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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# American City on a Chinese Hill: Single-Origin Narrative of American Freedom in Chinese Christianity

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**Abstract**

In recent years, a number of high-profile Chinese Christian dissidents, who once championed liberalism, democracy, and constitutionalism in China, have become outspoken supporters of Donald Trump and Christian Nationalism. Complex historical factors led to this change, but this article highlights one important intellectual facet that undergirded many of their arguments for Christian Nationalism. It is a single-origin historical narrative, whereby American freedom came exclusively from Calvinism as testified in the original Westminster Confession and practiced by the New England Puritans. This article traces the historical process through which this single-origin historical narrative was transported from its American roots to contemporary Chinese Christianity. This is a two-part history: the first being the ministry of Charles Chao, Jonathan Chao, and Stephen Tong, who jointly introduced this single-origin narrative to China, and the second being the process through which Yu Jie, an outspoken Chinese Calvinist and Trump supporter, inherited and exaggerated the single-origin narrative. Altogether, this article explores a previously understudied Sino-American connection in the history of contemporary Chinese Christianity.

**Keywords:** Chinese Christianity; Christian Nationalism; Christian conservatism; Calvinism; Chinese intellectuals

## I. Introduction: Christian Nationalism in the Chinese Church

In 1996, Yu Jie, then a twenty-five-year-old graduate student of Chinese Literature in Beijing University, cried out against China's stale literary culture. "Three thousand years of fermentation in the dying vat of Chinese authoritarianism" had defanged the Chinese literati, whereas he aimed to revive the real intellectual spirit that came from "protection of freedom, [and] a motivation for liberation."[1] From his perspective, while Chinese society suffered from a deeply ingrained authoritarianism, the United States of America

[1]Yu Jie, *Huo Yu Bin* 火与冰 [Fire and Ice], 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Jiujiang Wenhua, 2014 (1996)), 301. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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provided a counterexample where "people of different skin colors, languages, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds could find fertile soil for their lives." "To live in America," he concluded, "is to live in a free world."[2] Following his conversion to Christianity in 2003 and his endorsement of Calvinism shortly after, Yu Jie seemed to have joined several other Chinese Christian intellectuals for whom "spiritual reform is found in an embrace of political liberalism informed by Calvinist political theology."[3] His perhaps inflated adoration of the US aside, his critique of totalitarianism and his endorsement of cultural and ethnic diversity landed him squarely in the liberal camp among his contemporary intellectuals in China.

Few, however, could have foreseen the sea change in his thought twenty years later. Yu Jie helped start an iconic Chinese house church, developed a more entrenched Calvinist worldview, gained international recognition for his activism for human rights and religious freedom, and was exiled to America in 2012. Changing alongside his religious views and international relocation was his assessment of the root of American greatness. In his 2020 book, *The Governing Wisdom of the Rightwing Businessman Trump*, he argues,

> On the matter of how to deal with [American] tradition, the leftists and the terrorists have similarities, as they both believe that America's foundation was outdated, counterrevolutionary, and can be replaced with new values. Trump and the rightists, however, believe that America was founded on the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence… The left hates America, hates The [sic] Declaration of Independence and The [sic] American Constitution, hates the founding fathers, hates Christianity, and hates the foundational values of America… If Trump doesn't speed up his wall building, [the leftists] might really be able to become the majority through introducing large scale immigration.[4]

While his adoration of the United States was not new, his recent writings portray it not so much as the "land of diversity," but "founded as a Puritan country,"[5] defined by an unbroken tradition stretching from the Mayflower Compact to the Constitution, and to the present Republican Party. This tradition is also under siege, which necessitates the more exclusive nationalism embodied in some of Donald Trump's policies.

