

# “Neutrality is Impossible”: Nationalism, Unequal Treaties and the National Christian Council of China, 1925—1926

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**Abstract:** This article takes the National Christian Council of China (NCC) as a case study. By examining the responses from various stakeholder both mainline Chinese Protestants and western mission within the NCC to the campaigns for the abrogation of the unequal treaties during the period of 1925—1926, it aims to reveal the tension and interaction between Christian missions, Chinese churches and the nationalist discourse. This article argues that although both Protestant missions and Chinese churches were in general the beneficiaries of the “toleration clauses” of the unequal treaties and were aware of the necessity of drawing a clear borderline with the treaties, the two parties viewed the matter from different standpoints. To the majority of the missionary societies associated with the NCC, it was a diplomatic matter to be solved through formal negotiation between the governments. Whereas to most of the mainline Chinese Protestants, it had developed into a fundamental factor causing not only Christianity’s unfavourable position in Chinese society, but also China’s backwardness and “humiliation.” Considerably influenced by the nationalist discourse, they ardently engaged themselves in the campaigns to abrogate the unequal treaties, individually or as a group. Specific Chinese socio-political context and the nationalist discourse contributed significantly to the divergence of views. The NCC, incorporating both sides, was obliged to make a prompt response to the treaty issue and struggled to find common ground among the cooperating bodies.

**Key Words:** Unequal treaties; nationalism; National Christian Council of China; Chinese churches; Christian missions

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Jiang Menglin (Chiang Monlin 蒋梦麟), president of Peking University (1919—1927) and minister of education of the Republic of China (1928—1930), once commented on China’s encounter with Christianity as follows:

During the nineteenth century, Christianity ganged together with the commercial activities that relied on the patronage of military powers. This made Christianity, once a religion advocating to “love your neighbour as yourself,” an agent of western aggression in Chinese people’s mind. The Chinese gradually formed an impression that ... Jesus Christ arrived in China on a cannonball. <sup>[1]</sup>

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[1] Jiang Menglin, *Xi chao* [Tides from the West], (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe [Liaoning Education Press], 1997), 2.

The “patronage of military powers” refers to a series of wars and conflicts between the Qing empire and western powers in modern Chinese history, such as the Opium Wars (1839—1842 and 1856—1860), and the consequent treaties since 1842, for example, the Treaty of Nanking (1842), the Treaty of Wanghia (1844), the Treaty of Tientsin (1858), the Convention of Peking (1860) and the Boxer Protocol (1901), etc. Those treaties guaranteed western powers the fixed tariff rate of five percent *ad valorem* and extraterritoriality, which immunised foreigners from Chinese jurisdiction. With the growth of nationalist sentiments in the early twentieth century, the above treaties were labelled “unequal” by Chinese nationalists, condemning that they were placed against China’s will in a weaker position by western military powers and strengthened the privileges and rights of the nationals of the powers.<sup>[2]</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, the phrase “unequal treaties (*bupingdeng tiaoyue* 不平等条约)” has become one of the most frequently appeared phrases in the discourse of Chinese nationalism and has occupied “a central position in the Chinese collective memory of the nation’s humiliating experience.”<sup>[3]</sup>

As a term closely related to modern Chinese nationalism, the topic of “unequal treaties” has attracted much scholarly attention. For the treaty issue in the Republican era, many studies have been done from the angles of political, legal and diplomatic history, and international relations.<sup>[4]</sup> Nonetheless, few have specifically focused on the perspectives of Christian missions and Chinese churches at that time, who, as one of the actual beneficiaries from the treaties, became the main target of the Anti-Christian Movement and the nationalist campaigns for the termination of the unequal

[2] Edmund S. K. Fung, “The Chinese Nationalists and the Unequal Treaties 1924—1931,” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, (1987), 795-796. For instance, Sun Yat-sen claimed in his article “Zhongguo neiluan zhi yin (The Causes of China’s Civil Strife)” in 1924 that, “What are the unequal treaties? To put it simply, they are our ‘slave contracts.’ ... If we are still reluctant to revitalise our national spirit, to restore concessions, customs and extraterritorial rights and to abolish all the unequal treaties, China would no longer be a nation of the world and we Chinese nationals of the world no more.” See Sun Yat-sen, “Zhongguo neiluan zhi yin [The Causes of China’s Civil Strife],” in Qin Xiaoyi, ed., *Guofu quanji* [Collected Works of Sun Yat-sen], vol. 3, (Taipei: Zhongguo Guomindang wenhua chuanbo weiyuanhui dangshiguan [Kuomintang Archives & History Museum], 1989), 528-534.

[3] Dong Wang, *China’s Unequal Treaties: Narrating National History*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 1.

[4] For example, Thomas David Reins, “China and the International Politics of Opium, 1900—1937: The Impact of Reform, Revenue, and the Unequal Treaties,” PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1981; Dong Wang, “The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in Modern China,” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 3, (2003), 399-425; idem, *China’s Unequal Treaties*; Li Yumin, *Jindai Zhongguo de tiaoyue zhidu* [Treaty System in Modern China], (Changsha: Hunan shifan daxue chubanshe [Hunan Normal University Press], 1995); idem, *Zhongguo feiyue shi* [A History of the Abrogation of the Treaties in China], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company], 2005); idem, *Jindai zhongwai guanxi yu zhengzhi* [Modern Sino-Foreign Relations and Politics], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company], 2006); Tang Qihua, *Bei “feichubupingdeng tiaoyue” zhebi de Beiyang xiuyue shi* [Treaty Revision Campaign of the Beijing Government, 1912—1928: Out of the Shadow of the “Abrogation of Unequal Treaties”], (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe [Social Sciences Academic Press], 2010); Hou Zhongjun, *Jindai Zhongguo de bupingdeng tiaoyue: guanyu pingpan biao zhun de taolun* [Unequal Treaties in Modern China: Discussions on Criteria], (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe [Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House], 2012); Fung, “Chinese Nationalists and Unequal Treaties,” 793-819; J. Y. Wong, “The Limits of Naval Power; British Gunboat Diplomacy in China from the Nemesis to the Amethyst, 1839—1949,” *War & Society*, vol. 18, no. 2, (2000), 93-120; Kevin Herrick, “The Merger of Two System; Chinese Adoption and Western Adaptation in the Formation of Modern International Law,” *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law*, vol. 33, (2005), 685-703; Phoebe Chow, “Parliament and the Problem of China, 1925-7: Priorities, Preoccupations and Stereotypes,” *Parliamentary History*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2010), 358-375; Alison Adcock Kaufman, “In Pursuit of Equality and Respect; China’s Diplomacy and the League of Nations,” *Modern China*, vol. 40, no. 6, (2014), 605-638; and Pasha L. Hsieh, “The Discipline of International Law in Republican China and Contemporary Taiwan,” *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, (2015), 87-129.

treaties in the 1920s.<sup>[5]</sup> As one may have observed in the above quote from Jiang, the role of Christianity played in China's "century of humiliation" had gradually been fixed in the early twentieth-century nationalist discourse with the rhetoric of "unequal treaties" acting as a catalyst. Apart from some of their early attempts before the signing of the American Tientsin Treaty in 1858, in which the "toleration clause" was incorporated, Christian missions, consciously or unconsciously, entered China under treaty protection over missionaries' rights of residence and travelling, land leasing, church building, evangelism, as well as the personal safety of both missionaries and Chinese converts. Christianity thus became intertwined with the treaties and western military powers, at least in the eyes of Chinese nationalists. A study on the involvement of Christian missions and churches in the twentieth-century treaty issue, and particularly their responses to the campaigns for abolishing the unequal treaties, would provide the reader with an integral picture of the socio-political context that Christianity in China faced and the dynamics of Chinese Christians' search for the "selfhood" of the church. It may lead to a broader examination of the complex relationship between Christian missions, native churches and nationalism in modern Chinese history.

