Negotiating the Christian Past in China

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In Xiamen, in recent years, diverse interest groups have all shown a notable enthusiasm for producing historical texts linked to Christianity. While in past decades, writing about Christian history was within the purview of Marxist theorists or well-trained historians, it is now increasingly open to diverse players. This chapter examines the efforts of three distinct categories of actors engaged in writing Christian history: the government, churches, and amateur historians. A detailed analysis of how Christian history is produced in Xiamen reveals that state politics, historical agencies, and individual subjectivity (especially the psychodynamic dimensions of nostalgic sentiment) intersect in their official and unofficial efforts to create historical texts. It provides a basis from which to understand the state project of representing the past, where the mobilization of personal memories for historical reconstruction has paved the way for conditions under which competing versions can be expressed. To a certain extent, the emergence of unofficial or private narratives (for example, oral history) is challenging the grand master narratives of the state. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to put popular efforts in opposition to official accounts. In fact, the purpose is to show that the official production of history texts and unofficial efforts often mingle and cross-pollinate.
Shades of “Cultural Aggression”

Since it was founded, Christianity has been an evangelical religion, spreading and growing roots around the world. In some receiving countries or regions, the introduction of Christianity inevitably resulted in conflicts with existing traditions and, in some instances, upset the political and cultural status quo. Unquestionably, the spread of Christianity around the world in modern times was supported by the rise and rapid expansion of Western capitalism. The people in areas receiving Christian evangelism encountered not only the gospel but also the guns and privileges that came with it.

In China, an agricultural nation dominated by Confucianism, Christianity was treated as a “foreign religion” (yangjiao) that tested native sovereignty and the stability of its social structure. Christianity’s encounter with the Chinese empire was intertwined with the relentless advance of Western imperialist powers in their nineteenth-century heyday. After the Opium War, the unequal treaties that were imposed on a defeated Qing China granted privileges to missionaries, giving them the freedom to preach and build churches in designated areas. In the Chinese view of history, these treaties became Christianity’s “original sin.” The stain of Christianity’s association with oppression and imperialism could not be washed away. A consequence of this was the persistent criticism of “cultural aggression” leveled at Christian missionaries, which first gained ground as early as the 1920s, after the May Fourth Movement, and remains pervasive in official discourse even today.¹

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, after the founding of the People’s Republic, the image of Christianity worsened, and missionaries were categorized as enemy aliens. Research on missions in China was therefore made a restricted field, open only to officially appointed Marxist theorists for the purpose of constructing Communist ideology.

The year 1978 marked a new era not only for the economy of PRC and its foreign policy but also for the historical study of Christianity. Since then, constraints imposed from the top on research in the humanities and social sciences have been relaxed, and accordingly the study of Christian history has acquired its own space for development. Nevertheless, despite this relaxation, in the 1980s it still remained difficult to find a publisher for research that was not wholly critical of Christianity.

Change crept in in the 1990s, and a small number of well-received works of research written from the perspective of cultural exchange, education, modernization, and globalization were made available.² Since the turn of
the twenty-first century, dozens of books have been published on missionary contributions to the modernization of China.

Since Xi Jinping and his administration rose to power, political constraints on social scientific studies of religion, especially those related to Christianity, have been reinforced. While empirical research on contemporary issues faces more restrictions, space for Christian history is more available. Yet the restrictions are incomparable with those during the PRC’s early decades.

Though some scholars of Christianity have attempted to depoliticize the discourse on Christianity, the complete elimination of political influence on either academic research or citizens’ minds still does not seem feasible in the foreseeable future. The discourse of “cultural aggression” continues to prevail and is widely accepted in China even today. Although the government has permitted some publications, it has never made any considerable adjustments to its stance on foreign missions.

The Official Production of Christian History

When the Communist regime took over mainland China, it immediately initiated a national project to produce histories of the late Qing and Republic eras. Although this endeavor was interrupted by the constant upheaval of political campaigns under Maoism, the official project fully resumed in the 1980s and led to the construction of a comprehensive set of grand historical narratives.

**CPPCC Historical Projects**

Zhou Enlai, then premier and chairman of the CPPCC National Committee in the PRC, instigated the founding of the Historical Materials Research Committee (HMRC) in 1959 (eventually shortened to the Historical Materials Committee, or HMC, in 1988). Shortly afterward, the government required provincial-, prefectural-, and county-level CPPCC organs to establish HMRCs. The system, which featured “political consultation” and “unity of peoples,” officially aimed to “reposition history” (cunshi), “benefit the government” (zizheng), “unite all walks of life” (tuanjie), and “educate the people” (yuren). Under the CPPCC system, senior deputies were invited to contribute firsthand retrospective accounts of their lives that were published sporadically in historical volumes. Though the subjects were drawn from
all walks of life, many were chosen for being well-known figures who had “personally experienced (qinli), seen (qinjian) and heard (qinwen)” significant historical events in late Qing and Republican China.³

This campaign of historical production was unquestionably shaped by the ideological landscape of early Communism. The majority of the contributors were former Qing or Republican government officials, intellectuals, and officers of the defeated Nationalist Party army who had lost their influence under the new regime. Subsequently, such figures became the targets of the Anti-Rightist Movement and the political campaigns that followed in its wake. Without a doubt, their historical writings were strictly supervised and were used to achieve particular political purposes. Produced under the discipline of the new regime, their historical accounts were usually reconstructed in such a way as to support the party-state’s vision of history as well as to avoid stirring up any political trouble.⁴

The work of the CPPCC has been the most influential project to construct authoritative historical accounts and thus official memories of the past. The incomplete statistics available indicate that from 1960 to 1990, including the interruption of the Cultural Revolution, HMRCs on and above county level (known as HMCs since 1988) produced approximately 2,300 series of historical publications: specifically 13,000 volumes, consisting of 300,000 essays and totaling 200 million Chinese characters.⁵ Although Zhou Enlai declared that “all things from the most backward to the most advanced should be recorded,” the main purpose of the project was to expose the negative sides of the “old society” (jiu shehui), creating a perfect foil for the “New China.”⁶ Generally, the CPPCC framing of pre-1979 historical accounts emphasized the reactionary elements of the past, and its post-Mao historical work was required to “hold high the banner of patriotism.”⁷

Under the aegis of the 1959 national history project, the CPPCC Xiamen Committee established its HMRC and in 1963 published two volumes of Xiamen Historical Materials. In these works, Christianity was criticized as an aggressive entity rather than as a tool of imperialist aggression. The second volume was a special issue covering the process by which Gulangyu was forcibly occupied and transformed into an international settlement. In this monograph, Gulangyu was denounced as a “vampire camp” from which the Three Missions based there “made massive incursions into the hinterland of Fujian Province.”⁸ Besides the vehement accusations of “cultural aggression” and “interference in China’s sovereignty,” moral discourses were often brought into play to censure missionaries or their mission work. John Otte, among others, was denounced as an “imperialist rogue” and a
“hypocrite with an extremely ugly soul.” To further blacken his name, he was also accused of indecent assaults on women, a sinful charge calculated to erode his identity as a morally upstanding missionary (see chapter 2). The Xiamen historical accounts of Christianity were framed strictly within a logical and explanatory structure consistent with an overall state-sanctioned framework of national history whose purpose was to reaffirm the Party’s uninterrupted historical continuity as a national liberator.

