and separation from denominationalism. Watchman Nee was born into a Christian family in Shantou, Guangdong, China in 1903.[[73]](#footnote-72) In 1920, the first well-known Chinese female evangelist, Dora Yu, held an evangelistic meeting through which Nee was converted.[[74]](#footnote-73) In the following years, Nee became more enamored with the Plymouth Brethren, classic Scofield Dispensationalist theology[[75]](#footnote-74), Keswick Higher Life teaching[[76]](#footnote-75), and mystics such as Madame Guyon.[[77]](#footnote-76) In 1928, Watchman Nee published his best-known book, *The Spiritual Man*, which drew heavily from the mystic Jessie Penn-Lewis and her work *Soul and Spirit*.[[78]](#footnote-77)

By the early 1930s, Nee’s following began to grow rapidly and Nee used his elevated position to denounce denominations, which he saw as an unhelpful import from Western missionaries.[[79]](#footnote-78) Ironically, about the same time, a group of churches founded by Nee called Little Flock began to expand quickly. This association, centered around Nee, drew its name from the fact that church members sang from a Plymouth Brethren hymnal titled *Hymns for the Little Flock*. By late 1933, Nee reported that there were already more than 100 Little Flock assemblies.[[80]](#footnote-79) As Nee continued to publish and preach during the 30s, his ministry and that of the Little Flock expanded despite large-scale disruption and persecution at the hands of the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).[[81]](#footnote-80)

## Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)

Shortly after the Second Sino-Japanese War ended during the mid 1940s, China became engulfed in a brutal civil war between the Nationalists, who had toppled the Qing dynasty in 1912, and the Communists, led by Mao Zedong. Eventually, the Communists won and Mao proclaimed the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Like many emperors of previous dynasties, the Communists insisted on monitoring religious life and requiring all sects to register their venues and leadership with the government. This instinct stems from a desire for stability and the repeated instances of sectarian quasi-religious movements turning into political rebellions (e.g., White Lotus rebellion in 1350s, Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813, Taiping Rebellion in 1850s,[[82]](#footnote-81) and Muslim rebellion in mid 1800s).[[83]](#footnote-82)

Against the backdrop of the Communist Party tightening its grip on religion and foreign influences, in May 1950 the Communist Chinese Protestant Y. T. Wu and 18 other indigenous church leaders traveled to Beijing for a series of meetings with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. Out of these discussions, the Christians acknowledged the history of imperial entanglement and pledged to extricate any remaining foreign ties.[[84]](#footnote-83) In a document produced by the group that exuded liberal theology[[85]](#footnote-84) called the “Christian Manifesto”, the authors wrote: “Recognize clearly the evils that have been wrought in China by imperialism; recognize the fact that in the past imperialism has made use of Christianity; purge imperialistic influences from within Christianity itself; and be vigilant against imperialism, especially American imperialism, in its plot to use religion in fostering the growth of reactionary forces.”[[86]](#footnote-85)

In May 1951, Y. T. Wu assembled a group of Protestants in Beijing to start the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) as a formal institution with the blessing of Zhou Enlai.[[87]](#footnote-86) The phrase *Three-Self* dates back to the middle of the 1800s when the heads of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Church Missionary Society used the term to denote their goal for the indigenous Chinese church: self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation.[[88]](#footnote-87)[[89]](#footnote-88) While religious in appearance, the TSPM had highly political goals. In fact, the initial council that launched the organization had overtly Communist political aims and called itself the “Preparatory Council of the China Christian Resist-America Help-Korea Three-Self Reform Movement”.[[90]](#footnote-89)

After the launch of the TSPM, the government accelerated its systematic persecution of native Christian leaders outside of the TSPM. By 1955, the vast majority of these leaders were jailed, subjected to severe public denouncement, or fled the country.[[91]](#footnote-90) In taking these actions, the government accused Christians of fraud, disloyalty to China, or some other non-religious charge in an attempt to preserve the facade of religious freedom.[[92]](#footnote-91) As a result of the Communist Party’s actions, by the mid 1950s, all three of the major independent native Chinese church movements that could genuinely claim to be “three self” were in decline as the government had jailed many of their leaders[[93]](#footnote-92).

## Persecution: Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution

As the TSPM accelerated its grip on Protestantism during the late 1950s, it merely reflected the Communist government’s increasingly violent regulation of Chinese life.

Beginning in 1958, Mao Zedong’s Communist Party of China (CPC) pushed the country into economic and social reforms called The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) that sought rapid industrialization and collectivization. The Great Leap Forward instituted forced agricultural communes, criminalization of private farming, and heightened religious persecution. The government closed over 90% of the remaining churches and sent the pastors into the fields to labor. In 1958 alone, The Great Leap Forward closed upwards of 20,000 churches.[[94]](#footnote-93) By around 1960, the TSPM ratcheted-up its control over the small number of public churches that remained open, leading to the exodus of Christians in those assemblies and the birth of the so-called “house church” movement.[[95]](#footnote-94)

While Mao’s religious policies hurt churches, his economic policies produced a disastrous famine. Between hunger and political persecution, in three years alone, Mao’s Great Leap Forward killed at least thirty million people.[[96]](#footnote-95) Political and religious prisoners in labor camps experienced the most acute suffering as many inmates died. Yet through those who lived, the gospel spread markedly.[[97]](#footnote-96)