This article takes the National Christian Council of China (NCC), a representative and advisory body among most of the mainline Protestant denominations and organisations in China since 1922, as a case study.<sup>[6]</sup> It examines the responses from various stakeholders "both mainline Chinese

[5] Studies on this theme include Paul A. Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats: The American Protestant Missionary Movement in China, 1890—1952*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958); Li Chuanbin, *Jidujiao yu jindai Zhongguo de bupingdeng tiaoyue* [Christianity and the Unequal Treaties in Modern China], (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe [Hunan People's Press], 2011); and Kim Ki-young, "Zhongguo jiaohui feichu bupingdeng tiaoyue de lishi guocheng kaocha [An Investigation on the Unequal Treaty Abrogation Movement of Chinese Christian Church]," *Yichun xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Yichun College], vol. 35, no. 5, (2013), 108-111. Grounded in solid primary sources, Li's book examines the evolution of the relationships between Christianity and the unequal treaties from the Opium Wars in the 1840s to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It exhibits in detail the attitudes of various stakeholders, including missions and Chinese Christians, as well as Chinese nationalists and governments, to the treaty issue through different time periods, and lays the foundation for further research on the subject. Other relevant works scatter in the studies on the Anti-Christian Movement of 1922-7, mission schools, hospitals and other properties in China, and the history of Christianity in twentieth-century China. The majority of the studies on this theme focus on the late Qing period, addressing issues such as missionary cases, missionaries' rights under treaty protection and missionaries' roles in Sino-foreign relations. For instance, George E. Paulsen, "Missionary Criticism of the Toleration Clause in Reed's Treaty of 1858," *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 34, (1979—1980), 65-76; Zhang Li and Liu Jiantang, *Zhongguo jiao'an shi* [A History of Missionary Cases in China], (Chengdu: Sichuansheng shehui kexue yu chubanshe [Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences Press], 1987); Chen Caijun, "Chuanjiaoshi Bi Zhiwen, Bo Jia yu zhongmei 'wangxia tiaoyue' de qianding [Elijah Coleman Bridgman, Peter Parker and the Signing of the Treaty of Wanghia]," *Aomen lishi yanjiu* [Studies in the History of Macao], no. 4, (2005), 111-114; and Wang Zhongmao, "Wanqing tianzhujiaohui zai neidi de zhichanquan shulun [A Study on Catholic Missions' Rights of Property Purchase in the Late Qing Period]," *Qingshi yanjiu* [The Qing History Journal], no. 3, (2007), 87-94. A thorough review of the existing scholarship can be found in Li Yumin, Li Chuanbin and Liu Limin, *Jindai zhongwai tiaoyue yanjiu zongshu* [Literature Review on the Studies of Modern Sino-Foreign Treaties], (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe [Hunan People's Press], 2011).

[6] It should be noted that opinions on the treaty issue varied among different Protestant communities in China. This article focuses on mainline Protestantism. Responses from indigenous Christianity are beyond the scope of this article. Indigenous Protestant communities, such as the True Jesus Church, did manifest a sense of nationalism in their opposition to western Protestant establishment. Nonetheless, as Lian Xi indicates, this nationalistic sentiment, to a large degree, often failed to transcend its "more immediate sectarian interests" and was adopted as a rhetoric to legitimate their separation from western Protestantism, yet it lacked a social dimension to connect itself with the more general anti-imperialist trend in Chinese society. See Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 14. Additionally, even within mainline Protestantism, there was no consensus being reached concerning the treaty issue. Protestant fundamentalists in general considered the engagement of the liberals (in their view, for example, the National Christian Council of China) in social movements and nationalist campaigns as an act of meddling with politics.

Protestants and western missions” within the NCC to the campaigns for the abrogation of the unequal treaties during the period of 1925—1926. Mainline Protestantism was often accused of being the agent of western intrusion in the discourse of “unequal treaties.” In the meantime, a large number of missionaries and mainline Chinese Protestant intellectuals and elites showed a high degree of social engagement throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The NCC, in particular, paid great attention to the search for the relevance of Christian religion to Chinese society. The exploration of its involvement in the treaty issue opens a window showing the tension and interaction between Christianity and Chinese society. This article argues that although both Protestant missions and Chinese churches were in general the beneficiaries of the “toleration clauses” of the unequal treaties and were aware of the necessity of drawing a clear borderline with the treaties, the two parties viewed the matter from different standpoints. To the majority of the missionary societies associated with the NCC, it was a diplomatic matter to be solved through formal negotiation between the governments. Whereas to most of the mainline Chinese Protestants, it had developed into a fundamental factor causing not only Christianity’s unfavourable position in Chinese society, but also China’s backwardness and “humiliation,” against which they were convinced that they, as Chinese citizens, should fight. Specific Chinese socio-political context and the nationalist discourse contributed significantly to the divergence of views. The NCC, incorporating both sides, was obliged to make prompt response to the treaty issue and struggled to find common ground among the cooperating bodies.

## The Rhetoric of “Unequal Treaties” in the Early Twentieth-Century Nationalist Discourse

As mentioned previously, the term “unequal treaties” has played a key role in the state narrative of the so-called “national humiliation,” a perception which was firstly constructed and introduced by the government in response to the Japanese Twenty-one Demands in 1915 and later inherited and reinforced by the ruling authorities throughout the twentieth century. Yet to the majority of the Chinese, as Wang Dong points out, the term “lacks a clear and unambiguous meaning” and there is “no agreement about the actual number of treaties signed between China and foreign countries that should be counted as ‘unequal.’”<sup>[7]</sup> The invention of the term “unequal treaties” was closely related to the socio-political climate in the early Republican era.

According to Wang Dong, the term had not been used during the nineteenth century. To the Qing emperors and officials, criteria for judging what “equal” or “unequal” was may have differed from our present-day standards and understanding based on the development and wide acceptance of international law. Following the introduction of a number of modern concepts into China, such as state sovereignty, autonomy and inequality, sensibility to sovereignty, tariff autonomy and extraterritoriality was gradually manifested among high ranking officials since the late Qing period (the 1870s).<sup>[8]</sup> Zhang Jianhua argues that it was in 1906 that for the first time Sun Yat-sen brought forward the term “unequal treaties (*bupingdeng zhi tiaoyue* 不平等之条约)” in his criticism on the

[7] Wang, *China's Unequal Treaties*, 2.

[8] Wang, “Discourse of Unequal Treaties,” 401-402.

Qing government that, "The Manchu government, with poor diplomacy, signed a series of unequal treaties with foreign countries."<sup>[9]</sup> Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that, instead of opposing western powers, the ultimate target of Sun's adoption and propagation of the concept of "unequal treaties" prior to the 1911 Revolution was to portray the Qing government as a cause of China's backwardness in order to challenge its legitimacy and overthrow its rule.<sup>[10]</sup>

It was not until the mid-1920s that Sun Yat-sen once again started to draw a connection between the nationalist revolution and the term "unequal treaties," with the aim of boosting the collective patriotism of the Chinese and legitimating his revolutionary activities. In January 1924, the phrase "the abrogation of the unequal treaties" appeared in the Manifesto of the First Guomindang (GMD) National Congress.<sup>[11]</sup> Since then, the nationalist revolution and the appeal for the termination of the unequal treaties were officially bound together. It is noteworthy that the term "anti-imperialism" was also incorporated in the party's political agenda at the congress.