After only two volumes, the CPPCC Xiamen Committee’s historical work was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, during which hundreds of unpublished manuscripts totaling two million characters were destroyed. Not until 1979 was the initiative resumed and those cultural workers denounced as rightists reinstated in their positions. Over the course of the ensuing two decades, twenty-one volumes of Xiamen Historical Materials were published. One 1980 publication again brought up the position of Gulangyu as an international settlement and particularly the dishonorable roles of church-run hospitals and schools in propagating “mental anesthesia.”

A noticeable trend began to emerge in some articles whereby anti-imperialist patriotic movements within mission schools were highlighted and in fact exaggerated. One example repeatedly cited to illustrate the existence of an anti-imperialist movement was an incident that occurred in the church-run Anglo-Chinese College one day in February 1914, when three students decided to teach a lesson to an Indian policeman who had been hired by the Kulangsu Municipal Council, forcing him to drink seawater. It would be impossible to authenticate the incident as all the witnesses have passed away. It might possibly have been true if we take into account the widespread antipathy engendered by the privileges and arrogance of the foreigners, though the incident occurred in February 1914, much earlier than the well-known May Fourth Movement of 1919, which did so much to arouse anti-imperialist sentiments in China. Nevertheless, true or not, this sole incident could hardly be characterized as an anti-imperialist campaign or struggle; rather, it reveals how stories involving Christianity could be molded into patriotic narratives.

The seventh volume of 1984 contains two essays written by Christians introducing the New Street Church and Trinity Church. Though both articles opened with a criticism of the unequal treaties that missionaries and their cultural aggression relied upon, the descriptions that followed took a positive tone. The following eight volumes published in the mid- and late-1980s benefited from a much more relaxed atmosphere in which historical accounts of Christianity could be produced. The 1987 volume focused on
the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Two articles outlined the contributions made by church schools to the war effort, for instance their reception and care of war refugees. Subsequently, official narratives of Christianity in Xiamen began to purposefully refer to Christianity’s association with anti-Japanese efforts, with the aim of constructing a positive image for Christians as part of China’s united front against Japanese invasion.

The two volumes of 1988 contained two articles describing Christian histories authored by the late Wu Bingyao, an influential church leader. In the first, he praises the efficient missionary work of the Three Missions. In the second, he attempts to defend the position that Christianity had been mistaken for a tool for imperialist aggression, and it was not the missionaries’ intention to become entangled with foreign imperialism. He tries to excuse the role of Christianity in imperialism by using rhetorical turns of phrase such as “directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously.” Superficially at least, the state requires its citizens to comply with official narratives, but it is also clear that it is possible to produce and publish alternative histories by making compromises, employing state discourse to admit Christianity’s disgrace.

In the late 1980s, partly because of the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, the state introduced tighter ideological control. Against this backdrop, Xiamen Historical Materials released a special issue in 1990 (volume 16) criticizing the Gulangyu International Settlement where they launched a fierce attack on Christianity and mission hospitals and schools.

Yet in spite of this, the increasingly relaxed atmosphere for historical work has not been fundamentally reversed. The volume published the following year, the eightieth anniversary of the 1911 Revolution, focused on how Qing rule in Xiamen was overthrown, during which “many patriotic pastors and Christians were revolutionary activists” and Xu Chuncao, an influential Christian who claimed to have “only accepted Christ but not submitted to foreign command,” often confronted foreign missionaries. In another essay, the Egret River News (Lujiang bao), founded by a British missionary, was praised for “raising awareness of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism” and consequently promoting the “bourgeois democratic revolutionary movement.” Since then, further volumes in the same series have applied a revolutionary discourse intended to buttress the legitimacy of the Communist regime.

Over the next few years, essays about Christianity assumed a much more positive tone, introducing numerous celebrities who were raised as
Christians or educated in church schools (see chapter 1). Political issues were avoided. The last volume, which came out in 2002, marked the end of the 1959 historical project. According to the former editor-in-chief, the major reason for the termination of the series was a shortage of manuscripts and a decline in readership.

Like the CPPCC National Committee's historical project, the Xiamen historical work relied on contributors who were typically part of the regime's united front work, including Republican government officials, intellectuals, and members of the religious elite who had experienced significant events firsthand. While they contributed valuable historical accounts, they were subject to the constraints of the particular political conditions of the time and had to cater to the mainstream ideology in their descriptions of the past, meaning that censored personal accounts were presented as legitimate historical work.

In the mid-1990s, another round of the national historical project was initiated. It was launched just at the point when Xiamen's economic prosperity was stirring up a passionate interest in the city's past and the government-led historical team proudly traced the origins of Xiamen City back to 1394. The project resulted in the second extensive production of Xiamen history in the new century. Between 2007 and 2013, the CPPCC Xiamen Committee HMC published twenty-four monographs covering a comprehensive range of subjects including (but not limited to) religion, music, physical education, films, newspapers, and the women's movement.

It was an official task and it was unquestionably finished in a hurry. The production's enormous scale turned history into an industrial product. From commissioning to publication, a particular book might be completed in the space of a few short months, leaving little time for research and writing. The authors or editors were local experts and ordinary cultural workers, typically laypeople in their fields who lacked any kind of historical training and created “history” on the basis of hearsay. Professional historians and university academics kept their distance. The books that were churned out could hardly be regarded as serious works of historiography. Not to put too fine a point on it, they were hotchpotches essentially devoid of originality and academic rigor.

Using government funding, authorities produced a large number of copies and distributed them to citizens free of charge. In a nutshell, the government produced the city's history and managed to popularize it with adequate funding. To some extent, this gesture catered to citizens with feelings of nostalgia, especially those who lamented Gulangyu's excessive
commercialization. As Le Goff argues, “[The quest for collective memory] amounts to a conversion that is shared by the public at large, which is obsessed by the fear of losing its memory in a kind of collective amnesia—a fear that is awkwardly expressed in the taste for the fashions of earlier times and shamelessly exploited by nostalgia-merchants; memory has thus become a best-seller in a consumer society.”