Yu Jie was not alone among noteworthy Chinese Christian leaders to air this view. Wang Zhiyong, a self-proclaimed Chinese Puritan now residing in Virginia, began an online petition during the 2020 presidential campaign in support of Donald Trump. Among the signatories were Zhang Boli, pastor of two Chinese megachurches in Fairfax, Virginia, and Los Angeles.[6] Zhang and Wang, together with Stephen Chan, a former colleague of renowned Indonesian-Chinese preacher Stephen Tong, hosted an all-night online gathering on election day in 2024, in which participants prayed nonstop for

[2]Ibid., 380.

[3]Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 105.

[4]Yu Jie, *Yong Changshi Zhiguo: Youpaishangren Chuanpu de Dangguo Zhihui*用常识治国:右派商人川普的当国智慧 [Governing the Country with Common Sense: The Governing Wisdom of the Rightwing Businessman Trump] (Taipei: Ba Qi Culture, 2020), 2.1, accessed October 1, 2022, www.ebook.books.com.tw.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Wang Zhiyong, "Huaren muzhe guanyu 2020 nian meiguo daxuan zhi quanmian" 华人牧者关于2020年美国大选之劝勉 [Pledge of Chinese American Pastors on the 2020 American Election], accessed September 26, 2020, https://telegra.ph/Pastor-09-26.

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Trump's victory.[7] Popular Chinese media platforms that frequently feature a similar message of Christian Nationalism, such as *CCLife* (*Shengming jikan*), can reach an online readership of hundreds of thousands. Christian Nationalism has exerted an unneglectable influence among certain outspoken sectors of the Chinese Christian community, whether in China or the United States.[8] Christian Nationalism, as a religious and political movement in the United States, branched from multiple theological and denominational roots and can be manifest in theocratic or more liberal ways. This article uses Christian Nationalism in its contemporary context of US politics, with an emphasis on the historical narrative it puts forward, as the belief that "Christianity should keep its historic place as the unquestioned and dominant cultural framework in the United States, and that the government should actively construct and defend that cultural framework."[9]

These Chinese Christians' endorsement of Christian Nationalism is the result of complex intellectual, social, and political movements that took place in China and the United States in the past forty years. Within China, the "culture fever" of the 1980s made space for a number of intellectuals to view American democracy and the country's economy as "the model to imitate or to beat" in their own quest to modernize China.[10] Lin Yao argues that the gaze to the West and to the United States revealed among some Chinese liberal intellectuals a "beacon complex," which stands for "the idealization of 'the West', and the United States in particular, as the political and civilizational 'beacon of light' for the rest of the world."[11] Among those who looked westward, some religiously minded thinkers located the achievements of the modern West in Christianity, among other sources, and wanted to excavate its spiritual and intellectual resources to address the challenges in China's modernization.

A US-focused understanding of China's potential modernization arrived in sophisticated and simpler ways, as in the mature Sino-Theology of He Guanghu and the less intellectually rigorous *The Essence of America* (*Meiguo de benzhi*) by the popular writer Yu Ge. These Chinese searchers of American Christianity were met by a missionary force coming out of the United States that was increasingly evangelical and fundamentalist in their theology. Coupled with the politicization of American evangelicalism since the late 1970s, the political influence of American Christianity reached beyond US borders. Though further research is still needed to grasp the full range of the consequences of a politicized American evangelicalism in China, several scholars have documented its influence in various sectors of Chinese Christianity. For example, some of Wenzhou's "boss Christians" infused the market economy with "Puritan" religion, thanks, in part, to American missionaries. A renowned house church pastor in Nanjing became militantly

[7]Zhang Boli, "Juezhan shike! Daxuanzhiye daogao daolingchen…" 决战时刻!大选之夜祷告到凌晨 [The Final Battle is Here! Praying through the Night on Election Night], *Zhang Boli tantian shuodi* 张伯笠谈天说地 [Chats with Zhang Boli], posted November 3, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYWTiUlH2QA.

[8]While there exists a form of Christian endorsement of Chinese nationalism, usually associated with postcolonial critique or "sinicization," "Christian Nationalism" in this article always refers to the US religious movement that reads divine will into US history and present-day right-wing politics.

