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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Surviving the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Cai Yongchun in the Cultural Revolution

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This article examines the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) as a history of trauma for Chinese Protestant intellectuals. Using Cai Yongchun—a graduate of Yenching and Columbia University—as an example, the article aims to 1) demonstrate the overwhelming conformity demanded by the Communist regime and 2) analyze how Christians like Cai sought to align with official lines through intellectual reconstruction. In sum, the party viewed Christian intellectuals as deeply suspect due to their religious and Western affiliations, thus targeting them in successive campaigns that began in the 1950s and culminated in the Cultural Revolution. Despite state marginalization, Christian intellectuals like Cai persisted in their patriotism, eager to remain relevant even amid ideological fanaticism. Active adaptation as such, however, facilitated the hegemonic project of revolutionary subject formation that championed the Communist leadership as the custodian of truth. Cai came to experience a fundamental and perpetual denial of the self, pressuring him to become an ever more faithful follower of Mao and his words. Nevertheless, the proletarian redemption proved elusive, and the old Christian identity resilient.

**Keywords:** Chinese Protestant intellectuals; Cultural Revolution; Christianity in China; Cai Yongchun; church-state relations

## I. Introduction

Launched in 1966, Mao Zedong's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" marked one of the most traumatizing periods in the history of Chinese Christianity. It was the only time in twentieth-century China when a nationwide eradication policy for Christianity, along with other institutional religions, was attempted. Many Christians did not survive the ordeal. Meanwhile, counterintuitively, the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution proved to be an opportunity for rapid growth. Historian Daniel Bays estimated that their numbers may have increased "by a factor of five or six" during the tumultuous decade, reaching "five to six million" in the late 1970s.[1]

[1]Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 186. The actual number of Christians in China is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. Official statistics from the Chinese government indicates that, while the number of Catholics and Muslims remained

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Despite its significance, this decade of Christian history in China remains largely a black hole—a gap in historical research considering the scale of trauma and transformation brought by the Cultural Revolution. The scarcity of scholarships is mainly due to a lack of records. With party and government apparatus paralyzed at virtually all levels, few sources and statistics were preserved. Scholars are often confined to anecdotal accounts of personal experiences during those years.[2] Consequently, monographs on the history of Christianity in China, like that of Bays and Xi Lian, choose to paint the period in broad strokes.[3] Melissa Inouye's study of the True Jesus Church dedicates a chapter to the "clandestine church culture" that facilitated a charismatic practice from the 1950s to the 1970s, though most of her sources point to pre-1958 Wuhan and post-1974 Fujian.[4]

Seeking to arouse scholarly attention to this period are a few Taiwanese and Hong Kong scholars. In his 2009 and 2020 articles, Chen-yang Kao focuses exclusively on Protestantism during the Cultural Revolution to explain its phenomenal growth. To him, the collapse of institutional authorities led to a decentralized and experiential form of Christian practice reminiscent of Pentecostalism. Furthermore, prioritizing direct communication with the divine over tangible media gave Protestantism an edge over local cults amid the general devastation of religious buildings, icons, and scriptures.[5] While Kao relies on ethnographic fieldwork, Ying Fuk-tsang and Guo Fei resort to unconventional materials—252 audience letters written between 1966 and 1978 to Christian radio evangelism aired from Hong Kong. Investigating these letters, they try to reconstruct grassroots religious inquiries as a form of resistance at a time when listening to "foreign stations" (*ditai*) was immensely risky. Their research also places the beginning of the explosive Christian growth during the Cultural Revolution.[6]

Adding to this small corpus of studies, this article shifts from grassroots Christians and their growth during the Cultural Revolution. Instead, it treats this period as a history of pain by delineating the psychological and spiritual trials of one Chinese Protestant intellectual, Cai Yongchun (1904–1983). Born into a Christian family in

about the same from 1957 to 1982, Protestant Christians increased 3.75 times, from 0.8 to 3 million. The official figures are generally considered undercounts of the actual number of religious believers in China. See Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 92–97.

[2]For a fine example that reports these personal testimonies in a journalistic style, see Liao Yiwu, *God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

[3]Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 184–187. Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 204–207. Lian's more recent book on Lin Zhao, a Christian dissent executed by the Maoist state, treats the Cultural Revolution period more extensively. Xi Lian, *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, A Martyr in Mao's China* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

[4]Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[5]Chen-yang Kao, "The Cultural Revolution and the Emergence of Pentecostal-Style Protestantism in China," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24, no. 2 (2009): 171–188. Chen-yang Kao, "Materiality in the Absence of the Church: Practising Protestantism during China's Cultural Revolution," *History and Anthropology* 31, no. 5 (2020): 563–582.

[6]Ying Fuk-tsang and Guo Fei, "Wei tingdao de zhongguo shengyin: wenge shiqi fuyin guangbo tingzhong laixin suojian de dier shehui" (Unheard Voices from China: The "Second Society" as seen from the Audience Letters of Christian Radio Evangelism during the Cultural Revolution), *Jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan*, no. 107 (2020): 1–35.