In historical production, nostalgic memory is often used to piece together the history of a locality, and this process accelerates the commercialization and rapid consumption of the local history. This is amply illustrated in the way Christianity has been commended as the most significant promoter of Xiamen’s modernization, to the detriment of the people of Xiamen, whose contributions were underestimated or even ignored in historical works.

Nowadays it has become the custom to link Christianity closely to themes like schools and celebrities. A book on Noted Musicians of Xiamen lists twenty-one famous musicians, of whom seven were Christians and benefited from what the church had to offer, for instance through musical training. The book argues that the musical legacy of Gulangyu, which nurtured many great musicians, originated in Christianity. However, the volume makes a notable omission in its treatment of renowned soprano Yan Baoling (1924–1966), who committed suicide because of her unbearable humiliation during the Cultural Revolution. A history in a 2012 church publication, documented below, describes the way political persecution drove Yan to suicide:

Because she was a sociable person, the Red Guards slandered her as a courtesan and hung a pair of worn shoes (poxie) around her neck as she was made to stand in front of the crowd. One day, a group of fierce Red Guards came to the headquarters of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and confiscated all Bibles and faith-related books. They threw printed matter on the ground and burned it as the [YWCA] staff members knelt around the fire. Yan Baoling was the director-general and was therefore ordered to kneel at the very front. Her legs were burned. But this was not the end of [her] nightmare. A couple of days afterward she was ordered to accompany the Red Guards when they raided her house in Gulangyu. I did not dare to speak to her and could only watch silently. A few days later Yan jumped from the third story of the YWCA building.
Yan’s contributions to the music scene in Gulangyu made her a local celebrity, yet Noted Musicians of Xiamen only mentions her in passing, in a couple of sentences in a chapter devoted to her son, a fact that provoked widespread discontent. The author intentionally ignores both her significance to the music scene and the growing sadness about her fate. Apparently, Yan’s suffering and the political causes behind her suicide were not supposed to be mentioned in the historical work.

Since the Xiamen government decided to move forward with its application to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009, the Gulangyu Management Committee has organized intensive historiographic production that has led to the publication of dozens of monographs. This has been an exercise in quantity, not quality, and the project has been almost totally devoid of any creativity or originality. The organizers did not cast a wide net; they invited almost exactly the same editors or authors as the previous works and used the same materials without looking for new evidence. At the time, the books were still intended for a lay readership, but the project as a whole was supported by public funds. Tens of thousands of printed copies were widely circulated free of charge. In the application for WHS, over ten of the fifty-three core heritage sites of Gulangyu were related to Christianity, including the Christian cemetery, church buildings, and church-run hospital and schools. The authorities had not paid much attention to Christian sites before planning the WHS application, but after the decision to go ahead with it, the religious issue—Gulangyu’s connection to Christianity—could no longer be overlooked. Though Christianity played an undeniable role in the modernization of Gulangyu, generally speaking the historical evaluation in the official document fails to acknowledge this.

In spite of the publication of so many works related to Christianity, so far there has been no official reevaluation of the religion. Kong Qinmai, the former editor-in-chief of Xiamen Historical Materials and a delegate to the CPPCC Xiamen Committee, told me in an interview that although the religious policy was now less constraining, the government has never made any considerable changes to the official discourse on Christianity. He remarked that at CPPCC conferences, Christianity is often raised in conjunction with the names of patriotic religious figures and patriotic activities, yet it is important to note that the government has never slackened in its efforts to train patriotic socialists who are actively opposed to Christianity. For example, in 1999, Gulangyu’s Next Generation Working Committee edited a textbook to promote the cultivation of youth patriotism where the editors collect abundant evidence of imperialist guilt in Gulangyu and
Christianity’s inglorious past. With the exception of some of the Western-style buildings built by missions, the textbook does not acknowledge any useful contributions from Christianity or Christian missionaries. The only positive note is the grudging admission that missionaries chose scenic locations for their buildings. While the editors do their best to encourage young people to love their scenic island, they do their utmost to dissuade them from loving the religion that was so intertwined with its cultural and economic development.

The Special Gazetteer of Christianity in Xiamen: Three Decades of Failed Efforts

China has a rich tradition of local history writing. *Difangzhi* (*fangzhi* or *zhi* for short), often translated as “local gazetteers” or “local histories,” have existed in China since ancient times. The rise in the production of local gazetteers can be traced back to the Song and Yuan periods. A complete catalog, including Taiwan, lists over eighty-two hundred extant editions of gazetteers that appeared before 1949. There are long-standing debates over whether local gazetteers belong to the disciplines of history or geography. When referring to the production of Christian history, Xiamen government officials and church leaders refer to a text of this kind as *zhi* (gazetteer), distinct from *shi* (history), as its purpose is to chronicle without commenting. However, they have never intended it to be considered a geographical document, and *zhi* essentially refers to a concise history. This section, therefore, outlines the special *zhi* project as a historiographic endeavor.

In early imperial history, a local gazetteer was compiled and published for three basic purposes: namely, to draw attention to a particular place, glorify the emperor, and express local pride. James M. Hargett states that by the Song Dynasty, which saw the production of many more gazetteers on both the local and the national levels than any previous era, the general trend was to adapt these publications more than ever before to serve political, administrative, and military ends. Using gazetteers, ruling groups could educate themselves about the geography and customs of different regions or the histories of particular periods. More often than not, the dynastic states played an active role in the creation and production of local gazetteers, usually relying on the local gentry to compile and print these works.

Traditionally, the compilation of local gazetteers was decreed by central authorities and implemented by government officials in the localities. The most celebrated local literati and official scholars assumed responsibility
for their compilation, while the government was supposed to be financially responsible for the process as a whole. Nowadays, in contrast, the government is the sole authority responsible for compiling and publishing local gazetteers. A constant theme running through contemporary gazetteers is the emphasis on the need to present first and foremost a correct ideological picture and positive evaluation of both the CCP in particular and the government record in general, simultaneously extolling China's great economic and social achievements. In compiling gazetteers, through routinized historiography, the Party imposes its will on official history and reinforces the legitimacy of its rule.

To guarantee the political correctness of a gazetteer, the compilation is required to abide by state regulations. In 1963, the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee, which is responsible for ideology-related work, issued a circular entitled “Various Opinions about the Compilation of Local Gazetteers,” proposing a system of censorship to control the publication and distribution of such works. This guideline document prescribes that a draft of a local gazetteer shall not be published until it has been reviewed and found unproblematic both politically and in terms of the protection of national secrecy. The purpose of the “Provisional Guidelines on the New Compilation of Local Gazetteers,” issued in 1985, was to institutionalize and standardize the boom in the compilation and production of local gazetteers. This document was finalized in 1997 and released in 1998 as the official “Guidelines on Compiling Local Gazetteers.” The provisions of the “Guidelines” stipulated that Marxism-Leninism, the thoughts of Mao Zedong, and the theory of Deng Xiaoping must be the guiding principles of any such work, and the administrative and editorial activities must be “guided by the CCP and undertaken by the government.” “Political quality” was to be the principal feature in the gazetteer project. The regulation declared that compilers need to “pay special attention to the political quality of the gazetteers. Local gazetteers are not personal works, but ‘political books’ (zhengshu) or ‘official books’ (guanshu) of a highly political nature. . . . The view that gazetteers ought to be distanced from politics is wrong.”