Yet a dominant narrative of China's "humiliating" past had not been established in the early twentieth century, or at least had not been generally acknowledged and accepted. Unlike the revolutionaries, the ruling Beiyang government (1912—1928) treated the treaty issue as a diplomatic matter. It tended to seek a solution through formal diplomatic channels for negotiation and treaty revision under the system of international law. Meanwhile, it protected Christian missions and complied with the treaties. In spite of being in a weak position and experiencing failure at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference when western powers denied China's quest for reclaiming the former German treaty territory of Shandong, diplomats, such as Gu Weijun (Wellington Koo 顾维钧), Wang Zhengting (C. T. Wang 王正廷) and Yan Huiqing (W. W. Yen 颜惠庆), were able to negotiate "considerable room" for bargaining with the powers. They become the first to challenge the legality of the treaties and the conventional interpretation of international law.<sup>[12]</sup> Examples can be found in the signing of several equal treaties and agreements between China and western nations, such as the Agreement Regarding the Restoration of the State of Peace between Germany and China (1921), the Sino-Soviet Agreement of 1924 and the Treaty of Commerce between the Republic of China and the Republic of Austria (1925), as well as the cancellation of the Belgian Treaty of 1865 (1926).

Nonetheless, the rise of both the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the first United Front formed between them in 1923 made the Beiyang government the main target of their political struggles and the nationalist revolution. Under the influence of the Soviet Russian Bolshevik theory of world revolution, nationalist movements and party ideology, both the GMD and the CCP based their revolutionary strategies on the discourse of anti-imperialism and anti-warlordism.<sup>[13]</sup> The rhetoric of "unequal treaties" was adopted by both parties to oppose their common enemy the internationally recognised yet essentially powerless Beiyang government. By highlighting the

[9] Zhang Jianhua, "Sun Zhongshan yu bupingdeng tiaoyue gainian [Sun Yat-sen and the Concept of Unequal Treaties]," *Beijing daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)], no. 2, (2002), 119-120.

[10] Hou Zhongjun, "Jindai Zhongguo de minzuzhuyi yu bupingdeng tiaoyue: jiyu Sun Zhongshan geming lilun yu shijian de taolun [Modern Chinese Nationalism and Unequal Treaties: A Case Study of Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Theories and Practice]," *Renwen zazhi* [The Journal of Humanities], no. 3, (2013), 70-71.

[11] Fung, "Chinese Nationalists and Unequal Treaties," 799.

[12] Tang, *Beiyang xiuyue shi*, 49-173; Wang, "Discourse of Unequal Treaties," 404.

[13] Wang, *China's Unequal Treaties*, 72.

“unequal” nature of the treaties and China’s traumatic past of being bullied by western imperialists through the treaties, they successfully stirred up public opinion to portray the Beiyang government, who endeavoured to revise treaty relations with western countries through a peaceful negotiating approach, as the traitor of the nation. In the meantime, by calling for the “unconditional termination” of the unequal treaties, the GMD and the CCP intended to advertise themselves as the nation’s saviours.<sup>[14]</sup> The discourse of “unequal treaties” was utilised to foster a political culture of mass mobilisation for their revolutionary motives and legitimate their political establishments.<sup>[15]</sup>

Nationalist sentiments reached the peak after the May Thirtieth Incident (also known as the Nanking Road Incident) in 1925, when the British Shanghai Municipal Police in the international settlement of Shanghai shot thirteen Chinese students dead during a student protest. The treaty issue was once again caught in the eye of the storm and was brought up by Chinese nationalists in expounding China’s weakness and social illness. The abrogation of the treaties was therefore deemed “the only way to free China from semi-colonialism.”<sup>[16]</sup> This general mindset was demonstrated in the Manifesto of the National Student Union:

Why do we have to be subject to the “law” of the concessions? We all know that this is because of the unequal treaties. Concessions and extraterritoriality are the products of the unequal treaties. Chinese people shall never enjoy freedom if the unequal treaties remain.<sup>[17]</sup>

It should be noted that although the slogan of “the abrogation of the unequal treaties” quickly gained popularity after the May Thirtieth Incident and continued to be an effective means for political propaganda and mass mobilisation, it lacked feasibility in actual application. Just as jurist Zhou Gengsheng (S. R. Chow 周鯁生), one of the key figures in introducing the theory of international law to Republican China, pointed out that,

We [Chinese people] are launching campaigns to call for abolishing of the unequal treaties every day. However, the majority of us may not even know what treaties are unequal and how to abolish them.<sup>[18]</sup>

Besides the nationalists’ advocacy of treaty abolition, a few voices stood by the Beiyang government’s diplomatic approach towards comprehensive treaty revision. For example, journalist Hu Lin 胡霖 once commented from a diplomatic point of view that,

[14] Ibid., 68.

[15] Wang, “Discourse of Unequal Treaties,” 423.

[16] Long Chi, “Feiyue yundong yu jiuqi jinian [The Treaty Cancellation Movement and the National Humiliation Day],” *Xiangdao* [The Guide], no. 170, (1926), 7.

[17] “Xuesheng zonghui dui hu cansha gongxue an xuanyan [Manifesto of the National Student Union on the Nanking Road Incident],” *Minguo ribao* [Republican Daily], 4 June 1925.

[18] Zhou Gengsheng, “Bupingdeng tiaoyue de feichu wenti [The Issue of the Abolition of the Unequal Treaties],” *Chen bao* [Morning Post], 29 September 1925.

There are a good number of fervent patriots who are advocating the abolition of the unequal treaties instead of treaty revision. They have no idea that a treaty cannot be removed unilaterally by one party, unless one has prepared to start a war. On the contrary, both parties need to fulfil their duties as the treaty was signed with a mutual agreement under international law. <sup>[19]</sup>

However, the above voices had been drowned in the vociferous cry for treaty abolition, which had gradually dominated the nationalist discourse owing to both the GMD and the CCP's vehement advocacy. As Wang Dong points out, whether to promote the unconditional termination of the unequal treaties had become "the dividing line between revolution and counter-revolution, and between good and bad." <sup>[20]</sup>

The discourse of "unequal treaties" reflected and further strengthened the nationalists' quest for "national salvation (*jiuguo* 救国)" through restoring China's sovereignty and autonomy from western imperialists internationally and ending warlords' warfare to regain unification internally. This dual claim became vocal at the climax of Chinese nationalism in 1925. The Treaty Cancellation Movement not only flourished nationwide, but also reinforced the ongoing Anti-Christian Movement (1922—1927) with a clearer and intensified revolutionary cause. Christianity, being closely associated with the unequal treaties, was the vanguard of western imperialism and cultural aggression.

The link between Christianity and imperialism served as an indispensable part of the twentieth-century nationalist discourse. It helped Chinese nationalists to visualise the abstract image and imagination of the concept of "imperialism." By singling out the "others," they defined who they were and what they belonged to. As Michael Murdock argues, the GMD found it an effective means of expanding "top-down influence" over other organisations and unifying revolutionary efforts through portraying Christian missions and churches as the "common enemy" of all anti-imperialist groups. <sup>[21]</sup> Additionally, in the eyes of the revolutionaries, Christianity was a "relatively safe target" for their anti-imperialist campaigns. Trying to avoid violent confrontations with the more formidable foreign political, military and economic components in China, the GMD chose the Christian enterprise as an alternative to maintaining its anti-imperialist platform. The Anti-Christian Movement was thus incorporated into the party's larger anti-imperialist agenda and gradually dominated revolutionary anti-imperialist activities. <sup>[22]</sup>

## Responses from Mainline Protestantism the Case of the NCC

### "There is no need of this further protection"

The day after the May Thirtieth Incident, the Chinese members of the NCC executive committee

[19] Zheng Zhi, "Hu'an jiaoshe yu zhongwai guanxi zhi genben de gaishan [Negotiation on the Nanking Road Incident and the Fundamental Improvement of the Sino-Foreign Relations]," *Guowen zhoubao* [China News Weekly], vol. 2, no. 27, (1925), 1-2.

[20] Wang, "Discourse of Unequal Treaties," 412.

