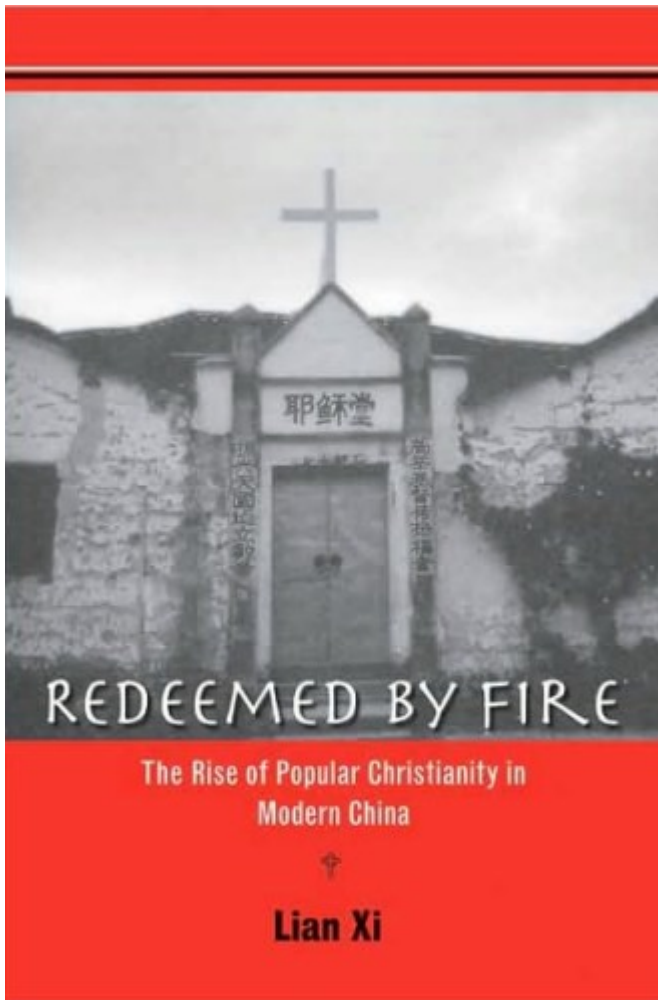


China's homegrown Protestants

by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Redeemed by Fire

By Lian Xi

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About 1913, a young Christian convert named Jing Dianying presented himself to a mission hospital in Tai'an, a city in western Shandong province. He wished to be emasculated. At the time, Jing's language tutor was Nora Dillenbeck, a single

American missionary described in recommendation letters as “very attractive in face and form.” Though Jing was married, a “warm relationship” had developed between them. Jing’s alleged guilt over his desire for Dillenbeck prompted the drastic request.

Dillenbeck appeared at the hospital and “tearfully dissuaded him.” Jing later divorced his wife (who had bound feet), experienced a Pentecostal “baptism by the Spirit” and started a communalistic sect called the Jesus Family. Dillenbeck herself eventually joined the Jesus Family as a Bible teacher and itinerant evangelist, but historian Lian Xi provides no evidence of later romantic involvement. She died in 1938 and Jing in 1957.

This poignant vignette, which Lian sketches in a dozen deft strokes, is important for two reasons. First, it offers a window into the real-life dilemmas of actual converts and missionaries on the ground, who are not the fairy-tale saints of pious legend. Second, it reveals the radicalism that fired the personalities and steeled the ambitions of the men and women who pioneered indigenous, ecstatic, millenarian Protestantism in 20th-century China.

Redeemed by Fire traces both stories at once. Lian, a history professor at Hanover College, begins at the beginning, with Nestorian missionaries in the seventh century. He then offers a concise one-chapter summary of the tortuous expansion of Christianity in China to the beginning of the 20th century. In subsequent chapters, Lian unfolds the stories of a succession of high-voltage homegrown groups, including the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family, the Spiritual Gifts Society, the mass revival campaigns of Wang Mindao and John Sung, and the Little Flock founded by the fundamentalist mystic Watchman Nee. The concluding chapters examine the explosive growth of Protestant groups—both registered and unregistered—in post-Mao China.

The book’s argument can be summed up in a sentence. Radical Protestantism flourished in 20th-century China not only because it met enduring needs of the human spirit but also because it distanced itself from the real and perceived imperiousness and ethnocentrism of the mainline Western missionary establishment. Though Lian does not play his own theological cards, he leaves little doubt as to where his sympathies lie: “I emerge from this study marveling at the human spirit that lifted millions of nameless people—whose collective story I have tried to tell in this book—above voiceless suffering and despair toward exultant hopes and radiant visions.”