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Fujian, Cai graduated from Yenching University with a sociology degree before joining rural evangelism in Hebei. During World War II, tuberculosis and forced relocations did not prevent Cai from teaching at various seminaries in Fujian, Guangzhou, and Yunnan. When the war subsided, Cai seized an opportunity in 1946 to study at Union Seminary in New York and completed his Ph.D. at Columbia University. When he returned in 1950, it was to a China embroiled in revolutionary fervor. His leadership at Yenching School of Religion was short-lived: Cai was sacked in a political campaign in 1952 by the school he returned to serve.[7]

Articles by Xu Yihua and Qiao Yangmin provide a general picture of Cai Yongchun's life.[8] The former prioritizes Cai's brief yet significant involvement with Yenching School of Religion, while the latter highlights his efforts to reconcile Christian identity with national service in Republican China. Chin Ken-pa's recent article offers greater depth into Cai's intellectual and spiritual struggles.[9] It presents a detailed analysis of Cai's early 1950s manuscripts, which focused on adapting Christianity with Communism. Building on the existing literature, this article engages Cai's archival records before and during the Cultural Revolution. His self-examination reports and diaries during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, miraculously preserved, illustrate the shattered Christian patriotism in modern China. Eagerness to save the nation through serving the church—the prevailing approach among Christian intellectuals who chose to stay in mainland China after the Communist takeover—was denied by the party-state.[10] Instead, the CCP coopted their patriotism into a driver for intellectual reconstruction that consumed Cai's identity in the Cultural Revolution—a personal tragedy that resonated with the larger intellectual landscape during this period.

Cai is certainly not the only Chinese Protestant intellectual who walked through the shadow of the valley of darkness. Prominent figures such as Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao, 1888–1979) and Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu, 1893–1979) had more intense interactions with the CCP during its ideological campaigns. Unfortunately, their existing sources were sparse, significantly restricting the extent of historical analysis. The latest article in Zhao's published anthology dates to 1957. Historians can only glimpse at his Cultural Revolution years through fragmentary sources.[11] A similar problem exists for Wu, whose speeches and articles were highly formulaic after 1949 and altogether

[7]The most detailed biography of Cai Yongchun is probably the memoir complied by his wife. See Huang Xiuying, *Wode banlu cai yongchun* (Cai Yongchun: My Companion), private publication. For an English biographical account, see Hugh Barbour, *Ts'ai Yung-Ch'un's Life and Work: Fully Chinese and Fully Christian* (New Haven: Yale Divinity School Library, 2000).

[8]Xu Yihua, "Zhao zichen, cai yongchun yu yanjing daxue zongjiao xueyuan" (Zhao Zichen, Cai Yongchun and Yenching School of Religion), *Jidujiao xueshu*, no. 1 (2017): 184–209. Qiao Yangmin, "Zuo 'zhenzheng de zhongguoren he zhenzheng de jidutu'" (To Be Fully Chinese and Fully Christian), *Jidujiao xueshu*, no. 1 (2017): 210–224.

[9]Chin Ken-pa, "Dashidai xia de jidutu xuezhe—yi yanjing daxue zongjiao xueyuan cai yongchun weili" (Christian Scholars in the "Grand Epoch": A Case Study of Cai Yongchun and His Time at the School of Religion, Yenching University), *Ching Feng*, no. 20 (2022): 1–23.

[10]This is not to say that all educated Chinese Protestants endorsed a similar ideology that devoted themselves to the revolutionary agenda. House church leaders like Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee, 1903–1972) and Wang Mingdao (1900–1991) generally adopted a non-conformist approach to the party-state. Meanwhile, most of intellectuals who tried to maintain public presence accepted ideological domestication like Cai Yongchun.

[11]Zhao Zichen, "Xianzhi de chuantong" (The Prophetic Tradition), in *Zhao Zichen wenji* (Works of T. C. Chao) vol. 4, (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2010), 233–244. On the later Zhao, see Zhao Zichen, "Yanjing daxue de zongjiao xueyuan" (Yenching School of Religion), *Wenshi ziliao xuanji*, no. 43

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lacking from 1964 to 1979. Only the headlines of his diary survived—the complete texts, which amounted to forty-some volumes, were seized by the state and never returned.[12] Cai's case proved invaluable in circumventing such a limitation of sources. Being a disciple of Zhao and a friend of Wu, Cai carries representativeness in the broader Chinese Protestant intellectual circles. Meanwhile, the unique availability of his writings, encompassing both official reports and personal diaries, makes it possible to reconstruct and analyze his intellectual journey in detail, thus shedding light on our understanding of Chinese Christianity during this tumultuous period.

## II. A Difficult Parting

Religiously and politically, Cai Yongchun found himself in a precarious state in the late 1950s. Victim of a violent purge, he had lost the long-anticipated leadership over Yenching School of Religion and suffered banishment from the Anglican church in Beijing—into which he was ordained a priest in 1944. Such a difficult position likely prompted the writing of a self-examination report in 1958.[13] This type of writing would dominate Cai's attention throughout the 1960s and much of the 1970s, with escalating intensity.

Despite the genre's self-criticizing nature, Cai began his report by celebrating his Christian mother, who impacted his life profoundly. The familial connection allowed Cai to frame his Christian ministry as an act of filial piety, justifying perhaps the joyous remembrance of his Christian faith. His upbringing also introduced the ideal of Christian service, Cai so accounted, first seen in the missionary and Chinese teachers at his Christian school in Jinjiang. The school's motto, later echoed by that of Yenching University in "Freedom Through Truth for Service," epitomized the attraction to an aspiring Christian student like Cai: personal liberation and public service converging on this treasure, Christianity, that many educators labored to introduce to a troubled land.

Indeed, Cai recalled how he cherished the vision of "the Kingdom of Heaven on earth" (*tianguo jianglin zai dishang*). It became for him "the greatest and most fundamental path" to "save not only China but also the world" through the moral improvement of human individuals and practicing "universal love" (*bo'ai*) in concrete social services. His participation in rural reconstruction to transform China's countryside and his teaching at Yenching School of Religion to train Christian leaders for the Heaven-on-earth vision were two examples of attempting to realize this ideal. "That is how I clung to Christianity to the death," Cai so concluded the self-examination, "and it dominated the first half of my life."[14]

Cai's affectionate rendering of his Christian commitment was qualified by the phrase "first half of life" (*qianban sheng*), soon popularized by the heavily censored

(1960): 106–128; and Winfried M. Glüer, "T. C. Chao Re-Visited: Questions about His Later Years," *Ching Feng* 11, no. 2 (2012): 171–196.