[21] Michael Murdock, "Poor-man's Anti-imperialism? The Anti-Christian Movement and the Political Value of Cultural Target for Revolutionary Activity, August 1924-June 1925," *Jindai Zhongguo Jidujiao shi yanjiu jikan* [Journal of the History of Christianity in Modern China], no. 3, (2000), 70-76.

[22] *Ibid.*, 62-77.

based in Shanghai held a special meeting to discuss the appropriate reaction to the incident. Several actions were taken afterwards, including urging editors of foreign and Chinese newspapers “to be careful in presenting facts of the incident” and addressing an official letter to the Shanghai Municipal Council on 8 June 1925 to appeal for the appointment of a special commission of enquiry on the incident, in which Chinese members should be included. In the meantime, the executive committee began to draft the “Message of the National Christian Council to the Christians in China,” which was later published in *the Bulletin of the National Christian Council*. The “Message” regarded the unequal treaties as one of the “external causes” resulting in the current situation and called for removing those causes. Overall, the “Message” was composed in a rather strong political vein, bringing together the two identities, Chinese and Christian, by claiming that,

Christianity, patriotism, and good citizenship are not necessarily opposed to each other. ... We are not dealing with that kind of narrow and selfish patriotism and citizenship which is really un-Christian and of which we see so much around us. To us, a Christian should be the highest type of patriot and the noblest example of citizen. ...

What about the long accepted principle that the Church should not meddle with politics? We must agree that the Church should not meddle, if by that we mean for the Church to seek to control the government or actually to interfere with its function. ... On the other hand, if political powers violate any or all of the Christian principles of life, should the Church remain silent and passive? ...<sup>[23]</sup>

Behind the “Message” lay the eagerness of the leading Chinese Protestants to clarify the church’s standpoint and deliver a Christian response to a national crisis. The “Message” perfectly reflected Chinese Christians’ struggle in the face of the tension between Christian religion and Chinese nationalism at that time.

Prior to the May Thirtieth Incident, a few NCC Chinese members had started to pay attention to the treaty issue and the dilemma of Christianity in the nationalist discourse, such as Luo Yunyan (R. Y. Lo 罗运炎), Liu Tingfang (Timothy Tingfang Lew 刘廷芳) and Wu Leichuan (Woo Lei-chuan 吴雷川).<sup>[24]</sup> Luo Yunyan, in particular, conducted a comprehensive study on the extraterritoriality and pointed out that the extraterritoriality “found no basis in international law but was made between the more powerful nations and the weaker one.” Based on the legal concept of “*rebus sic stantibus*” (Latin: things standing thus), which stipulates that a treaty may be withdrawn where there has been a fundamental change of circumstances, he deemed that the extraterritoriality should be “revised or abolished.”<sup>[25]</sup>

[23] School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library, Special Collections, CBMS 350, “Message of the National Christian Council to the Christians in China,” *The Bulletin of the National Christian Council*, no. 15, (1925), 1-3.

[24] They delivered speeches or published articles on the treaty issue on many occasions. See Luo Yunyan, “Lieqiang zai Zhongguo de zhiwaifaquan wenti [The Extraterritoriality of Western Powers in China],” *Xinghua* [Chinese Christian Advocate], vol. 22, no. 1, (1924), 4-9; Liu Tingfang, “Zhongguo jidutu aiguo wenti de pingyi [Patriotism of Chinese Christians],” *Shengming* [Life Monthly], vol. 4, no. 8, (1924), 1-5; Wu Leichuan, “Duiyu zai zhishijie xuanchuan Jidujiao de wojian [Some Thoughts on Advocating Christianity among Chinese Intelligentsia],” *Shengming*, vol. 5, no. 1, (1924), 2-7.

[25] Luo, “Lieqiang,” 4, 7-8.



Although studies and discussions on the treaty issue in Christian circles had been made (mainly by Christian individuals) as early as in the 1910s, stimulated by the foundation of the Republic of China, it was not until 1925, when nationalism gradually reached its peak, that heated debates on and campaigns for the abrogation of the unequal treaties occupied the mainline Chinese Protestants' minds. Wang Zhixin 王治心, church historian associated with the Methodist Episcopal Church South and professor of philosophy at Nanking Theological Seminary, took the initiative to call for the launch of the campaigns for abrogating the unequal treaties among Chinese Christians in early 1925, suggesting that:

1. The NCC call a conference of delegates of Protestant churches in China to organise an association for abolishing the unequal treaties and extraterritoriality.
2. Christians in China take united action to issue a joint declaration to the world.
3. Chinese Christians make a plea to western churches for support. <sup>[26]</sup>

On the same day of the incident, Wang, together with other eighty-six Chinese Protestants in Nanjing, initiated an association for advocating the termination of the unequal treaties to make known to the public the attitudes of "real Christians" and the "spirits of pacifism and egalitarianism" based on Christian doctrines. The association aimed at 1) "promoting the abolition of the unequal treaties through verbal and literary propaganda;" 2) "calling for support and assistance from western Christian organisations;" and 3) "conducting comprehensive study on the unequal treaties and the cases of treaty cancellation in other nations." <sup>[27]</sup> Following their action, large numbers of Chinese Protestants in Nanjing, Nanchang, Guangzhou, Wuxing, Hengshan and Danyang issued manifestos to advocate treaty abolition. Their sympathies to the victims of the May Thirtieth Incident directly gave rise to their determination to terminate the unequal treaties. <sup>[28]</sup>

By that time, the executive committee of the NCC had come to realise the urgency and necessity of responding to the nationalist cry for solving the treaty issue and thus, taking advantage of being a national Protestant organisation, actively engaged in studying and discussing the treaty issue. Its standing committee on international relations, with Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao 赵紫宸), renowned theologian, Christian writer and educator, serving as its chairman in 1925—1926, allocated its work into two sections: a Shanghai section to carry on the existing work of promoting the study of international affairs and a Beijing section to investigate the way how to gain better international understanding. The Shanghai committee, whose members included Gu Ziren (T. Z. Koo 顾子仁), associate general secretary and student executive secretary of the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) National Committee, conducted research and published books and pamphlets on the subjects of tariff autonomy and extraterritoriality, etc. Meanwhile, the Beijing committee,

[26] Wang Zhixin, "Jidutu ying shouxian faqi feichu guoji bupingdeng tiaoyue de yundong [Christians Should Initiate the Treaty Cancellation Movement]," *Xinghua*, vol. 22, no. 12, (1925), 20.

[27] "Zhonghua jidutu feichu bupingdeng tiaoyue cuchenghui yuanqi [The Origin of the Chinese Christian Association for Abrogating the Unequal Treaties]," *Xinghua*, vol. 22, no. 21, (1925), 16-18.

[28] "Hengshan Zhonghua Jidujiao hu'an houyuanhui chengli [The Formation of the Chinese Christian Association of Reinforcement to the Nanking Road Incident in Hengshan]," *Tongwen bao* [Chinese Intelligence], no. 1163, (1925), 4.

whose members included John Leighton Stuart, president of Yenching University, drafted resolutions with regard to the “toleration clauses” and extraterritoriality in November 1925 and urged the NCC executive committee to adopt “as its action and publish over its own name.”<sup>[29]</sup> Although the executive committee declined such a proposal, for it was not supposed to make any official statements without consulting the desires of its constituency, some Chinese leaders of the NCC voiced their opinions on the subject on many occasions publicly.