In the wake of the Great Leap Forward’s disastrous failure, Mao Zedong found himself marginalized politically. In 1966, five years after the end of the Great Leap Forward, Mao plotted his return to power and the purge of moderating influences in the government. To achieve these goals, Mao created the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). He appealed to young Chinese to join his Red Guard and remove anyone suspected of not being loyal to Mao and the Communist cause. This led to countless Struggle Sessions and uprisings at schools, in villages, within cultural institutions, and even among family members. As a result, widespread chaos, distrust, and violence ensued. In an especially pernicious twist, Mao’s Cultural Revolution often pitted children against parents, causing a weakening of the family structure. Mao’s Revolution resulted in the closure of every church by the end of 1966.[[98]](#footnote-97) In the late 1960s, Mao instituted a nationwide policy to eliminate all religion[[99]](#footnote-98) and close the TSPM.[[100]](#footnote-99)

By the time the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with Mao Zedong’s death, somewhere between 1-3 million people had died during the Cultural Revolution alone, with roughly as many permanently injured.[[101]](#footnote-100) The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution made the final 20 years of Mao’s life the greatest period of religious persecution in Chinese history.[[102]](#footnote-101) While the decade from roughly 1967-1977 is largely a historical black hole without any documents, statistics, etc.[[103]](#footnote-102), the years to come would prove beyond any doubt that the Protestant church grew considerably during this time.

## Opening

After Mao Zedong’s death, a period of opening to the West and loosening of internal regulation ensued under Deng Xiaoping. Many churches re-opened and the TSPM re-emerged to regulate Protestant congregations in China. By the late 1970s, Protestants numbered five-to-six million with a rapid growth rate.[[104]](#footnote-103) Looking back upon the darkest years of the Cultural Revolution, it is clear that the Protestant church grew by anywhere from three-to-six fold during these times.[[105]](#footnote-104)

## Today

From the period of opening under Deng Xiaoping to today, the church continued to expand. In surveying the present landscape of Protestantism in China, there are two crucial distinctions: (1) Legal vs. Illegal. Document 19, issued in March 1982 to elucidate the official TSPM policy, rejects unregistered house churches and requires the legal registration of all Protestant churches in the country.[[106]](#footnote-105) In general, especially in cities, the government tends to not crackdown on these unregistered churches unless they top 150-200 people assembling together at one time.[[107]](#footnote-106) (2) Domestic vs. International. The Chinese government’s policy is that its citizens not intermingle in worship with foreigners. As such, Chinese nationals should not attend an international church regardless of whether it is registered with the TSPM or not.

In examining the illegal domestic churches, while there is considerable variance in their composition, two common characteristics stand out. (1) Effect of Government Regulation. Although the list of consequences from being an illegal church are too limitless to name, some common ones include: (a) due to the implicit size constraint on the church, it can be difficult to support a full-time pastor, meaning the church must rely on bi-vocational pastors whose limited time makes even foundational tasks like preaching and discipling much more difficult. For congregations that can support a single pastor, the church is often multi-site meaning the pastor cannot linger with the parishioners. (b) difficulty in finding rentable space (c) inability to purchase a building (d) difficulty and caution with inviting others to church (2) Lack of Training. The options for theological training among house church leaders include Sunday School, summer programs in places such as Hong Kong, underground seminaries where students travel to a large city for a few weeks at a time, and online classes in Chinese through seminaries such as Gordon-Conwell. Nonetheless, the overall quality and availability of theological education in China is far behind that of other more open countries.

# Conclusion

## Lessons From Chinese Church History

Despite the challenges facing the Chinese church today, its history is a gripping story of persevering and even growing through opposition. While there is much we can learn from the past 200 years of Chinese Protestantism, a few brief lessons stand out.

(1) Broader Cultural Associations Matter. The scandalous behavior of Western governments toward the Chinese people left a negative perception toward Western missionaries that made evangelism difficult for much of the history of Protestantism in China. One woman who served as a dressmaker for three generations of China Inland Mission workers once said, “there seemed little inducement to repent and be saved, if going to heaven would entail associating with foreigners for all eternity.”[[108]](#footnote-107)

(2) Protestant Liberalism Doesn’t Survive Persecution. In the three decades before Mao purged foreign missionaries from China, many Western Protestant liberals traveled to China and spread their theology. However, after China re-opened in 1978, very few liberal missionaries returned yet evangelicals poured back into the country.[[109]](#footnote-108) Mao’s persecution had the unintended consequence of largely ridding China of theological liberalism.

(3) Persecution is Not an Insurmountable Obstacle for the Church. Even though Mao sought to eliminate Christianity in China during the Cultural Revolution, the church ended up growing during this period of intense persecution.

(4) Modern Secularization Theory is Faulty. Prominent atheist Daniel C. Dennett’s April 2015 essay in the Wall Street Journal entitled *Why the Future of Religion Is Bleak* argues that “with hardly any significant exceptions, religion recedes whenever human security and well-being rises.” Yet China, not to mention South Korea and parts of Africa, offer glaring counterexamples.

(5) Importance of Theological Training. Theological training of locals and not just conversions is vitally important for the long-term health of the indigenous church. The lack of extensive theological training during the first century of missions gave rise to numerous indigenous movements that espoused anemic theology.

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23. Moffett, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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35. Baugus, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
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