[12]Ying Fuk-tsang, ed., *Wu Yaozong quanji* (Collected Works of Y. T. Wu) vol. 4 book 1 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2020). Wu Zongsu, "Luohua youyi, liushui wuqing—wosuo zhidao de fuqin" (Falling Flowers and Flowing Streams: My Father as I know Him), in *Wu Yaozong quanji*, vol. 4, book 2, 455.

[13]Cai Yongchun, "Chedi zhuanbian lichang, yingjie sixiang shang gongzuo shang de dayuejin" (A Complete Change of Position to Welcome the Great Leap Forward in Thinking and Work), June 26, 1958, b. 7, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[14]Ibid., 2–10.

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autobiography of Puyi (1906–1967), the last emperor of China, entitled *From Emperor to Citizen* or literally *The First Half of My Life*. The connotation was clear: any identity and status one used to assume, whether that of an emperor or a Christian intellectual, belonged to the old and regressive life in a society marred by darkness and corruption. Unless one was born again through the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by reconstructing thoughts and class position, the person could not enter the new society as a comrade. For Christians in the already suspect category of intellectuals, leaving the old life became a means of survival and a struggle against marginalization, even when such rebirth, dictated by political whims, was often elusive.

As the Cai family suffered their fourth year of unemployment, the CCP's Central Committee held a high-profile conference in Beijing in January 1956, determined to resolve the "intellectuals' issue." The spirit of policy adjustment was reflected in Premier Zhou Enlai's report, which urged to mobilize the intellectual power of China to catch up with the rapid technological development in the world. Most notable was Zhou's pronouncement on the intellectuals' political status: "the vast majority have become state workers, have served socialism, and are already part of the working class" (*gongren jieji*).[15] Not everyone in the CCP approved of it, for the intellectuals had been chiefly considered products of bourgeois and Guomindang (GMD) influences. Mao Zedong, for example, concluded the conference by addressing only the necessity of employing intellectuals and producing "new" (that is, ideologically conformed) intellectuals, with no assurance about their political status or class attributes. It was a rather utilitarian approach.

Despite the tension, the January conference signaled the local party committees to improve intellectuals' lives and absorb them into the party. Most pertinent to Cai was the initiative to resolve unemployment and the improper placement of intellectuals. As a result, Yenching School of Religion offered Cai to return. His assigned task would be to critique Reinhold Niebuhr with his old mentor Zhao Zichen. It would have taken Cai with true sardonic humor to rejoin the perpetrator of his unemployment and collaborate with the namesake of his political condemnation.[16] Instead, he accepted the invitation of Cai Liusheng (1902–1983), a fellow Quanzhou resident and Yenching alumnus, to work in the history department at the Northeast People's University (later renamed Jilin University) in Changchun. Traveling northbound, Cai tried to leave the broken pieces of Christian relationships and vision behind to join, instead, the rank of the working class.

While Cai was thrilled at the prospects of serving the country as an insider, a part of the "revolutionary team" (*geming duiwu*), the party's failure to address the boundary of thought reconstruction and academic freedom kept intellectuals on their toes. The general distrust from the ruling center was sobering, especially for art and humanity scholars who, like Cai, were burdened to prove their worth for China's technological modernization. "What exactly does the party think of me" became the haunting question that plagued Cai. On one occasion, while Cai was sketching the beach, police suddenly appeared and confiscated his work. As he signed the record, Cai later confessed, "panic and terror seized my heart." Given his historical associations with the West, the charge of espionage must have crossed Cai's mind.[17]

[15]Shen Zhihua, "1956 nianchu zhonggong dui zhishi fenzi zhengce de tiaozheng" (Adjustment of Intellectual Policies of CCP in Early 1956), *Shehui kexue*, no. 8 (2006): 93.

[16]Cai was sacked by the school leadership in 1951 under the charge of being one of Zhao's favorites.

[17]Cai Yongchun, "Yu Tongdong fuxiaozhang tanhua" (Talk with Vice President Tong Dong), October 2, 1957, b. 7, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

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Further political pressure was on the horizon despite Cai's now elevated alertness. In 1957, with the "help" of colleagues, Cai had to examine his "mistakes" twice publicly in the Hundred Flowers campaign concerning his relationship with the "rightist" Lu Qinchi (1911–1977), another Yenching alumnus and the head of the history department. Besides affinities stretching back to Yenching and wartime Kunming, the fact that both suffered grievances during the earlier campaigns must have brought empathy.[18] However, their relationship suddenly became a liability. Encouraged by the liberalization in early 1957, Lu critiqued Tsarist Russia's territorial encroachment on nineteenth-century China and questioned the intentional neglect of such a historical fact. It was a risky endeavor, given the close ties between China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s. As political tides turned, this internal paper was dismissed as "total fabrication and distortion. . . aiming to slander the party and the Soviet Union," and its author denounced as a "rightist."[19]

Fearing to be branded a "rightist" himself, Cai had to give detailed reports documenting his engagement with Lu, hoping to acquit himself again from the charge of alienating the party. The process was highly repetitive and must have reminded Cai of his early 1950 trials. He had to confess his "wrong" attitudes to previous campaigns, the CCP cadres involved, his work at the School of Religion, and the subsequent unemployment—all interpreted as signs of undue doubts for the party. Why else, Cai's colleagues interrogated him, would he associate with a "dissatisfying reactionary rightist"? However, the "roots of roots" (*genyuan de genyuan*), as Cai struggled to identify in the second report, was a factor internal to his thoughts and "essentially an issue of class position (*jieji lichang*)." "If I had stood firmly with the working class," Cai continued, "I would not have confronted the party on the issue of religious beliefs at that time."[20]

Self-incrimination and essentializing one's sin to class background might make a thorough, and thus qualified, self-examination report. The problem with this deadly formula was that it necessarily led to a deterministic judgment of a person, ready to resurface at the next turn of the political wind. For Cai, the given system pressured him to reconstruct his thoughts and old class habits, often requiring further self-flagellation. However, to his accusers, Cai was simply confirming the predestined nature of his capitalist and Christian identity.