In June 1925, Cheng Jingyi (C. Y. Cheng 诚静怡), secretary of the NCC (honorary secretary, 1922—1924; full-time secretary, 1924—1926; general secretary, 1926—1933), responded to the May Thirtieth Incident in his article “The Tragedy of May 30th.” The article is collected in the archives of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland, which may imply its wide circulation in missionary circles at the time when it was drafted. Speaking of the question of how to maintain an international friendship, Cheng pointed out that a key factor was to “remove international barriers,” that is, foreigners’ special privileges granted by the unequal treaties:

The unequal treaties that hinder international friendship are strong, they are deeply rooted. If they are removed it will not only affect the sovereignty of China but will benefit the whole world. Since the church takes the attitude of not interfering with government or politics, naturally it is not in a position to take part in a discussion as to how the treaties should be amended or what the procedure should be. The point at which the church is directly concerned in the unequal treaties is the protection of preaching and believing the doctrine. Is not the principle of “freedom of faith” plainly stated in the constitution of the Republic of China? ... Since the rise of the anti-Christian movement all the young people of this country aim at this target, the duplicate protection given to Christianity by the unequal treaties. They call Christianity a foreign doctrine, and Christians, foreign followers. They even consider them to be slaves of imperialism and capitalism. ... Moreover, to whatever country Christianity goes, it has its own unimpeachable principles, which touch people’s hearts with power, and give them boundless blessing; naturally there is no need of this further protection.<sup>[30]</sup>

Cheng’s above words indicated that the protection under the unequal treaties was a fundamental factor causing the unfavourable position of Christianity in China. Speaking with a determined tone on the issue of the unequal treaties, Cheng made his position clear to both western missions and Chinese Christians.

Not only Cheng Jingyi, Yu Rizhang (David Yui 余日章), chairman of the NCC and one of the two Chinese citizen representatives to the Washington Naval Conference of 1921—1922, also made an official statement on the subject in his chairman’s address at the fourth annual meeting of the NCC on 13-20 October 1926:

[29] SOAS, CBMS 348, The National Christian Council of China, Annual Report 1925-6, 121-123.

[30] SOAS, CBMS 396, C. Y. Cheng, “The Tragedy of May 30th,” 4.

The second question is: "Should we uphold the Toleration Clauses of the unequal treaties or be in favour of giving them up?" It is difficult for us to understand why this can ever become a serious question. In the face of the national movement to abrogate the unequal treaties, why are we perplexed, disturbed, and worried? Does Christianity have to depend upon such extraordinary and extraneous protection for its propagation and power? Even if we were to grant that such protection was necessary when Christianity was introduced into China over one hundred years ago, does Christianity need it now? Religious liberty was enjoyed by our people before and is now written into the Constitution of our Republic. ...

The Chinese people are divided by many things, but they are absolutely united in the national movement to abrogate the unequal treaties, including the Toleration Clauses. These treaties are doomed to go at an early hour, never to re-appear. Instead of giving way to doubt, worry and fear, the Christian Movement in China should in its own way support and hasten the fulfilment of the aspirations of the Chinese people in this regard. The Movement should rejoice over the fact that Christianity shall soon shake off the shackles which have heretofore been looked upon as special protection, and make its appeal freely on its own merit. Such an appeal will be irresistible. <sup>[31]</sup>

Considering the positions of the above two figures in the NCC and their fame in Christian circles, both nationwide and internationally, their attitudes, to a large extent, may have reflected a general stand of the NCC Chinese members and further guided the opinion of the church.

Besides the work of the committee on international relations, a number of the NCC Chinese members, such as Cheng Jingyi, Zhong Ketuo (K. T. Chung 鍾可托), secretary of the NCC, Luo Yunyan and Zhu Jingnong (King Chu 朱经农), Christian educator, etc., held two meetings in Shanghai on 3 and 10 December 1925 to discuss the issue of the "toleration clauses," with the purpose of forming some concrete views on the subject to be presented by Cheng and Zhong at the Conference on Extraterritoriality, which was scheduled to be held in Beijing on 18 December. <sup>[32]</sup> Discussions mainly focused on the following questions: 1) "Are the toleration clauses compatible with Christian doctrines?" 2) "What would happen if churches continue to enjoy the protection under the toleration clauses?" 3) "Is the existence of the toleration clauses necessary, since religious freedom has been guaranteed in the Constitution of the Republic of China?" 4) "If the existence of the toleration clauses is unnecessary, how to abolish them?" 5) "Are the special privileges granted by the treaties beneficial or harmful to Christian missions?" 6) "Should Christian missions in China rely on the treaties or the friendship with the Chinese?" 7) "Shall the toleration clauses be incorporated

[31] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925-6, 7-8.

[32] "Jidujiao jiaoyujie xin yundong: quxiao tiaoyue zhi yundong [New Movement in Christian Educational Circles: The Treaty Cancellation Movement]," *Zhonghua jidujiao jiaoyu jikan* [Chinese Christian Education Quarterly], vol. 1, no. 4, (1925), 92-93; "Jiao xun; qiyi, Zhongguo zhibu; chuanjiao tiaoyue taolunhui jilu [Church News; 1. China; Minutes of the Meeting for Discussing the Toleration Clauses]," *Xinghua*, vol. 22, no. 49, (1925), 29-31; "Jiao xun; qiyi, Zhongguo zhibu; chuanjiao tiaoyue taolunhui di'erci huiyi jilu [Church News; 1. China; Minutes of the Second Meeting for Discussing the Toleration Clauses]," *Xinghua*, vol. 22, no. 50, (1925), 31-33.

again in the new treaties?” and 8) “What would happen to Christianity in China if the toleration clauses are to be incorporated again?”<sup>[33]</sup>

Based on the above discussions, the NCC sent out a questionnaire of fourteen questions regarding the “toleration clauses” to Chinese Christian leaders in each province in February and March 1926.<sup>[34]</sup> By October 1926, 275 replies to the questionnaire were received. Based on the replies, the NCC summed up that oppositions to the cancellation of the “toleration clauses” were chiefly on the ground of two aspects; firstly, churches should not interfere with politics; and secondly, churches were still in need of the protection under the “toleration clauses,” especially during a time when the socio-political situation in China was unstable.<sup>[35]</sup> Nonetheless, the above oppositions weighted a minority of mainline Chinese Protestants. According to the 275 replies, 60%—75% of Chinese Protestants’ attitudes towards the abrogation of the “toleration clauses” were determined:

That the “toleration clauses” are incompatible with the teachings of Christianity, and further that even if they were not, they are no longer needed and by implication, not desirable; and that in order to do away with them a formal declaration, voluntarily made, by missionaries and (or) Chinese Christians, signifying their willingness to see them abolished, would be of value.<sup>[36]</sup>

Additionally, according to the report of the standing committee on international relations (1925—1926), a number of Chinese churches, for example, the North China Congregational Union and the Guangdong Divisional Council of the Church of Christ in China, even went further and stated their positions that: “All Christians should stand for the abolition of unequal treaties.”<sup>[37]</sup>

It is important to note that many articles and manifestos published in the Chinese language did not generally distinguish between “toleration clauses” and that of “unequal treaties,” and often used the latter to refer to both. Opinions among mainline Chinese Protestants concentrated, to a large extent, on the abrogation of the unequal treaties. This may have been largely owing to the awkward

[33] “Jidujiao jiaoyujie xin yundong,” 92-93.

[34] The fourteen questions included: 1) “Shall the Church express its opinion in regard to politics”? 2) “Are the Toleration Clauses compatible with the teachings of Christianity”? 3) “Is there any necessity for the existence of the Toleration Clauses, since religious freedom has been provided in the Constitution of the Republic of China”? 4) “How to help abolish the Toleration Clauses”? 5) “Shall the Toleration Clauses be incorporated again in the new treaties between China and the foreign nations”? 6) “If re-incorporated, shall it be done on a reciprocal basis”? 7) “After the Toleration Clauses have been cancelled, how are we to meet the difficulties”? 8) “Shall Church properly be exempted taxation”? 9) “Regarding the custodianship of Church properties”? 10) “Shall the Christian bodies be registered by the Chinese government”? 11) “Are the six articles of the regulations (promulgated by the Ministry of Education, Peking) regarding the registration of foreign-financed schools objectionable”? 12) “Do the private schools have freedom of teaching religion”? 13) “Shall non-Christians serve on the directing boards of various Christian bodies”? and 14) “Shall the Church cooperate with bodies of other religions with a view to asking the Chinese government to provide for just and equal treatment toward all religions”? See SOAS, CBMS 350, “Christianity and the Treaties: Summary of the Chinese Replies to a Questionnaire Regarding Toleration Clauses, etc.,” *The Bulletin of the National Christian Council*, no. 20, (1926), 11-14.