Under Mao, the compilation of gazetteers was revived in 1956, but few works were published because of the continuous political disruption of the ensuing decades. However, since the 1980s, when China embarked on a fast track of economic development, gazetteer compilation projects have returned to the political agenda. As the saying goes, “The compilation of history happens in prosperous times” (shengshi xiushi). Thus, it should come as no surprise that during the economic upswing of the 1980s, the
Chinese government decided that the time was ripe for the compilation of new local histories.

National institutions on different administrative levels were in a position to provide fairly adequate political, human, and financial resources for the compilation and publication of gazetteers. On the national level, the China Steering Group for Local Gazetteers oversees offices or departments in provinces, cities, and counties. The Local Gazetteer Office is a regular government unit, responsible for the compilation and publication of gazetteers on its local administrative level. The office is often headed by the top local government leader. In 1981, the Chinese Local Gazetteers Association was founded, leading to a high point in the compilation of local gazetteers. The first round of gazetteer work was completed in 1990, and more than nine thousand had been compiled by 1992.34

Before initiating the compilation of a comprehensive gazetteer for a particular place, the local official gazetteer office encouraged people from all walks of life to put together their own. The corresponding authorities (for example, of education, industry, commerce, transport, or religious affairs) were responsible for supervising those that fell within their remit. In the late 1980s, the Xiamen RAB was assigned the task of compiling a gazetteer of religion in Xiamen and apportioned the writing to different religious organizations. The Xiamen Lianghui accepted the assignment and swiftly set to work. The project was largely managed by the Lianghui and supervised by RAB officials.

Old Pastor Wen, then the leader of the Lianghui, entrusted the project to Guo Qinghuai, a retired seminary teacher and who was still active in the Christian community, notably as a volunteer pastor at Trinity Church. In order to make up for deficiencies in historical sources, Guo Qinghuai visited libraries and archives in Fuzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai. He also consulted references in missionary memoirs and sources such as the Chinese Recorder and the Christian Occupation of China. In the early 1990s, ideological restrictions in China were still strictly in place, and Guo’s writing was required to follow the Marxist-Leninist view of history. During the writing process, he traveled to America to visit his children and decided to settle there, giving up the gazetteer project.

Guo’s writing duties were later transferred to Luo Anping, an editor at the Anxi County Gazetteer Office and a close relative of the Old Pastor. In view of Luo’s government work experience and the pastor’s personal recommendation, Luo was considered politically reliable and transferred to Xiamen to undertake the assignment. He finished the gazetteer in 1993,
but both the Lianghui and the RAB were dissatisfied with the manuscript. Luo, not being originally from Xiamen, was not very conversant with the Christian history of the area. As he was engaged in a government-sponsored project, Luo had been permitted to access archives, so he listed many events that had taken place during the various political movements of the Maoist era. His description of the state oppression of Christianity and the role of the TSPM put both the RAB officials and Lianghui leaders in an embarrassing situation, since allowing the manuscript to be published would put them at risk of political repercussions.

After much toing and froing, the manuscript was finally rejected. Besides its many palpable mistakes, the principal objection to the manuscript was that it was excessively politicized. The church saw it as lacking spiritual content, while the government was stumped by the detailed descriptions of the repression of the Christian community, precisely what it was doing its best to erase from the collective memory. The project was shelved until the 2010s, and to this date it has still not been completed.

Though Luo’s manuscript was not approved, part of it was adapted for a twenty-five-page concise history in the Xiamen City Gazetteer that omits the charge of “cultural aggression” and avoids pointing to Christianity’s role in Western imperialism. This is not to say that the narrative is free of any political tone. The only official intervention mentioned is the Cultural Revolution, and it is referred to several times as the reason why churches were shut. However, no details are given about the political campaign, and the Cultural Revolution is used to cover all repression of Christianity. Blame is shifted away from the Party to the ultra-leftism associated with the Gang of Four.

After three decades of attempts, the government has failed to compile a systematic, detailed history of Christianity in Xiamen. The vacuum of officially approved texts has unintentionally resulted in a negotiable field for alternative narratives. Nevertheless, official censorship procedures and strict government control of publications on Christianity conspire to create a difficult environment for these unofficial narratives.

Individual Efforts at Making Alternative Narratives

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the RCA mission to China, a history book entitled The Reformed Church in China, 1842–1951 was published in 1992. It provided a detailed description of Xiamen’s historical
landscape. When three printed copies were brought to Xiamen, the book aroused great interest among local history experts.

In 2000, Yao Deming, a retired engineer, voluntarily assumed responsibility for the book’s translation and publication. This proved to be extremely challenging for Yao, who never completed middle school and does not understand English. He finally turned to a university lecturer in English-Chinese translation for help and devoted himself to collecting old photographs and identifying proper nouns (that is, names of people and places). The journey was a long one, and the translation was not completed until 2010, when, financed by private donations and a major church, Yao was ready to have the Chinese version published. However, this in itself was a problematic undertaking.

At present, the legal publication of Christian works is possible in China but it is still subject to strict constraints. For a book to be legal, it must secure an officially issued International Standard Book Number, which can only be obtained from licensed publishing houses operating under close official supervision. Christianity-related books published in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or anywhere except mainland China cannot be legally sold in bookstores nor in any of the mainland’s several bookselling internet sites without being subject to strict and cumbersome import procedures.

Yao consulted an editorial director of a university press, who read the manuscript and explicitly pointed out that because the last chapter dealt with post-1949 political issues, any efforts to publish it in mainland China would be in vain. Yao also approached Kong Qinmai (mentioned above), who had served on the editorial team of *Xiamen Historical Materials* for many years and was highly aware of the political issues involved. The final chapter about the forced termination of the RCA mission between 1949 and 1951 presented the biggest problem. Kong explained:

I have acted as a censor for the publishing authorities, so I know the hoops [that publishers and authors have to jump through]. By and large, the book is alright. But the last chapter, in particular the part on RCA missionary Henry Poppen’s deportation and the details about those who were expelled under escort rudely, brutally, even savagely, is [politically] sensitive. This meant that the manuscript would not be acceptable to the authorities. Yao Deming came and sought my help. As an editor, I am practiced in the tactics of neutral description. I suggested they did not use any sensitive phraseology. The upshot is that we are not supposed to remain [literally] faithful
to the original texts, but we should nevertheless convey the intent of the original book. We should not publish it illegally and should abide by the Party’s publishing and religious policies.