To break this self-perpetuating cycle, Cai, in the subsequent drive to "surrender one's heart to the party" (*xiangdang jiaoxin*), employed a subjective-objective dichotomy to sanitize his Christian past. The "dominant idea" (*zhudao sixiang*) in the first half of his life, Christianity was recognized yet relegated to subjective convictions. Then, judging by the CCP's values, Cai critiqued his Christian ministries as the "objective results" of his otherwise patriotic and thus justifiable intentions. By juxtaposing the two sides to create a contrast, Cai demonstrated his reformed perspective without detracting from the authenticity of his past Christian identity. He would acknowledge, for example, the Christian intention behind his rural service. Nevertheless, he would then decry it as a competition against the party for the interests of the "reactionary" GMD. It painted an impression of an honest offender who had awakened to the fact that the imperialist and

[18]Cai Yongchun, "Jin yibu jiancha cuowu, zhuisu genyuan" (Further Check for Errors and Trace Back to the Root Cause), October 9, 1957, b. 7, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[19]Lu Qinchi, "1858 nian he 1860 nian dongbei bianjie de gaibian" (Changes in the Northeastern Boundary in 1858 and 1860), *Shixue jikan*, no. 2 (1991): 35–43. Ironically, this history of territorial encroachment was reintroduced into the public view as the Sino-Soviet split solidified in the 1960s.

[20]Cai Yongchun, "Jin yibu jiancha cuowu," 12.

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reactionary forces exploited his Christian patriotism for evils. Cai was determined to demonstrate a thorough intellectual reconstruction leading to a changed worldview.[21]

However, such total surrendering was not as restorative as Cai had hoped. Instead of intellectual confidence and academic opportunities came weariness and hesitancy. Two years after he vowed to achieve "a great leap forward" in his thoughts and work, Cai contrasted his position before and after the 1949 Communist takeover. While he meant it as fodder for self-criticism, this section revealed Cai's plight as a middle-aged, Christian intellectual in Maoist China:

> In terms of status, I was a university professor, holding a chair in the history of Christian thought, trusted by the president and dean, and celebrated by students. . . becoming more prosperous with each passing day, and seen by others as a popular person. I was a priest in the church—I had even been a pastor of a church in America—well respected by the congregation. Intellectually, I had the ambition to bridge Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Communism and make Christianity take root in Chinese culture. I was ensnared by Christianity to the extreme, taking the Christian faith as the destination of my life.
>
> After the liberation, my wife and I experienced more than three years of unemployment. . . In 1956, I came to the history department at Jilin University, where, in terms of disciplinary expertise, I was not even as good as a teaching assistant. . . In 1957, the Ministry of Higher Education restored my academic title when I was given a teaching assignment, yet in 1958 I was transferred back to supportive work. . . I often feel that this is all there is to this life. In terms of professional knowledge, what I had learned in the past was useless and subject to denunciation. . . In terms of politics, an old bourgeois intellectual with a historical burden like me is difficult to reconstruct—I can neither be red [revolutionary] nor specialized (*ji buneng hong, you buneng zhuan*).[22]

By 1960, Cai had realized that the tantalizing goal of being both "red"—loyal to the party's revolutionary agenda—and "specialized" in one's profession was beyond reach. The result was certainly not for lack of trying. As this confession suggests, in 1957, Cai was assigned to develop a course on US history, which probably involved sections on Christianity.[23] However, triggered by his relationship with the "rightist" Lu Qinchi, a round of ideological self-criticism sunk the teaching opportunity and sent Cai back to language work: translating and coaching younger history faculty on English. The marginalization worsened in 1961 when Cai transferred to the newly established Foreign Language Department. Teaching courses such as How to Learn and Speak Good English was neither relevant to his training nor academically satisfying.

While the Cai family struggled intellectually and logistically as a politically induced famine devastated China, over 7000 CCP cadres gathered in Beijing in January 1962 for a month-long work conference. By then, the Great Leap strategy was discredited in most eyes. During the conference, Mao had to make a gesture of self-criticism and allow other leaders such as Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969) and Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) to recoup

[21] Cai Yongchun, "Chedi zhuanbian lichang."

[22] Cai Yongchun, "Xuexi zongjie" (Learning Summary), August 15, 1960, b. 7, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205), 6–7. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[23] Huang Xiuying, *Wode banlu cai yongchun* (Cai Yongchun: My Companion), private publication, 99.

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the nation's economic losses and rebuild public morale. Despite severe divisions within the top leadership, the leftist fanaticism in the Great Leap Forward was relaxed—a policy adjustment that, once again after 1956, brought a degree of intellectual liberalization.