[35] “Zhongguo jiaohui duiyu chuanjiao tiaoyue wenti zhi yijian [Opinions of the Chinese Church on Toleration Clauses],” *Zhonghua gui zhu* [China for Christ], vol. 63, no. 4, (1926), 2.

[36] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925—1926, 124-5; “Jidujiao jiaoyujie xin yundong,” 90-94.

[37] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925—1926, 124.

situation in the nationalist discourse brought to the church by the equal treaties.

Notably, some Chinese Protestants' appeal for abolishing the equal treaties reflected how widely and deeply the discourse of "unequal treaties" and the socio-political atmosphere penetrated and affected all corners of society. One prominent example can be found in the Manifesto of the Baptist Convention in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. The Manifesto adopted Sun Yat-sen's anti-imperialist claims and nationalist revolutionary theories. It condemned the unequal treaties to be a violation of both humanism and the "Christian spirit of equality, liberty and fraternity (*pingdeng* 平等, *ziyou* 自由, *bo'ai* 博爱)." [38] It is worth noting that Guangdong province and its capital city Guangzhou (Canton) had served as a base for both Sun's revolutionary campaigns since 1895 and the newly launched nationalist revolution (1924—1928). In addition, the Republic of China Military Academy (Whampoa, 1924) and the national government of the Republic of China (Sun's rival government, which was founded in 1925) originated in Guangzhou. Moreover, even the "Christian spirit of equality, liberty and fraternity," which the Manifesto claimed, resembled Sun Yat-sen's interpretation of the idea of "nationalist revolution (*guomin geming* 国民革命)" and his political doctrine of the "Three Principles of the People (*sanmin zhuyi* 三民主义)." Sun referred to one of the slogans—*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*—of the French Revolution of 1789—1799 in his writings and brought forward the vocabularies of "*ziyou, pingdeng, bo'ai*" correspondingly. [39] Though attempted to condemn the unequal treaties from Christian perspectives, the Manifesto of the Baptist Convention demonstrated a strong influence of Sun's nationalist revolutionary propaganda in the Guangdong region.

In the face of a series of national crises and attacks against Christian churches in China, it was almost impossible for the Chinese members of the NCC not to be affected by the political atmosphere. As a national Protestant institution, the NCC and its member churches and societies maintained the link with the West. This led to severe criticism from Chinese nationalists. Mainline Chinese Protestants thus endeavoured to demonstrate their Chinese identity by taking a stand on social and political events.

**"It was fatal not to act."**

Meanwhile, missionary societies, including those associated with the NCC, were obliged to take action to state clearly their positions. By late 1925, all the mainline Protestant mission boards in Great Britain and North America had adopted resolutions individually and through the Missionary Conference of North America and the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland in October and December 1925 respectively. Take the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great

[38] "Jidujiao liang guang Jinxinhui daibiao dahui dui bupingdeng tiaoyue xuanyan [Manifesto of the Baptist Convention in Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces on Unequal Treaties]," *Zhen guang* [True Light], vol. 25, no. 12, (1926), 73.

[39] Qin Xiaoyi, *Guofu quanji*, vol. 1, 67, 223.

Britain and Ireland, which represented twenty-two British Protestant missions in China,<sup>[40]</sup> as an example, its standing committee urged all its members to take “common action” to evince their standpoints concerning the treaty issue. The memorial of the standing committee to the British government dated 7 December 1925 showed that all the twenty-two missions were in general agreement in “welcoming the action taken by the [British] Government in carrying out the Washington [Naval Conference of 1921—1922] engagements, and entering upon a comprehensive revision of the Treaties which at present regulate the position of foreigners in China.” In addition, they bespoke their readiness in accepting the “modification of extra-territorial rights as shall open the way to their eventual abolition.” This was along the same line with the view of the majority of Chinese Protestants of the NCC. Having said that, the missions also expressed their hope that the Chinese government would not “curtail those rights now enjoyed by missions and missionaries.”<sup>[41]</sup>

In order to reach a “general agreement” and to pass the above resolutions as their “common action,” missionary societies had to take into account a number of factors. As revealed in the correspondence, the British missions faced a series of pressure and challenges, not only from Chinese society and Chinese Christians, but also from their American fellow workers and their own compatriots. For instance, after the Missionary Conference of North America made public their stand on the treaty issue on 2-3 October 1925, Kenneth Macleannan, secretary of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland, wrote to Harold B. Rattenbury of Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, member of the NCC business committee of 1925—1926, indicating the urgency of making know the British missions’ position.

I have been struck with the unanimous mind that it is not right to throw the responsibility for a decision of this kind on the missionaries in the field, as any division of opinion on the matter there would be immediately known to the Chinese and would react unfavourably on the missions. ...

The difficulty is that unless societies give expression to their views before the Conference [Conference on Extraterritoriality on 18 December 1925] meets, they will be misunderstood and misrepresented in China. As you know the American societies have passed very explicit resolutions on the subject and it will be represented in China that the British societies are not in sympathy with the American view and accordingly are opposed to any revision of the treaties. The situation is full of difficulty.<sup>[42]</sup>

[40] The twenty-two British Protestant missions included: Baptist Missionary Society, British and Foreign Bible Society, China Inland Mission, Church Missionary Society, Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee, Church of Scotland Women’s Association for Foreign Missions, Friends’ Foreign Mission Association, London Missionary Society, Mission to Lepers, National Bible Society of Scotland, Presbyterian Church of England Foreign Mission Committee, Presbyterian Church of England Women’s Missionary Association, Presbyterian Church in Ireland Foreign Missions, Religious Tract Society, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, United Free Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee, United Methodist Church Missionary Society, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Women’s Auxiliary, YMCA and YWCA.

[41] SOAS, CBMS 396, Memorial by the Standing Committee of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland on the Proposed Revision of the Existing Treaties between Great Britain and China, 5-6; Qing Feng, “Guanyu chuanjiao tiaoyue wenti zhi zhongxi yijian [Opinions of Chinese Churches and Western Missions on Toleration Clauses],” *Zhen guang*, vol. 25, no. 9-10, (1926), 19-25.

[42] SOAS, CBMS 396, K. Macleannan to H. B. Rattenbury, 22 October 1925.