Our dilemma is that we must not deviate from the original book. In the last chapter, for instance, the words “struggle assembly” (douzheng dahui) should be replaced by the far more neutral “holding a meeting” (kaihui) and “struggle” substituted by “arguing about the issue” (shuoli). Speaking of Poppen’s deportation, the description should be rephrased along these lines: he was told to leave the country after the meeting held to argue about the issue.

When I asked if he had received any instructions from his superiors about how to review books of this kind, Kong shook his head and continued, “When I was the editor-in-chief of Xiamen Historical Materials, I was never given any particular instructions from the top on what kind of topics could or could not be published. We understood what the government wanted. That is tacit knowledge. Whenever we referred to the politically sensitive past [connected to Mao’s political movements], we said ‘as we all know the reason that,’ just a couple of words instead of a fuller description.”

In fact, not all books about Christianity are difficult to publish. As Kong stated:

I have examined many books about Xiamen, some of them about religion [i.e., Christianity]. The books dealing with incidents related to Christianity and the intervention of foreign consuls did not receive approval. Their topics fell outside the mainstream. Our favorites have to do with cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West, and modern Western medicine and the like. Some of these topics could and should be learned about. The most important guiding principle in examining manuscripts is that they should belong to mainstream themes such as cultural exchanges, integration, development and other positive issues. I know how to deal with the government and make use of policies to the utmost extent.

In spite of his former official posts, the good reputation he enjoys, and the influence he could exert on government officials, Kong has personally experienced failure when trying to publish sensitive material. In about 1999, a fine arts publishing house in Beijing organized a series of photographic books devoted to fifty cities and regions to commemorate the
fiftieth anniversary of the “New China.” At the publisher’s request, Kong edited a volume entitled *Old Photographs of Tibet*. However, nobody was willing to review the manuscript. Under China’s current publishing regulations, manuscripts cannot be given the go-ahead for publication without first being examined by the authorities. If a published book can be shown to violate laws and regulations, the authors or editors and the authorities responsible for them will face punishment. Therefore, censors may be unwilling to review or approve a “sensitive” work because their own career is on the line if they approve something that later attracts the negative attention of higher authorities. The process dragged on for five years, but the volume was never published. As Kong said:

The fine arts publishing house wanted to publish the manuscript. However, no-one was willing to examine it, because no-one was willing to take the risk. It took five years but the project was finally abandoned. The publisher sent the manuscript to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC), but they said the subject [of the book] was religion and therefore it should be reviewed by the SARA. Later the SARA rejected it, offering the explanation that the manuscript was about ethnic affairs. The manuscript was like a ball that the two authorities kept kicking back and forth. Eventually it was sent to the United Front Work Department [of the CCP Central Committee] that supervises both the SEAC and SARA. A deputy director read the manuscript but did not dare [to approve it] either. One of his concerns was that it might contain some “imperialist elements” (*diguozhuyi fenzi*) in the photos. We could neither verify nor refute this point because most of the people in the pictures have already passed away.

The Chinese version of RCA history faced a similar problem. The sensitive elements of the manuscript meant that it could not be published in mainland China; Yao and Kong were at an impasse. The only other possibility was to find a publisher in Hong Kong or Taiwan. This might have solved the publishing problem but still left the matter of its distribution: all printed matter produced outside mainland China must comply with formal censorship and import procedures before being allowed in, let alone being distributed and sold within the PRC.

Kong cast around, mobilized his resources, and finally introduced Yao Deming to the C&M Company, a firm focusing on cultural products. This
company has quite a complex background, functioning as a multifaceted set of enterprises that can work around official constraints by exploiting regulatory loopholes without attracting official ire.

Understanding the nature of C&M is impossible without some idea of the economic context in post-1979 China. Early in the reform era, the government launched tax incentives to attract foreign investments. Undoubtedly this policy has contributed to the vast influx of investment and rapid development of China’s economy, but it has also inevitably created a situation in which many Chinese enterprises or investors establish overseas corporations, then return to the mainland as foreign investors with access to preferential treatment. The manager of C&M explained:

Our company is itself a concoction. It is not wholly state-owned, but state-owned assets preponderate. This firm is deemed an independent company that is fully foreign owned, nevertheless the major shareholder is the state. The firm’s idiosyncratic identities make it easier for us to do business. The procedure is simple. Whenever we need to, we choose one of the particular identities. The Taiwanese publishing house is also under our control. It is a complicated set-up. The most important objective is not to violate policy. Hence, in this instance, the manuscript was published under the imprint of a Taiwanese publishing house, a choice that meant it was exempt from scrutiny by the RAB and the publishing authorities in mainland China. Instead, the company itself was responsible for its review. And we actually own and run the Taiwanese publisher. The whole process was legal. Public distribution through bookstores requires the intervention of an import company.

Under the imprint of a Taiwanese publisher, the Chinese version of the book was printed in Xiamen, and copies were disseminated organically through the community. Under official publishing policy, the printed copies should have been packed and delivered to Taiwan and should not have been circulated before being censored and permitted to enter the mainland. As it stands, the copies cannot be sold in bookstores and can only be distributed through personal channels.

Crucially, the fact that C&M has the privilege of avoiding official oversight of the manuscript does not mean there are no political risks for the firm and its manager. As the manager said:
We are the publisher and bear the main responsibility. If the authorities at the top blame us, I will be penalized and removed from my position and the firm will be ordered to shut down for two or three years. The company could be finished even within a year [not to mention two or three years]. The state's attitude toward religious culture has unquestionably changed. Books on Buddhism used to be difficult to publish. But in recent years the restrictions have been relaxed as Buddhism is considered an ameliorating factor in maintaining social stability and educating the people. [Taiwanese Buddhist] Master Hsing Yun’s books have been published in the mainland, as his books have been acknowledged to be expressions of the Buddhist spirit. Nevertheless, books about Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam are still difficult to publish. Only if they deal with historical topics might it be possible to have them published. All books on religions are required to be subjected to RAB inspection and many of them are published by designated presses. Despite this change in attitude, most publishers are unwilling to touch them. To do publishing business in China, it is essential to learn how to work around the edges of policy. We are not supposed to violate policy or publicize the book’s release. Never ever look for trouble!