In 1963, with the Ministry of Higher Education's approval, the university invited Cai to devise his own research and teaching plan. Cai took the initiative to begin a Bible and literature project, which included giving school-wide lectures and compiling an English anthology of Biblical passages. Charting the textbook, Cai intended this "short Bible" to contain selections from all 66 biblical books, "each of which [were] preceded by a short critical introduction," with extensive appendixes covering topics such as "a short history of the Hebrews" and "New Testament History." Ambitious, Cai saw the textbook as "three books in one"—the abridged Bible with critical introductions and interpretive treatises—that would "help initiate the readers into an efficient use of the Bible and a knowledge of the rudiments of Christianity." While years of experience in higher learning convinced Cai of "a crying need for such a book," his rekindled fervor was extinguished by a sharp return to leftist radicalism by 1965.[24] Always one step too late, Cai had to denounce his work again. His closest moment to teaching Christianity in Maoist China came to a university lecture on Dante's *Purgatorio*, where he quoted the poet on Italy's mournful state of violence:

> Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows,
> you ship without a helmsman in harsh seas,
> no queen of provinces but of bordellos!
> . . .
> But those who are alive within you now
> can't live without their warring—even those
> whom one same wall and one same moat enclose
> gnaw at each other. Squalid Italy,
> Search round your shores and then look inland—see
> if any part of you delight in peace.[25]

Whether or not the verses reflected Cai's own concern for the turmoil in China, they would soon prove prophetic in the coming terror of the Cultural Revolution. One must wonder if Cai shared Dante's faith that the Purgatorial sufferings were not merely punishments but means toward spiritual and moral refinement for the final ascent to Paradise.

## III. Tribulations and Redemption

The cataclysm that gathered swiftly through the spring and culminated in the summer of 1966, what Mao and his supporters would call the Great Proletarian Cultural

[24]Cai Yongchun, "A Short Bible," b. 3, f. 9, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[25]Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 241. Cai's 1963 lecture was edited and published in two articles. See Cai Yongchun, "Danding he shenqu dui zhongshiji jiaohui de pipan" (Dante's Critique of the Medieval Church in the *Divine Comedy*), *Jilin daxue shehui kexue xuebao*, no. 6 (1987): 26–33. Cai Yongchun, "Danding jiqi shenqu diyupian" (Dante and his *Divine Comedy*: *Inferno*), *Jinling shenxuezhi*, no. 4 (1986): 42–55. After coming to Changchun, Cai's other attempts at teaching and writing on Christianity included manuscripts on the history of Christianity in China, particularly focusing on the Nestorian and Protestant entry into China, and a 60-page draft on biblical eschatology. Cai also left copious notes on Dante.

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Revolution, defies easy definition. There was the revolutionary romanticism of Mao, who saw his lifelong work, the CCP, as beset by lethargy and bureaucratization. To the aging leader, these problems explained the threat of marginalization from his senior colleagues, who diverged from his vision of continuing struggles after the Great Leap fiasco. Being drawn to the vigorous yet insecure Chairman were figures such as Jiang Qing (1914–1991), Mao's third wife and a radical activist in cultural politics, and Lin Biao (1907–1971), the veteran army commander who expanded the influence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into politics and culture through promoting the cult of Mao. Represented by Jiang and Lin, radical elements in the intellectuals and the military would, for ideals and ambitions, jostle for power against leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, who fought to steady their own control in Beijing.[26]

Popular frustration over career advancement fueled the lofty fervor to purify China. In Cai Yongchun's city, urban youths experienced different sources of grievances. Some were barred from upward mobility simply for being born in a "bad" family—those connected to the GMD, the West, the landlords, or the "capitalists"—as classified by the CCP. Some had been sent to the countryside during previous campaigns and discovered, upon their return, that the children of new party elites now dominated access to top universities. Finally, at a major school like Cai's university were those who felt disgruntled for answering to "unreformed" professors from "old" China. Cai noted in early 1966 the atmosphere of disrespect, for students believed that "the teachers are from bourgeois families and too old to change" and thus wanted "to draw a line with them." Some even ventured to report on Cai, dismissing his teaching efforts as "nothing but to make a name for himself."[27]

Such were the students who, in the summer of 1966, declared themselves to be "Red Guards," the vanguard of China's revolutionary integrity. Greeted by Mao on the Tiananmen gate, the symbol of revolutionary China, the euphoric sea of Red Guards eagerly seized the order to throw off all restraint and directed their fury to the perceived culprits of their repressed lives. Lacking any centralized coordination, it was up to the local Red Guards to implement a comprehensive eradication of any "old" elements in Chinese society. This initiative soon disintegrated into a bewildering situation where various radical groups struggled with each other.

Despite the changing claimants to the radical label, the targets of the outpouring violence, what historian Johnathan Spence called "calculated sadism" so iconic of the early Cultural Revolution, were relatively predictable. They tended to be parents, teachers, party cadres, and other established figures who once were the superiors of the zealous youth.[28] Few in this group were foreign to violent domestication—physically, psychologically, and intellectually. Seventeen years of mass campaigns had ensnared intellectuals such as Cai in a web of comprehensive control through places of work (often called work units), class backgrounds, and persistent intimidation. The system was highly effective in manipulating people into compliance.

Now quite familiar with political movements, Cai sensed the heightened atmosphere in late May and decided to put away his religious books. Two weeks later, the storm of the Cultural Revolution hit the campus. On June 14, Kuang Yaming (1906–1996),

[26]Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

[27]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" (Diary) January 12 and March 27, 1966, b. 5, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[28]Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 545.

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previous President of Jilin University and a patron of Cai's research on Christianity, was denounced on national radio as "an anti-party and anti-socialism element." After previous failures, Cai seemed to have abandoned the idea that he could challenge the party's will and remain unscathed. "Agitated and furious" upon learning the denunciation, Cai joined the denouncing chorus by compiling his own "big letter poster" (*dazi bao*) to "reveal Kuang's crimes." The writing lasted until 2:30 am.[29]

However, like countless others who tried to avert the imminent doom, Cai's preemptive attempts proved futile. Five days after participating in condemning Kuang, Cai was ordered to write self-criticism reports on his "attitudes toward religious knowledge." Even so, it did not prevent thirty English major students from signing a poster entitled "The Reactionary Faces of Foreign Slaves Cai Yongchun and Huang Xiuying," which denounced the elderly couple for their associations with John Leighton Stuart and Kuang—now symbols of imperialism and "anti-party element."[30] Another heavy blow came from his younger daughter. Suffering prejudices at work, she wrote to "severely criticize" and to "draw a class line" with her father. The letter sent Cai deep in shame, feeling "sorry for my children for having dragged them down and unworthy to be their father, given my backward political thinking and mistakes."[31] It was the beginning of an apocalyptic decade when the Chinese people turned on even the most intimate ones.