The British missions took cautious steps on the treaty issue as if treading on thin ice. They felt the pressure and necessity of taking the “right” side in the heat of the nationalist campaigns. Moreover, the American missions’ prompt and definite response in urging “the early revision of the treaties with China” and “the abolition of extraterritoriality in China at an early date,” as well as their claim for no more “distinctive privileges for missions and missionaries” granted by the “toleration clauses,” had put British missions in an unfavourable position.<sup>[43]</sup> Rattenbury’s reply also expressed the discontent with their American fellow workers:

Apparently America has as usual acted on her own and that puts us in an awkward predicament. Well; she is always doing that and we probably shall be reduced ultimately to acting on our own or we shall suffer for it. American psychology and British differ in a good many ways. Personally I believe that China is suffering now a good deal for her Americanisation.<sup>[44]</sup>

Based on his experience and observation in the actual mission field in China, Rattenbury then expressed his perception of the circumstances that missions and churches faced in his letter that,

No one of us living out there was unaware that ... the real thing wasn’t anti-foreignism at all but a political re-shuffle. ... I personally am much more concerned that what action is taken should be right than that we should be rushed into action at the tail of America just because it was fatal not to act.<sup>[45]</sup>

The concern of “what action is taken should be right” may have implied the British missions’ consideration of the interests of their government and other stakeholders while declaring their own views. As indicated in Maclennan’s memorandum, the British missions got “considerable misunderstanding and mis-conception” from their own compatriots with regard to their resolutions concerning extraterritoriality and missionary privileges under the treaties:

There has been an assumption amongst some missionaries in China, and almost entirely on the part of the foreign community, that the Missionary Societies have urged the simpliciter abolition of extra-territoriality.<sup>[46]</sup>

Maclennan tried to clarify the resolutions by stressing that missionary societies “would welcome the abolition of the present articles relating to extra-territoriality and the substitution for them of

[43] SOAS, CBMS 350, “Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Discussed by Representatives of Mission Boards in America,” *The Bulletin of the National Christian Council*, no. 16, (1925), 15; Qing Feng, “Guanyu chuanjiao tiaoyue wenti,” 13-19.

[44] SOAS, CBMS 396, H. B. Rattenbury to K. Maclennan, 23 October 1925.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] SOAS, CBMS 396, Memorandum by Mr. Maclennan with reference to the Resolutions passed by various British Missionary Societies on the present situation in China, March 1926.

such provisions for the administration of justice and the protection of life and property of British nationals as may be similarly mutually agreed upon in equal conference between China and Great Britain” on condition that “the interests of missions and missionaries are concerned.” He affirmed that the mission boards only expressed their views on their behalf, and nothing in the resolutions went beyond the British government’s stance:

I have pointed out how careful the Societies have been to make explicit that they are acting on behalf of the Missions only. They are quite aware of other interests involved, but they have not presumed to offer any suggestion with regard to extra-territoriality as it may affect others than missionaries. That is entirely a matter for the British Government and those concerned.

I have further pointed out that the resentment among our own compatriots in China with reference to the action taken by the British Missionary Societies appears to be based partly on the ground that the Missions may embarrass our Government by venturing to express opinions concerning matters that have already been entrusted to accredited representatives of the Government for discussion with the Chinese Government. We are able, however, to say that the British Government have cordially welcomed the expression of opinion given by the Missionary bodies.<sup>[47]</sup>

Overall, the respective resolutions of the twenty-two British missions showed that, although they were willing to give up the legal rights which rested upon “existing treaties, and in particular upon the so-called toleration clauses,” and welcomed “the abolition of the present articles relating to extra-territoriality” so far as the missions’ interests would be taken into account, considering the unequal treaties as a whole, they tended to favour “a comprehensive revision of existing treaties.”<sup>[48]</sup> This reveals a divergence in attitudes between missions and Chinese Protestants. Even though missionary individuals may have had different opinions, the British missions as a whole acted publicly in accordance with their government’s position.<sup>[49]</sup>

Moreover, in respect of the attitudes of missionary agencies (societies) in China, the NCC standing committee on international relations reported that there were “some few” regarding the

[47] Ibid.

[48] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925—1926, 126-7; CBMS 396, Memorial by the Standing Committee of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland on the Proposed Revision of the Existing Treaties between Great Britain and China, 5-6, 11-16.

[49] For example, Newton W. Rowell, Canadian politician, Methodist missionary leader and a member of the Versailles Treaty Conference of 1919, expressed his personal view to Maclennan that, “Foreign Traders may justify their position in reference to the Treaties on grounds of national or commercial expediency, and may ask the protection of the powers in carrying on their trade. We may not sympathize with them in their attitude. It appears to me that the Missionary Societies stand on an entirely different basis and if they cannot carry on the work without the protection of the foreign powers, one must question then whether the work should be carried on.” See SOAS, CBMS 396, Memorandum by Mr. Maclennan with reference to the Resolutions passed by various British Missionary Societies on the present situation in China, March 1926. It should be pointed out that, as revealed in missionary correspondence and reports, attitudes of individual missionary societies and the general positions of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland and the Missionary Conference of North America varied, not to mention those of missionary individuals. This requires further detailed and nuanced study.



issue of the unequal treaties not to be “the concern of the church or missions and can be safely left in the hands” of their governments.<sup>[50]</sup> Though the committee claimed that the number of the missionary agencies who were in full sympathy with the action of their mission boards was “greater” than that of those who adopted a different position, this implied the fact that not all the missionary agencies were on the same page with their home boards.<sup>[51]</sup>

Given the various opinions between mission boards, missionary agencies in China and native Christians, the NCC needed to balance the diverse views and find common ground among its cooperating members. During the year 1925—1926, it was reported that the NCC office was “flooded” with “letters reporting meetings held and actions taken by missionary organizations in Great Britain, America and China” and statements from various Protestant communities all over China. A good number of missions and Chinese Christian groups “repeatedly urged” the NCC itself to take a “definite” stand on the subject and to issue a statement on behalf of its constituency. Meanwhile there were those who were against the idea of making an official pronouncement and those who disapproved of abandoning the special privileges.<sup>[52]</sup> At first, the council was hesitant to issue a statement given the lack of adequate information about the general opinion of Chinese Protestants and a consensus among missionary societies. Nonetheless, as Gu Ziren and the committee of international relations pointed out at the annual conference of 1925—1926,

People all over the world were waiting to know what the NCC would say. Christians ought to express themselves on such a question of right or wrong. Neutrality is impossible.<sup>[53]</sup>

The NCC eventually adopted the resolutions proposed by the business committee as its formal statement:

1. That the Christian Church and Christian Missions should preach the Gospel and perform Christian service in China upon the basis of religious liberty freely accorded by the Republic of China, and that all provisions in the treaties with foreign countries for special privileges for the churches or missions should be removed.
2. That the present treaties between China and foreign Powers should be revised on a basis of freedom and equality.
3. That we are glad of the steps already taken towards this end by the Governments concerned and trust that they may persist in their efforts till satisfactory results have been achieved.
4. That whatever were the historical circumstances which led to the present state of

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[50] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925—1926, 128.

[51] *Ibid.*, 128.

[52] *Ibid.*, 68-70, 123; CBMS 350, “Christianity and the Treaties,” *The Bulletin of the National Christian Council*, no. 17, (1925), 4.

[53] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925—1926, 70.

affairs, its speedy remedy is now the joint responsibility of Chinese and foreigners and that in this task we need the spirit of persistent forbearance, understanding, and love on both sides. <sup>[54]</sup>

The statement indicated that certain progress had been made concerning the issue of the unequal treaties since May 1925; both the Chinese and foreign members of the NCC had reached an agreement on the removal of the special privileges for Christianity in China. Nevertheless, it was rather a compromise between Chinese Christians and western missions, for the desire of large numbers of mainline Chinese Protestants for treaty abolition had not yet been achieved.

Even so, the active engagement of the NCC Chinese members in the campaigns for abrogating the unequal treaties evoked criticisms from some missions, one of which was the Lutheran Church of China (Chung Hua Hsin I Hui):

It is rather to our regret to point out that plans and activities of the Council for the service of the Church herself have been far too scanty in comparison with the vigorous push of such movements, as the Anti-Narcotic, the Betterment of Labor, and the Crusade against Gambling, Prostitution, and Polygamy. Furthermore, the Council is now planning to engage itself in the campaign of the abolition of Toleration Clauses and the “Unequal” Treaties. This is to expose itself to the suspicion that it is meddling in political matters, and consequently it would seem that the Council has already gone beyond its limit. <sup>[55]</sup>

Moreover, on 7 April 1927, a critical letter from thirty-two missionaries accused the NCC of causing division by its political actions:

It [the NCC] has endeavoured to determine the policy of the Missions and Churches in China; and has repeatedly put forth pronouncements in regard to political matters on its own authority without ascertaining the wishes of the co-operating bodies. ... For these reasons it has lost the confidence of a large part of the Missionary Body and we are making this protest against its being considered as representing our views and opinions. We regard its recent policy and methods as dangerous to and subversive of the best interests of the Churches in China. <sup>[56]</sup>

This further indicates the divergent standpoints and perspectives between some missions and Chinese Protestants.