[9]Paul Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What's Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 2022), 60.

[10]Timothy Cheek, *The Intellectuals in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 258.

[11]Lin Yao, "Beaconism and the Trumpian Metamorphosis of Chinese Liberal Intellectuals," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (May 2020): 88.

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"Puritan" and anti-LGBTQ around 2010 after studying in an American seminary.[12] Despite these compelling connections, the complex landscape of global evangelicalism at the turn of the twenty-first century means that any attempt to trace the emergence of Christian Nationalism within the Chinese church to just a handful of sources risks oversimplification.

With these caveats in mind, this article highlights one intellectual element that has been present front and center in the thought of many Chinese Christian Nationalists. It is the belief that American greatness, whether its freedom or its prosperity, came from a single source: traditional Calvinism outlined in the Westminster Confession and practiced by the New England Puritans. A simpler version of this single-origin historical narrative, whereby America was founded upon "Christian conservatism," is frequently featured in Chinese media that endorses Christian Nationalism.[13] "Conservatism" here is used in its contemporary American sense as supporting traditional ideas about marriage and sexuality, small government, and the country's allegedly Christian founding. This understanding of "conservatism" shares certain similarities with classical liberalism, such as its suspicion of centralized political authority. Digging a little deeper, however, it often becomes apparent that this kind of "Christian conservatism" can lend intellectual power to Christian Nationalism by highlighting "Puritan Calvinism" as the real progenitor of the United States. For example, in Wang Zhiyong's recent book, titled *America Founded as a Christian Country: Twenty-Five Founding Principles of Puritan Theology and Anglo-American Conservatism*, Puritanism, conservatism, and the founding of the United States were closely associated, if not mutually identified.[14] This single-origin narrative of American freedom not only helped justify a historical outlook that excludes liberalism, popular sovereignty, or natural law constitutionalism from the intellectual landscape surrounding the founding of the United States, but it also helped fashion an absolute divide between heroes and villains in the historical outlook among some Chinese Christians, thus lending support to one side of US politics.

As an exploration of intellectual history, this article traces the process through which a single-origin historical narrative came to assert such an influential position in the minds of notable Chinese Christian Nationalists. The narrative originated in the early days of the American republic and proliferated in the heated debates between the fundamentalists and the modernists in the early twentieth century. In the Chinese context, translations of Reformed Presbyterian missionaries contain some of the earliest examples of this narrative. An outstanding Chinese convert to Reformed Presbyterianism, Charles Chao (*Zhao Zhonghui*), laid down an early intellectual foundation for portraying the history of Western freedom as exclusively a Reformed story. His son, Jonathan Chao (*Zhao Tian'en*), together with other missionaries such as Stephen Tong, disseminated a milder version of the senior Chao's historical narrative to their Chinese audience. Although

[12]Carsten Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 125–126.

[13]The popularity of this line of argument is unmissable from just a quick Google search of Chinese publications in support of the US Christian Right. For example, see Ren Yunsheng, "Meiguo, shizai shenme jichushang liguode" 美国,是在什么基础上立国的 [On What Foundation was America Founded], *CCLife*, April 26, 2022, accessed October 20, 2022, https://www.cclife.org/View/Article/5045.

[14]Wang Zhiyong, *Meiguo: yi jidujiao liguo – qingjiaotu shenxue yu yingmei baoshouzhuyi ershiwu dayuanze* 美国:以基督教立国—清教徒神学与英美保守主义二十五大原则 [America Founded as a Christian Country: Twenty-Five Founding Principles of Puritan Theology and Anglo-American Conservatism] (Taipei: Lordway Publishing, 2021), 17–24.

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many intellectuals embraced ideas associated with a single-origin historical narrative, this article focuses on Yu Jie, who reinterpreted the narrative he inherited in more extreme directions in response to his circumstance as a Christian dissident in China. The history of the single-origin narrative covered in this article is therefore a two-part history: of how missionaries translated it from its US roots into the Chinese context and how Chinese Christian intellectuals reinterpreted and radicalized it.