Though C&M agreed to publish the book, the translators and editors were still cautious about the wording used. They deliberately omitted some details about how missionaries were insulted and mistreated when they were being deported. For instance, a description of local militiamen humiliating two women missionaries, Ruth Broekema and Jean Nienhuis, leaves out these details: “To show their disdain for the women, one of the young men spit on his hands and wiped them on Nienhuis’s face. When she took a handkerchief to wipe her mouth, he grabbed it, threw it on the floor, and stamped on it.” The translated section on Henry Poppen’s public trial omits the fact that he was “considered a common criminal” when he was deported and, “with his hands tied behind him, was separated from the others and placed in jail.” The translation makes no reference to a telling detail of Poppen’s public accusation trial, attended by over ten thousand people, when the government employed a ruse to silence his testimony: he “was allowed to speak briefly in his own defense, although the loudspeakers were turned off.” In the Chinese version, it says that during that part of the trial, the sound quality of the speakers was so poor that Poppen’s voice could not be clearly heard. Words in the original texts like “occupation” or
“Communist takeover” were translated as “liberation,” a term uniformly used in official narratives to describe the just Communist revolution that “liberated” the Chinese people from the oppression of the “three big mountains” (三座大山, namely: imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism). True to the spirit of the original, the Chinese version remains critical of the Communist Party but nevertheless strikes out particulars about the persecution of missionaries. This trend signifies that, as far as Chinese politics are concerned, detailed description is more powerful than sharp criticism, and therefore such telling details are censored or omitted even if a work retains broad or general critiques of the party-state.

Rather than being sold in bookstores, copies of the Chinese version of the book have been widely circulated through unofficial channels among the Xiamen Christian community but also through government agencies. At one point Gulangyu officials were actually intending to sponsor the publication of the book. They finally gave up on the idea, precisely because they were so aware of the political sensitivity of post-1949 politics. Once copies of the Chinese version started circulating, the Gulangyu authorities took a pragmatic view, adding the book to their historical materials project to help boost their WHS application. Apparently the officials shelved their concern about sensitive matters, although they were still mindful of publishing regulations. Their rationale seemed to be that it was the responsibility of the publishing and religious affairs authorities to supervise the publication of historical texts relating to Christianity, while supervisory duties do not fall within the remit of officials of the Gulangyu government, which is a bureaucratic unit. Later, I realized that even the RAB officials knew about the book’s release and had turned a blind eye to it. By and large, local cadres are not particularly motivated to carry out ideological controls of Christianity and tend to acquiesce in whatever civilians do.

The book, a significant source for Xiamen history, has elicited an enthusiastic response both within and outside of the Christian community. Two months after its publication, the Xiamen Evening News (Xiamen wanbao) carried a review of the book.41 Reporter Sun Xiaowei did not avoid using words like “Christianity” or “missionary,” but used cautious language. Rather than describing it as a religious undertaking, Sun treated the missions as a cultural phenomenon, looking at it from the perspectives of cultural exchange and integration (the “mainstream,” as Kong said). Over the past several years, the newspaper has carried several reports related to Christianity’s contributions to Xiamen society. In 2015, the Xiamen Evening News published two features about the development of culture and education in
late Qing and Republican-era Xiamen, in which the missions played a key role. By contrast, Sun told me in an interview, when he moved to Xiamen in 2003, nary a word was heard in public in praise of the missionaries. Each time he mentioned the Christian past, he had to quote the CPPCC’s historical accounts and criticize the missionaries. The political atmosphere is now more relaxed, but the story of post-1949 Christianity might easily invite trouble, and as far as Sun is concerned, it is still forbidden territory.

In contrast, as an official organ of the Party (being part of the CCP Xiamen Committee), the *Xiamen Daily* strictly adheres to the CCP guidelines and seldom reports on Christianity. The *Xiamen Daily* was in fact the only legal newspaper in Xiamen during the momentous political movements of the Mao era and therefore actively propagated Party policy toward Christianity, putting itself at the forefront of attacks on missionaries and promoting the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Since the beginning of the reform era, it has seldom made any references to Christianity, whether positive or negative. This is very different from the newspaper’s policy toward Buddhism and popular religion, in particular when discussing the religious exchanges between Xiamen and Taiwan.

The *Xiamen Daily* and the *Xiamen Evening News* are both supervised by the Publicity Department of the CCP Xiamen Committee and are both subject to various restrictions concerning the kind of content they can publish. Nevertheless, there are noteworthy differences between them. The *Xiamen Evening News* is a semiofficial newspaper that cannot rely on steady revenue either from work unit subscriptions or from state subsidies; to survive financially, it must attract a wide readership within Xiamen. Unsurprisingly, in the past, special features on Christianity and Xiamen have proven to be of interest to its local audience. Conversely, as a Party newspaper, the *Xiamen Daily* is financed by subscriptions from work units and state subsidies and does not have any such concerns about its market. Therefore, there is no incentive for it to take the political risk of touching on issues related to Christianity, which administrative organs have declared forbidden territory.

Apart from the translation of the RCA book, a number of other original works of local Christian history have also found an audience. Zhu Zixian, a preacher of the Museum Church, an unregistered church in the Xiamen area, authored a manuscript called “Following the Footprint of Love,” focusing on missionaries and influential church members, which was sponsored by a Christian bookstore owner. It is not a work of academic historiography; the author has never had any historical training, and the narrative is
intended as light reading for laypeople. The overwhelming majority of the content covers common-knowledge topics like mission schools and hospitals, which can easily be found in the official *Xiamen Historical Materials* of the 1990s. However, in spite of its lightweight content, the manuscript faced numerous challenges.

The first problem stemmed from the position of the Museum Church in the early days of the People’s Republic. As a preacher of the church, Zhu is a faithful follower of its founder, the late Yang Enli (mentioned in the previous chapter), who refused to join the TSPM in the 1950s and insisted on holding gatherings in her private home. She was sent to prison and labor camps for sixteen years to undergo “reform through labor.”46 Her younger brother was also sentenced to six years of “reform.” After she was released in the late 1970s, Yang Enli continued to lead her house gathering, and it became a leading church in Fujian’s house church community. Yang gained a reputation as a spiritual leader at home and abroad, particularly after being featured in the widely circulated documentary film *The Cross: Jesus in China.*47 Yang Enli had a profound effect on Zhu and his fellow workers, and Zhu devoted a very detailed chapter to the church he serves and the suffering of his spiritual mentor. Apparently, authorities have considered the Museum Church a thorn in their side since it was founded, and it remains active today, undeterred by occasional official interventions. Under religious regulations, it exists in a gray zone because it is not registered with the official Lianghui organizations. This is not an exceptional situation. House churches exist throughout the country, but the government views them as illegitimate and occasionally takes repressive action against them. Therefore, details about the Museum Church prevented Zhu’s manuscript from passing official censorship.