For the next month, Cai spent many sleepless nights writing self-reports and reporting on other denounced figures, struggling to negotiate himself out of the charge of studying the Bible. However, his self-incriminatory poster on July 25, entitled "Bad Things I Have Done in Teaching," only fueled further and harsher criticism, which culminated in Cai denouncing himself as a member of the "ox demons and snake gods" (*niugui sheshen*) and a "class enemy of the people." It was a condemnation that Cai vowed to "study and examine" but nevertheless privately found "baffling." Did all his previous ideological confessions and pledges of commitment amount to nothing? On August 5, Cai and his wife, Huang Xiuying, both faculty members at the Foreign Language Department, were staged for public denunciation. After the mass trial, dozens of elementary students surrounded Cai's home, shattering windows and wrecking furniture, thrilled to discipline a denounced "foreign monk" (*yang heshang*) and "criminal gang" (*heibang*).[32] The Christian identity of Cai, criminalized and undesired, refused to leave him.

By the end of August, in addition to arbitrary fines and threats of eviction, Cai was subjected to "reconstruction through labor" in school buildings. While working, he was forced to wear a white placard, which bore his name and the "crime" of belonging to the "Five Black Categories" (landlords, rich farmers, counterrevolutionaries, bad influencers, and rightists). The labor pertained to largely meaningless and humiliating work: sweeping floors, pulling weeds, and cleaning public latrines smeared with human waste. According to the Red Guard supervisors, physical labor was not a mere form of punishment but—aided with political study and self-reports—a means to reconstruct the mind and body for Communist redemption. Cai strove to identify with this view, tackling the filth as an opportunity to "thoroughly cleanse my old

[29]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" May 22–23, June 14, 1966, b. 5, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[30]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" March 16, 1967, b. 5, f. 4, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[31]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" June 19, 1966, b. 5, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[32]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" July 25–27, 31, August 5, 1966, b. 5, f. 3, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

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and foul thinking."[33] However, despite meticulous studies of Mao's words, Cai's reconstruction efforts suffered perpetual dismissal from the Red Guards, crushing Cai as he recorded the tribulation in his diary:

> Every afternoon, the wrap-up meeting was a hurdle to overcome. Criticism came incessantly. I could not see my mistakes, yet I was still called to give self-criticism. . . I tried to reflect on my faults in the daily labor and work with a penitential attitude. In the end, however, I had to work desperately with no regard for my life in order to pass. . . What on earth is happening?[34]

Rather than transforming one into a new person, this process of socialist purification ended up hospitalizing Cai for over two weeks.

While the Cultural Revolution failed to deliver the promised utopia, its manipulative power on intellectuals like Cai dwarfed all previous campaigns in the PRC. Five months into the Cultural Revolution, Cai reflected on the possible reasons that made him a university-wide target in June. The reasons "obvious" to Cai were all event- or person-specific—teaching theology as a pastor in "old" China, collaborating with the denounced Kuang Yaming on introducing the Bible, and lecturing on the *Divine Comedy*.[35] In contrast, however, the official verdict sought to address much more than particular instances of ministry or teaching. It entailed a categorical rejection of Cai's intellectual existence:

> You used to belong to a reactionary intellectual community affiliated with imperialism, making you an enemy of the people. While the liberation took over the regime, ideologically you still ruled. Now all your bourgeois ideas are to be eradicated along with the 'four olds.' Teaching religion in socialist universities after the liberation was not just a matter of 'professional placement' but a matter of class struggle in the ideological realm.[36]

Contrary to the party's rejection, Cai never saw his Christian intellectual identity as unredeemable under the revolutionary regime, despite the embroiling turmoils since the early 1950s. He kept assuming that a public departure from his Christian faith would preserve his intellectual commitment to China so that, when circumstances allowed, he could reintroduce Christianity to Chinese higher learning. However, the parting proved painful personally and altogether unconvincing to the party. As it turned out, Communist redemption would take more than faith in the party and the people. It demanded a total surrendering of self in body and mind, especially for those like Cai, who came to embody cultural aggression and intellectual treason. The question is whether the end of this arduous journey is a new self or the elimination of self.

If the reconstruction was not to the party's satisfaction, it was certainly not for want of trying. Cai's diary shows the vigor of his commitment to the revolutionary agenda, also revealing his determination to avoid ostracization. Despite the insufferably cold

[33]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" August 27–30, September 1, 5, 9, 12, 14, 1966, b. 5, f. 4, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[34]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" October 14, 1966, b. 5, f. 4, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[35]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" November 29, 1966, b. 5, f. 4, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[36]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" December 10, 1966, b. 5, f. 4, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

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winter in Jilin, Cai would rise at 4:30 am for his daily study, usually led by a Maoist motto. On January 10, 1967, it was a line from Mao's 1944 speech "Serve the People," which acquired scriptural status during the Cultural Revolution together with his two other essays and the Quotations known as the "Little Red Book." Guided by the Great Helmsman, Cai began his morning watch by studying Chairman Mao's "Speech at the Yan'an Symposium on Literature and Art." The speech was a milestone in solidifying Mao's intellectual control over revolutionary Yan'an in 1942—the crystallization of his larger agenda to direct all writings to the purpose of political propaganda. Equally significant was the accompanying mandate to reconstruct the authors of those writings from intellectual suspects to party-serving soldiers.[37]