In a Western mission environment marked by decorum, moral seriousness, nation-building patriotism and zeal for modernization, radical Protestants provided a striking contrast. At one time or another their religious practices involved diverse manifestations of what social scientists call involuntary motor behavior: weeping, trance-inducing, screaming, howling, numbness, glossolalia, weightlessness, shivering, miraculous healings, profuse sweating, rolling on the floor, frothing at the mouth, ecstatic singing and dancing and extended fasting (in one case, for 76 days). It also involved diverse manifestations of demanding disciplinary rituals such as tithing, exorcisms, foot washing, mass public confessions and communal sharing of goods. The theology paralleled the most severe forms of American Protestant fundamentalism. It entailed conversion, biblical literalism, missions to unconverted Chinese, attempts to evangelize other Christian sects (especially Seventh-day Adventists) and fierce denunciation of mainline Christianity and liberal theology.

Millenarianism constituted the most conspicuous feature of this radical Protestant theology. Though the details varied from sect to sect, all of them foresaw the imminent end of history in which the Lord would return in glory, smite his (and, not incidentally, their) enemies and establish a millennial kingdom of peace, justice and prosperity.

Less noticed but more portentous was the companion insistence on apocalypse. The unveiling of the hidden mysteries of the end times would enable the elect to see what the rest of the world, in its reckless pursuit of pleasure and violence, could not.

Who were the converts? Again, things varied from sect to sect, but on the whole they appear as men and women who had suffered a fracture in their lives. For some, that break took the form of social marginalization. The converts were peddlers, fortune tellers, night-soil collectors, bankrupt shopkeepers, underpaid missionary helpers and, of course, talented but disempowered women ("without the niceties of Southern Baptists' call for the 'servant leadership' of men"). Many were victims of bandits or famines or floods. And many others were addicted to opium, desperately seeking relief from a life-crushing industry that largely owed its prosperity to Western economic rapacity.

Leaders too presented a recognizable profile, one marked more by lack of personal fulfillment than by social marginalization. They are described as "folk intellectuals," autodidacts frequently brushed but not empowered by mission school education. Willing to defy social conventions, they saw themselves in messianic roles. They

heralded a message that called not for the reform of oppressive institutions but for deliverance from them. If at first glance their vision seemed to fade into dark pessimism, at second glance it exploded in the brilliant colors of the New Heaven and New Earth.

Lian's narrative contains no saints—this is history, not mythology—but it does feature more than a few paladins of the cause. The most gripping is John Sung (1901–1944), often called the Billy Graham of China—although the Oral Roberts of China might be more apt.

Like many radical evangelical leaders, Sung was born into a clerical family. Undeniably brilliant, he graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University and then earned a Ph.D. in chemistry from Ohio State. He soon abandoned science for ministerial training at New York's Union Theological Seminary. Influenced by the Pentecostal preaching of the "child evangelist" Uldine Utley, Sung reacted strongly against modernist teachings in general and the preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick in particular. "Jesus found me in Room 405 of an atheistic seminary," he recalled.

Back in China, the flamboyantly charismatic Sung preached an unflinching heaven-or-hell message of salvation, studded with attacks on mainline missionaries' complicity in Western schemes of modernization. "China needs a Savior, not a sage," he snapped. Sung was neglectful of his family, but he converted more than 100,000 souls.

Redeemed by Fire could well serve as a model for a doctoral class in critical historical method. It grows from immersion in Chinese sources, augmented with command of 20th-century Chinese history and the unfolding of Christian missions in Asia. Beyond that, Lian clearly states the primary and secondary arguments—perhaps a bit too often—while nuancing them with counterexamples and gradations.

One case suffices: Lian initially advances what looks like a heavy-handed functionalist model of religious causation. "Like most messianic convulsions in Chinese history," he tells us, "the drive toward a fiery, apocalyptic Christianity in modern China was largely induced by political, national, and environmental crises." But as soon as he makes this jaw-dropping claim, he qualifies it by noting the deep springs of spiritual aspiration that nourished millenarian movements throughout history. And he takes care to detail the striking similarities—if not

continuities—between Protestant and Buddhist precursors and analogues in China. Religion, in other words, operated as both a dependent and an independent variable; its rewards were both extrinsic and intrinsic. The lesson is clear. The mechanisms that drove mass religious movements cannot be reduced to simple causes. They were as complex and as delicately wrought as the individuals that constituted them.