Another sensitive issue has to do with the suffering of Shen Shengyu (1894–1969), the principal of the Anglo-Chinese College, and his wife Shao Youwen (1903–1982), the principal of the Lok Tek Girls’ School. They were local celebrities who educated a number of students who later became influential in Xiamen society. After 1949, they became political pariahs and their children were deprived of access to higher education. Both were accused of ideological crimes and imprisoned in Longyan, a remote region of Western Fujian. The fact that Shen died in prison became a source of embarrassment for the government, particularly when he was posthumously declared innocent. After her release, his wife Shao refused to join the TSPM organization and worked as an independent preacher until her death. Recently, their students have commemorated them on various occasions.
Zhu’s manuscript contains passages about the couple, notably describing Shen Shengyu as a martyr to his faith. This put the government in an awkward position. Certainly authorities declared Shen and Shao innocent as early as the 1980s, but they never apologized for the couple’s suffering. The same could be said of a vast number of political victims. These two episodes have prevented the manuscript from passing censorship for the past five years. Even so, Zhu has steadfastly refused to strike out the sensitive content.

Recording the Suffering of the Church

At the beginning of the new century, churches in Xiamen began the work of collecting retrospective accounts and have recently started to publish occasional booklets on church history. The most important of these are Trinity Church’s *Good News (Jiayin)*, the Bamboo Church’s *The Vineyard (Putao yuan)*, and the New Street Church’s *The Tree of Life (Shengming shu)*. The booklets usually contain the personal testimonies of members of the congregation.

The most remarkable example of recent church history is the book-length history of Trinity Church. When churches in Xiamen publish special memorial volumes, these typically focus on congratulations from Lianghui leaders and government officials rather than on historical matters. As Ma Zhenyu said, Trinity Church was determined to produce a different kind of volume “emphasizing Christian history, theology and God’s leadership so as to educate the younger generation, show the glory of God and afford people hope and faith.” *Trinity Church 1934–2014*, released at the church’s eightieth anniversary celebration, contains over 150,000 characters and hundreds of old photographs.

The editors of *Good News* collected as many personal testimonies as possible to create the book. Since 2011, issues of *Good News* have contained more items on church history, including essays on missionaries and mission schools and hospitals. The pieces that attracted the most attention from church members were an oral history series in 2012 on Shen Shengyu and Shao Youwen. In the three essays of the series, their daughter recollects the couple’s suffering:

They were both arrested and imprisoned in 1951, in 1956 and again in 1966. The TSPM organization ejected them, so they were no
longer able to serve. In the decades that followed, their children were implicated and hence became nonpersons. They were repudiated by universities and sent to remote mountainous regions to do manual labor. Misled by the pressure exerted in that era, we were disobedient [to our parents]. When our parents were released and returned home, their beloved daughters did not give them any welcome, but only criticism of themselves and their faith. . . . They were arrested three times. In 1966, the year the Cultural Revolution broke out, big-character posters (dazibao) encircled our small rented room. We had to bend forward to enter. One day, my parents were taken to be paraded [through the streets]. It was said that they were forced to kneel in the street with their hands tied behind their backs. Shortly afterward, they were put in jail. While my father died in prison in 1966 [NB: this should be 1969], my mother was jailed for six years and not released until 1972.  

Another popular oral history published in 2012 was about Yan Baoling, the Christian soprano who committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution (mentioned above). Yan’s story was told in testimony by her neighbor. A female elder of Trinity Church says that, when the Good News published personal reminiscences of this kind, church members particularly welcomed their copies and it was easy to distribute them. Well-known figures in the Xiamen church who had made significant contributions to local society were rewarded with overwhelming attention. However, neither the official historical work of the CPPCC nor the efforts of individuals or churches to write Christian history gave voice to the ordinary people who make up the majority of Christians. Generally speaking, the production of Christian history in Xiamen has been a mission or passion confined to the cultural elite. The memories of uneducated and socially marginalized Christians, who make up the silent majority, have tended to be ignored.

Under the Anti-Rightist Movement, seven members of Trinity Church, including one preacher, two elders or deacons, and four lay Christians, were denounced as rightists and publicly accused. One of the laymen was called Huang Douya (literally meaning “soybean sprout”). Among poor rural families in China, parents sometimes give their children a humble or derogatory name (jianming) to avoid tempting fate, in the hope that this can help them survive the vulnerable years of early childhood and live a longer life. To Chinese speakers, Huang’s name conjures an image of someone who was born and raised in a poor family. Although Ma Zhenyu mentioned Huang
Douya during our conversation, his name and suffering never appeared in the church’s history book. He was an example of someone who was thought to be too ordinary or unimportant to be worth recording in the history books; someone who could not inspire respect or feelings of nostalgia.

Ma Zhenyu, a member of Trinity Church and a retired engineer with a college diploma, was entrusted with the task of writing the book about church history in May 2011. Though he never received any training in historiography, Ma has his own views about it. He disagrees with prevailing ideas about how historical periods should be divided. Many academic scholars as well as ordinary people tend to agree that 1949 spelled the beginning of political repression, but Ma insists that the political situation did not deteriorate until the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957. During the very early stages of Communism, Trinity Church continued to prosper, as then incumbent Preacher Wen recorded in an essay in the TSPM journal *Heavenly Wind.*

When I read *Trinity Church 1934–2014,* I was surprised to find so many paragraphs devoted to the political repression of Christianity in general and Trinity Church in particular. I asked Ma if mentioning these issues was not overly sensitive. He responded confidently:

Politically sensitive? No. I am critical of the Communist Party and I slap their faces with their own hands [a Chinese phrase akin to “hoisting them with their own petard”]. But I have never fabricated the evidence. I consulted the archives and included the reference numbers as they appear in the book. If you [the authorities] arrest me, I’ll show you the archives and inform you of the sources. I quoted Pastor Zhang Hanqing’s comment: “Each time a campaign is launched, Christians will have to suffer.” It’s true. They [the Party cadres] themselves have spoken in this vein. Since 1957, it has been their religious policy to treat Christians as class enemies (*jieji diren*). I have cited a paragraph of the CCP Central Committee. We should speak with the facts and should not spout nonsense as the Communist Party does. I have written that Trinity Church hung out the national flag [of the PRC] in April 1952 in obedience to the official instructions to “love the country and love religion.” I have a photo of that scene.

I have concealed some hatred in the text, but have done it covertly. Those who lived through the political movements will understand my intention, but those who did not share these experiences will not be able to make head nor tail of it. Perhaps they might even consider
it nonsense. I do not intend to publicize it [the political repression]. I just underline the real history rather than whitewashing the government’s actions by saying everything was fine and dandy. I admit I do dwell on the past and haven’t written much about the present situation. Of course, the manuscript will not pass [official] censorship and I never dreamed of publishing it formally.