Cai studied Chairman Mao's words almost devotionally. After copying and annotating a key passage from the speech, Cai applied the lesson to his teaching and research on Dante, which he characterized as suffering "the lack of clarity on whom to serve." Compared to the principle of "serving the need of the people and the existing struggles," exploring the Bible's impact on European literature carried not only an inferior but a wrong motivation. According to the Maoist teachings, directing literature and art "to serve the workers, peasants, soldiers and revolutionary masses" or "for personal achievement from an individualistic bourgeois standpoint" should be viewed as an ideological struggle and thus a matter of life and death.[38]

Had the Cultural Revolution followed the pattern of previous political campaigns, a brief window of liberalization might have restored Cai to his position. However, this time, the profoundly radical program was only approaching its peak in 1967. Backed by the Cultural Revolutionary group in Beijing, Red Guards nationwide viewed their task as a revolutionary struggle to overthrow the class enemy. Increasingly militant, this spirit drove many Red Guard groups to oust local party incumbents and clash among themselves.

These "armed struggles" (*wudou*) progressed in a bewildering fashion. At first, the two rival factions in Changchun, each denouncing the other and claiming to be the true leftist radicals loyal to Chairman Mao, fought over propaganda vehicles and speakers with homemade slingshots and bricks. In July, they were battling over school buildings, hospitals, and printing houses with weapons and ammunition seized from raided PLA depots. The violence was deadly and disruptive, reducing parts of the city into a war zone. Rumors of robbery and bloodshed went rampant. Sounds of machine guns were incessant throughout the summer of 1967. While hauling his coal ration home, twice Cai had to flee from nearby gunfire, causing a paralyzing muscle cramp.[39] These violent struggles must have made Cai wonder, like any observer of a religious war, if both were organizations of the revolutionary masses invoking the holy name of Chairman Mao, why did they kill each other with such class hatred?[40]

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[37]Gao Hua, *Hongtaiyang shi zenyang shengqi de Yan'an zhengfeng yundong de lailong qumai* (How Did the Sun Rise over Yan'an? A History of the Rectification Movement) (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000), 352–353.

[38]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" January 10, 1967, b. 5, f. 4, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205). On Mao Zedong's cult of personality, see Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[39]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" May 6, July 10, 16, September 21, 1967, b. 5, f. 5, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[40]In August alone, one internal news bulletin for the Beijing leadership reported twenty to thirty violent struggles in the provinces each day. Industrial centers like Chongqing suffered the most due to their heavy concentration of arms factories, which served as an unlimited supply of lethal weapons. A later report in Chongqing estimated 10,000 combatants on one occasion alone, fighting with virtually every kind of

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If the civil unrest in 1967 disoriented Cai from active ideological reconstruction, the terror campaign of 1968 led to Cai's forced relocation to an isolation camp, leaving a year-long interruption in his diary. The nationwide movement to "cleanse the class ranks" (*qingli jieji duiwu*) sought to restore order through the new revolutionary committees, consisting of an alliance of the PLA, the masses, and cadres. Ironically but unsurprisingly, the campaign, designed to preserve unity and inaugurate order, quickly morphed into a witch hunt, purging all real and imagined enemies of the revolutionary alliance. In Jilin province, where Cai was located, the official figures counted 2,127 "deaths from unnatural causes" and 3,459 cases of permanent injury for the cadres alone following the movement. The number of victims from ordinary people is unknown.[41]

Like many contemporary Christians, Cai's fragmented records painted a picture of tribulations. In the summer of 1968, he compiled hundreds of pages of self-incriminatory accounts ordered by increasingly scrutinizing ideological checks. The reports were primarily autobiographical, detailing and denouncing all the essential junctures of his Christian intellectual career: his lifelong relationship with mentor Zhao Zichen, the transformative lakeside dialogue with Bishop R. O. Hall, the Anglican ordinations, his ministries in Dali and Huitien Hospital in wartime Yunnan, and his more recent efforts to teach Christianity at Jilin University.[42]

The tribulations encompassed more than intellectual suicide. Around October, Cai, a member of a "criminal gang" wearing the black-lettered placard, was assigned a humiliating task: relocating the grave of an armed-clash victim. Cracking his whip, the student leader yelled at the "foreign monk" (Cai's charge), who was too out of breath to dig out the coffin. Instead, he forced Cai to drag out the decaying body. A red flag dripping with disinfectant was brought to cover the corpse of this dead Red Guard leader—a morbid aggravation to Cai's agony in smell and sight.[43]

Miraculously, Cai survived the tribulations, though prospects of either Christian or Communist redemption seemed distant. The stream of self-denunciations culminated in a 1969 report entitled "Initial Understanding of My Crimes," which defined his Christian career as one of "countless crimes against the people." His church ministries before 1949 were labeled "service to imperialism," his resistance at Yenching School of Religion against party-state domination vilified as "service to revisionism," and his defensive arguments in the early Cultural Revolution dismissed as "opposing mass movement."[44] His forced confession aligned well with the official verdict issued by the investigative team in December 1969:

> In 1930, Cai Yongchun translated *Christian Home Education* for the imperialist Dorothy Barbour at Yenching School of Religion, which slandered the

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conventional weapon and inflicting 1,000 casualties. In Changchun, rival rebel groups claimed to have designed and tested primitive "dirty bombs" that were radioactive. See MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 214–220.

[41]MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 257.

[42]Cai Yongchun, "Zizhuan cailiao" (Autobiographical Information), b. 7, f. 4–5, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205). To document each period of his personal history, Cai had to provide witnesses with their political attitudes, occupations, and addresses.