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[54] Ibid, 40-41 (my emphasis); “Jidujiao xiejinhui dui bupingdeng tiaoyue zhi xuanyan [Manifesto of the National Christian Council of China on Unequal Treaties],” *Qingxin zhong* [Pure Heart Bell], no. 2, (1926), 85-86. The business committee of the NCC in 1925—1926 consisted of Zhao Zichen (chairman), Liu Tingfang, H. B. Rattenbury, John Leighton Stuart, Jia Yuming (Chia Yu-ming 贾玉铭) of Presbyterian church, Logan H. Roots (Protestant Episcopal Church Mission) and C. G. Sparham (London Missionary Society), etc.

[55] SOAS, CBMS 348, NCC Annual Report 1925—1926, 53.

[56] SOAS, CBMS 348, The National Christian Council, A Five Years' Review 1922—1927, 31-32.

## Conclusion

By reviewing the forge of the discourse of "unequal treaties" in early twentieth-century Chinese society and examining the diverse responses to treaty cancellation from mainline Protestantism, this article demonstrates that abolishing the unequal treaties had never been simply a legal matter in modern Chinese history. It served as an effective means for various parties to oppose their political rivals, legitimate their authority and government over the nation, unify national identity and foster patriotic loyalty. It helped the nationalists gain victory in China's political landscape and became a dividing line between patriots and traitors and between the nation's saviour and imperialist invader. This discourse had also considerably influenced Christian communities in China. As revealed by the case of the NCC, both western missions and Chinese churches, in a way, were obliged to take action under political and nationalist pressure. Although no consensus had ever been reached either among mainline Chinese Protestant communities or in missionary circles, on the whole, missions' sympathies were with their governments, and their actions could hardly go beyond their governments' positions, which inclined to solve the problem through diplomatic negotiation on comprehensive treaty revision. Whereas mainline Chinese Protestants, in general, ardently engaged themselves in the campaigns for the abrogation of the unequal treaties, individually or as a group. The rising tide of Chinese nationalism and the intensified socio-political circumstances compelled them to take sides and attest their support for their compatriots. Though being hastened to make an official declaration. The NCC attempted to find balance among various interests and desires of its constituency. Yet it neither met the expectation of a good number of Chinese Christians for manifesting their determination to abolish the unequal treaties, nor did it please certain missions given the high degree of its social (or even political) involvement.

In addition, this article exhibits that although Christians' interests in the subject had emerged at the beginning of the Republic, they concentrated during the period of 1925—1926. Prior to the Anti-Christian Movement, much attention was paid to church growth and evangelism. It was not until the mid-1920s, particularly after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925, when the nationalist cry for treaty abrogation was made vociferous, that mainline Protestants found themselves at the centre of the storm and began to respond to the treaty issue on a large scale. Discussions then gradually lost steam in 1927—1928, when the national government of the Republic of China made Nanjing the capital and reunified China. Once it became the ruling party, the GMD's attitude to the treaty issue and international relations began to thaw.<sup>[57]</sup> Meanwhile, the Northern Expedition of 1926—1928 and the resultant damages it brought to the missions and churches along the routes made both missionaries and Chinese Christians once again concern about their safety without treaty protection. The dynamic shift in focuses revealed a close interaction between mainline Protestantism and the changing Chinese political climate.

On the other hand, this article attempts to point out that mainline Chinese Protestants were not entirely passive in the face of socio-political pressure. There were those who took the initiative in

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[57] Wang Zhenfu, "Neiwei maodun: Wusa hou Guomindang de feiyue yandong yu celüe [The Guomindang's Public Speeches and Strategy on the Abrogation of the Unequal Treaties]," *Shehui kexuejia* [Social Scientist], no. 12, (2010), 149.

responding to and participating in the Treaty Cancellation Movement. Others, from the NCC Chinese leadership to its member churches, openly expressed their determination to reject any further protection under the “toleration clauses.” Instead, they endeavoured to gain legal status under the Constitution of the Republic of China. Those mainline Chinese Protestants earnestly expressed their “Christian patriotism” and demonstrated the Chinese identity of the church. It is interesting to note that some of them tended to adopt a nationalist narrative, consciously or unconsciously. Further, discussions from the perspectives of Christian doctrines and ethics added a new dimension and volume to public discussion and engagement in resolving the treaty issue in terms of the understanding of the concept of religious freedom and the principles on international relations.<sup>[58]</sup> The mainline Chinese Protestants’ concerns on the subject were not solely political, just as Christian social activist Zhang Xueyan 张雪岩 stated in 1943:

The recent abrogation of the unequal treaties and the signing of the new ones owed to China’s political and military efforts rather than the truth and justice advocated by Christian faith. We Christians, no matter in the West or in China, should feel ashamed.<sup>[59]</sup>

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[58] For instance, following as the Manifesto of the Chinese Christian Treaty Cancellation Movement in Guangzhou declared, the movement was launched out of the convictions that: 1) The abrogation of the unequal treaties was part of the national liberation movement and was supported by humanists all over the world. It was compatible with the Christian spirit of equality among all countries, races and nations; 2) The unequal treaties violated Christian doctrines and international law and made Christian missions and churches above the China law; and 3) The church should be grounded in the Christian faith and truth but not in the treaty protection. See “Guangzhou Zhonghua jidutu feichu bupingdeng tiaoyue da yundong xuanyan [Manifesto of the Chinese Christian Treaty Cancellation Movement in Guangzhou],” *Xinghua*, vol. 23, no. 27, (1926), 9-11. Similar expression can also be found in the declaration of the Chinese Christian Association for Abrogating the Unequal Treaties. See “Cuchenghui yuanqi,” 16-18.

[59] Zhang Xueyan, “Bupingdeng tiaoyue zhi feichu yu Jidujiao zai hua zhi qiantu [The Abrogation of the Unequal Treaties and the Future of Christianity in China],” *Xiejing yuekan* [The National Christian Council Monthly], new series, no. 1, (1943), 14.

中文题目:

## 中华全国基督教协进会与废除不平等条约运动(1925—1926)

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**提 要:**本文以中华全国基督教协进会为研究个案,通过考察协进会之成员教会与传教差会在 1925—1926 年间对于废除不平等条约运动的态度与回应,展现二十世纪上半期民族主义话语下,教会、差会与中国社会之间的互动与张力。本文认为,尽管作为传教条款受益者的西方差会与中国教会已然认识到与“不平等条约”划清界线的迫切性与必要性,双方看待条约问题的态度与观点却不尽相同。于差会而言,条约问题实属外交范畴,且涉及西方其他在华团体的利益,差会的公开表态始终规范于母国政府的外交决策框架之下。然而,对于大多数华人信徒来说,不平等条约的签订,不单是导致基督教在华被视为西方帝国主义侵略先锋之尴尬处境的根本原因之一,更是近代中国“屈辱”、“落后”的症结所在。虽遭民族主义话语排斥,却亦深受其影响:不少信徒主动发起或参与到废约运动中,力求表明自己的国民身分认同与“基督教爱国主义”精神。中西新教团体不同取态的背后,反映出双方处境、立场的差异。二十世纪二十年代中国社会政治气候及民族主义话语在其中发挥重要作用。

**关键词:**不平等条约;民族主义;中华全国基督教协进会;中国教会;传教差会