Lian's account takes surprising turns, some happier than others. Despite their dispossession, women like Jessie Penn-Lewis, a theological force of nature, or Dora Yu, a tireless evangelist and hymn translator, or Shi Meiyu, a pioneering surgeon and temperance advocate, populate the narrative. And so do asides that reveal indigenous grievances as well as aspirations. "Your denominationalism does not interest Chinese Christians," countered one Chinese delegate to the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. The Chinese "never understood it, could not delight in it, though they often suffered from it."

And then there is the writing, ribbed with colorful verbs, lead sentences that really lead somewhere and prose so clear the reader sometimes wants to stop and ask: How did he do that? We read of the "protective shadow of Western missions" and of "air . . . thick with prophecies." We experience too the rhetorical power of the apt quotation: "Lingering hunger could be tamed by fasting. . . . And if hunger persisted, one could find comfort in a Jesus Family worship calendar: 'fat pigs die young while lean cranes live long.'" The pages sparkle with wit. The Lord, it seems, sometimes issued commands "in slightly ungrammatical Chinese." The Canadian missionary Jonathan Goforth found celebrity in the "boundless admiration" of his "adoring wife" who rhapsodized that he "went up to Manchuria an unknown missionary . . . [and] returned a few weeks later with the limelight of the Christian world upon him."

Lian's lightness of touch adds delight, of course, but also signals the depth of his respect for his subjects' lives. Their foibles, no less than their achievements, bespoke a common humanity.

Most historians keep their eyes fixed on the rear view mirror, but in a long, thought-provoking afterword, Lian hazards a peek into the future. At first, the numbers seem encouraging, at least for Christians who value numerical growth. Estimates of China's Christian population range as high as 130 million. Daniel Bays, a leading Sinologist, judges 85 million, while Lian (in other work) puts the sum closer to 67 million, including 58 million Protestants and 9 million Catholics. Though those figures

equal only 5 percent of the population, the millions of souls committed to the church are not negligible. More important, they form part of the seismic shift of Christianity from the North to the South. In the year 2000, some 1.1 billion Christians lived in Asia, Africa and Latin America, twice the total of Europe's Christians and more than five times that of North America's. They represent the shock wave of the future.

In Lian's hands, however, this story proves more complicated. He judges that nearly two-thirds of the Protestants in China reside in unregistered congregations, often called underground or house churches. The radical impulse historically embodied in groups like the True Jesus Church animates those underground churches (though not necessarily under those labels). And they surge with millenarian and evangelistic zeal.

Even so, unregistered congregations are not likely to influence the course of Chinese history. Persecuted by the state, fractured by internal disputes and disdainful of formal education, they will remain in a state of "intellectual decapitation." Lian is not sanguine about the future of the registered churches either, owing to their political passivity. And the much-heralded rise of Christian artists and academics in China no doubt will remain too small to exert significant influence.

The conversation among historians about how to understand Christianity in China is by now a venerable one. In 1929, Yale's redoubtable Kenneth Scott Latourette effectively launched the discussion with his magisterial *A History of Christian Missions in China*. The operative word was *missions*. In the 1960s and later, Harvard's equally redoubtable John King Fairbank and his students moved the dialogue in a different direction by analyzing Christianity's interaction with other aspects of Chinese history. In the past 20 years, sinologists such as Tao Feiya, Ryan Dunch and especially Daniel Bays have moved the conversation in still another direction by examining the astonishing insurgence of indigenous Christianity. Lian's contribution to this inquiry lies less in the larger argument than in the richness of the detail he brings to it. Already translated into Chinese, *Redeemed by Fire* has received a host of glowing reviews and earned the 2010 Award for Academic Excellence given by Chinese Historians in the United States, an affiliate of the American Historical Association and the Association for Asian Studies.

In the end, *Redeemed by Fire* produces mixed feelings. Not about the book—which is, by any reasonable measure, a tour de force, deeply researched, cogently argued and beautifully written—but about the story it tells. It is at once gritty and soaring, dispiriting and inspiring, poignant and funny. Perhaps the problem lies less in the

narrative than in the American-bred assumption that every story must have a happy ending and every sunset an amber glow. Real life rarely works that way. The Cornell historian R. Laurence Moore once wrote that meaningful action in history usually meant exchanging one dilemma for another. One suspects that a missionary named Paul knew that before he booked the second voyage.