When I assumed responsibility for writing the history, I preferred the title *Sanyi fengyun* (The wind and clouds of Trinity Church). I like to talk about class struggle and how the Communist Party fooled the people. I am also keen to expose ugly realities in society, but these outrages are not pleasing in God’s sight. The church committee suggested the current title.

Although Ma Zhenyu concedes it was unpleasing in the sight of God to reveal so many ugly facts and conceal hatred in the texts, he was still willing to play the “cat and mouse game” with the authorities, which seems to offer him a sense of accomplishment.

In his talks with me, Ma also referred to the weakness of the clergy during the turbulent times of Maoist political campaigns, although, in contrast with its overt criticism of the CCP, his book omits any negative remarks about religious leaders. Instead, he writes that “Trinity Church members have witnessed the Sino-Japanese War and the Cultural Revolution, to say nothing of a series of political struggles and persecutions. However, as the servants of God, they have endured this hardship as it was imposed on them and none of them has betrayed the Lord in exchange for wealth and status or forsaken their missions halfway.”

The book turned out to be a great success, highly praised by both the clergy and members of the congregation. It covered a great deal of the history of Trinity Church but also the broader history of Christianity in Xiamen. Thousands of copies were distributed, not only to local members of the church community but to overseas Chinese Christians as well.

**Conclusion**

The production of Christian history in Xiamen occupies a zone of intense cultural and ideological work, where official history and unofficial narratives collide and sometimes combine. This makes Christian history a particularly significant site through which to articulate the confluence of Communist
ideology about imperialism and sovereignty, grassroots efforts, and popular nostalgia. The regional and historical particularities of Xiamen throw these issues into sharp relief.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the CPPCC’s collection and publication of personal testimonies produced a unified, coherent narrative whose purpose was to affirm the Party’s legitimacy and its role as the liberator of the Chinese nation, which had formerly been mired in misery. Christianity, denounced for its seemingly inextricable links with imperialism, was the frequent target of ideological attacks in official historical works. The framework set up by the CPPCC project squeezed and colonized the space of private memory. Today, whenever the people of Xiamen look to reconstruct the region’s Christian history, what they find are excessively homogeneous accounts and dwindling living memories. Decades of extensive ideological indoctrination shaped people’s way of thinking, something that was made clear during my talks with Xiamen residents who tended to admit Christianity’s dishonor in modern history before answering my queries. This particularly frames how citizens write Christian history: even though they intend to depart from the official narrative, this proves difficult to elide. The state has successfully imposed a stereotyped rhetoric on its citizens. When ordinary people talk about Christian history, they tend to use political clichés and monotonous vocabulary, in what seemed to me a striking echo of the fictional authoritarian universe of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, where Newspeak is radically reduced as the ruling group controls the fluency of expression of those they rule.51

Compared to central authorities, officials in Xiamen show a greater tolerance for the publication of narratives about Christianity before 1949. However, for stories relating to the turbulent political movements that reveal the fault lines in the Communist regime—they have placed extremely strict restrictions on any alternative narratives of the Maoist era. Consequently, the production of Christian history is easier if political events are omitted. When it alludes to its political mistakes, the government typically blames the Cultural Revolution in general without allowing details to be publicized. The government closes archives and forces publishers to delete any detailed repression of Christianity, since it is well aware that details of the Party’s mistakes will damage its legitimacy. The Cultural Revolution is used as a vehicle to give vent to public grievances while shielding the Party from blame.

In the representation of their city’s glorious past, Xiamen authorities have positively represented Christian elites. An unexpected consequence
is that elite Christians now have a more positive image and are playing an important role in depoliticizing Christianity, incorporating it into the city’s proud cultural and historical legacy.

However, in recent years, Xiamen government efforts to commission new written histories, such as for the UNESCO World Heritage application, have produced conditions in which individuals have been able to articulate new narratives that frame Christianity in a more positive light. These cannot be defined simply as acts of resistance or indeed complicity with the hegemony of the state, nor can they be regarded as voices that have been silenced and need to be freed from official hegemony. Instead, it is precisely the state’s systematic infiltration of historical narratives and attempts to dominate them that unintentionally paved the way for the emergence of alternative voices and perspectives, offering ways to navigate the fissures in post-Mao ideology and inscribe a very different set of meanings to historical events. The twenty-four monographs published by the CPPCC Xiamen Committee since the beginning of the new millennium indicate that the state does not dominate every aspect even of government-sponsored historiography.

After three decades of effort, the Xiamen RAB and the Lianghui have not yet published a complete official history of Christianity. From the perspective of ordinary people in Xiamen, the vacuum created by the lack of an official history has given them an opportunity to reconstruct the Christian past without being hamstrung by any obligatory points of reference. As the official restrictions on social memory have been watered down, civilians can find different channels through which to release what they want to say.

This does not mean the government is prepared to accept unofficial histories in lieu of their official counterparts. In fact, the three-decade-long special gazetteer project detailing the history of Christianity in Xiamen was never abandoned. At the end of 2015, a manuscript was finally finished by the fourth writer to attempt the project. This manuscript was eventually reviewed by the authorities and the Xiamen Lianghui. An officially recognized systematic history of Christianity is beginning to take shape.

Although the history of Christianity in China during the Cultural Revolution is still “a black hole,” locals are dedicated to piecing together fragmented memories of the time. Collective memories of the era of early Communism still to some extent impede relations between the church and the state. The state never apologized for the suffering inflicted on churches or individual Christians, nor has it compensated them for their losses. To
the Christian community, the Party has never been willing to accept its responsibility. Party leaders are conscious that the handling of this historical issue should not go any further, lest historical facts damage the Party’s legitimacy. Apparently the painful past remains obstinately planted at the heart of present-day politics.

From a local point of view, the people of Xiamen no longer need to obey the Party’s political logic and are showing great enthusiasm for reconstructing the region’s Christian history. They feel a particular interest in unearthing almost forgotten stories and bringing them to light. There is a general consensus among the Christian community and cultural workers that the Cultural Revolution is largely to blame for the dearth of historical materials. Almost without exception, the fire set by the Red Guards at the YWCA is brought up in conversation but, apart from this, they can cite no other instances. Until recently, since they reopened, most churches had not yet taken the trouble to set up any sort of system to restore their historical materials. Their lack of enthusiasm for preserving historical materials does not really have much to do with the Cultural Revolution. Instead, it sheds light on the fact that the government, churches, and individuals are all disposed to use the Cultural Revolution pragmatically to explain interruptions in memory or historical lacunae.

The enterprise of history writing in Xiamen has not attracted much attention from well-trained historians. University scholars tend not to get involved. A few of the university professors I interviewed look down on the “low quality” of the local history experts and certainly had no interest in these projects. On the other hand, as far as government officials are concerned, academics are not welcome in the government-sponsored history projects, as they are difficult to discipline and are not particularly obedient in following the government guidelines.