[43]Huang Xiuying, *Wode banlu cai yongchun*, 107. Jiang Dongping, "Wenge wudou shiqi de changchun" (Changchun in Armed Clashes during the Cultural Revolution), *Wenshi jinghua*, no. 8 (2004): 51–52.

[44]Cai Yongchun, "Dui ziji zuixing de chubu renshi" (Initial Understanding of My Crime), June 24, 1969, b. 7, f. 5, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

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> Communist Party in one place. In 1940, when the Canton Union Theological College proposed to set up a preaching site in the Mincha region, Cai provided intelligence-bearing material for the imperialist R.O. Hall, the former Anglican Bishop of the South China Diocese. After returning from the United States, he had some reactionary words and actions. Having confessed in the current campaign, he has shown some awareness [of his crimes]. After extensive internal and external investigations, so far no other major political problems have been found.[45]

Cai must have now realized that, for him, the Communist ideology meant not personal transformation but a determinism that chained him to his "class background" and "slave-making Christian education." Even the most rigorous attempt at intellectual reconstruction, which was the only designated remedy, could not avert the charge of committing "crimes against the people." What else could he have done to reconstruct "class position and worldview"—the supposed root of all his evils?[46] Having been baptized by nearly twenty years of socialist campaigns, Cai remained lost to a secure identity. The Christian past he attempted to renounce proved resilient, while the rank of the proletariat, despite appearing tantalizingly close, was beyond his reach.

Caught in limbo, Cai grasped the first chance to retire by the end of 1969, planning to retreat to Guangdong with his eldest daughter and son-in-law. Three years prior, Cai had been reluctant to do so despite suffering the initial brunt of the Cultural Revolution. Now the fear of having no scholarly contributions was outweighed by a loss of hope in ever attaining sufficient political credibility to access public space.

Before the family could escape, however, several military clashes between the PRC and the Soviet Union in northern Manchuria heightened the tension. The situation led to the "first order of Vice Chairman Lin Biao," whose prestige was at zenith given the PLA's recent heroism in guarding the national border. For the Cai couple, it meant emergency evacuation to rural Jilin—a county in Yanbian adjacent to North Korea. Plagued by asthma and other chronic respiratory diseases, how Cai survived the insufferable coldness (on average below freezing point in March) was baffling. His wife, Huang Xiuying, described their journey to the local production brigade—a three-hour ride on an oxcart from the county railway station:

> On the way there was but mountains and wasteland. Villages were sparse. We saw neither people nor heard chickens and dogs. The oxen kept pulling and the wheels cackling, and we were exhausted. Yong [Cai] told me to rest my eyes, and I urged him to pray. We snuggled and bumped our way into this remote mountain village. Looking around we felt bewildered, but God was with us![47]

What they did not know was that, shortly after they emerged from this exile, the whole country would be struck by a profound sense of bewilderment. On September 13, 1971, Lin Biao, Mao's greatest advocate in the PLA and chosen heir, died in a plane crash while fleeing China. Two years prior, Lin pronounced the sentence on the former head of state Liu Shaoqi, condemning the latter as "a hidden traitor and scab." After Lin's failed escape, the CCP announced that it was Lin who had been the "traitor against

[45]Huang Xiuying, *Wode banlu cai yongchun*, 111.

[46]Cai Yongchun, "Riji" July 27, 1969, b. 5, f. 6, Cai Yongchun Papers (RG 205).

[47]Huang Xiuying, *Wode banlu cai yongchun*, 113.

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the party and nation." After years of unprecedented violence and disorder, over which many intellectuals poured out themselves as a sacrifice to Mao's last revolution, they woke up to the horror that neither the Great Leader nor the CCP seemed to know where this country should be going.

## IV. Conclusion

Cai's torment during the Cultural Revolution was a telling story of how the revolutionary fury swept over intellectuals and religionists of various traditions. Embodying a quasi-religious zeal, agents of the revolution, such as the Red Guards, acted as priests of the Maoist spirit. They sought to exorcise hundreds of thousands of condemned "ox demons and snake gods" with wrath and violence. For that, Christian leaders became excellent targets given their "superstitious beliefs" and "imperialist ties."

Tragic as it was, the Cultural Revolution stands not as a single pathbreaking watershed but the culmination of revolutionary momentum that had been gathering since the founding of the PRC. Regarding this issue of continuity versus rupture, Cai's records demonstrate that such ideological domestication, whose suffocating efficiency reached its zenith during the tumultuous decade, had been consistently and widely practiced since at least the late 1950s. Voluntary or not, Cai's active intellectual reconstruction along the Maoist lines resulted from years of disciplinary imposition. As the level of coercion in the revolutionary spiral escalated, so did the intensity of the reconstruction efforts, eventually engulfing any intellectual identity one used to claim.

After the Cultural Revolution, Cai's Christian intellectual identity remained difficult to restore. Militant persecution gave way to tacit marginalization. Resources and space were both lacking for Cai to accomplish his academic goals. Even more torturous was the internal alienation, which resulted from nearly thirty years of forced recantation and the assumption that Christianity had been annihilated in China. Like others who struggled to remain human amid collective paranoia and corrosive relationships, many Christian intellectuals were plagued by a profound sense of guilt—they failed to bring a prophetic challenge to the party-state. They thus had to endure, together with their own powerlessness, the political leviathan's violence against the church and their Christian vocation, shattering their patriotism. Why had the vision of national salvation, which in the long twentieth century empowered Christian intellectuals like Cai to create something new for themselves and China, appeared tantalizingly close yet proved elusive in the end? Indeed, that once captivating vision would become the lingering existential question to haunt the remainder of their lives.

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