## II. The Beginning of the Single-Origin Narrative in China

Christian missionaries in China were no strangers to political reform. From W. A. P. Martin's translation of *Elements of International Law* to the YMCA's various programs to cultivate civic virtues in Fuzhou and elsewhere, missionaries have constantly involved themselves in political programs in China, whether out of genuine concern or strategic calculation. Among these Christian reformers, one small denomination stood out with a message in opposition to many liberal-leaning Christian missionaries. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) launched its first China mission in Guangdong in 1895, and the second and last in Manchuria in 1930.

Reformed Christians of Scottish backgrounds formed the RPCNA in 1798. With roots in the Scots Covenanters, leaders of the RPCNA had, since its inauguration, distanced themselves from the democracy and religious toleration practiced by the federal government of the United States. Contrary to the mainline Presbyterian Church, USA, the RPCNA insisted that civic authorities could not remain neutral or tolerant on religious matters – at least not as the US federal government understood those terms. Instead, they ought to openly acknowledge Jesus Christ as the supreme authority in the Constitution and establish an official religion by political means through, for example, requiring religious exams for public offices.[15] The Reformed Presbyterians led several unsuccessful petitions to the US Congress to amend the preamble of the constitution, and the denomination prohibited its members from serving in the secular US government.[16]

In China, the RPCNA mission disseminated a similar message. In a booklet mailed to Yuan Shikai in 1913, the Reformed Presbyterian writer criticized the "fatal defect" of the US Constitution, which is its "atheistic error," and lamented how, after the American Revolution, "religious concepts in political thought had almost vanished out of mind."[17] The sure evidence for this was the omission of God from the US Constitution and the removal of religious exams for public offices.[18] China, the writer exhorted, should not follow the US's atheistic footsteps. Materializing in their critique of the American Revolution and Constitution was the argument, relatively new to China thus far, that true Christianity did not complement, but contradicted the American principles of democracy and freedom. This argument was a far cry from the Christian Nationalist

[15]The dissent from the Reformed Presbyterians toward the mainstream understanding of American liberty has been analyzed in D. G. Hart, "Implausible: Calvinism and American Politics" in *John Calvin's American Legacy*, ed. Thomas J. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78–79.

[16]RPCNA's involvement in the Christian Amendment Movement, beginning in the 1860s, has been aptly studied in Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 22–30.

[17]William J. McKnight, *A Message to China: The Teachings of the Bible concerning the Basic Principles of Civil Government, Presented for the Consideration of the Republic of China* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: RPCNA Press, 1913), 26, 20.

[18]Ibid., 27.

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mandate of taking dominion for God, a mandate with which the Reformed Presbyterians were never entirely comfortable. In an ironic twist, however, the Reformed Presbyterians' dissenting attitude would lend power to a single-origin narrative of American freedom when the landscape of global politics changed during the Cold War.

The RPCNA claimed among its converts a talented Chinese student, Charles H. Chao. Born to a loosely Christian family in Liaoning in 1916, Charles Chao converted to Christianity in 1935 through the sermon of Wang Mingdao. Having then dabbled in Pentecostalism but finding it lacked theological depth, he enrolled in the conservative Presbyterian seminary, Yingkou Bible Institute, where he quickly caught the attention of his teacher, Johannes Geerhardus Vos.[19] Vos was also the head of RPCNA's Manchuria mission, and he connected Chao to another Reformed Presbyterian missionary, Samuel Boyle, who would become the Chao family's lifelong friend and benefactor. After graduation, Chao was hired as a translator and assistant by Vos. The outbreak of the Nationalist-Communist civil war soon convinced the RPCNA to leave Manchuria. For two years beginning in summer 1948, Chao and his family followed their Reformed Presbyterian colleagues south, through Shanghai and Hong Kong, before settling in Kobe, Japan. The perilous exodus knit the Chao family ever more closely with the RPCNA, and Charles Chao was baptized into the denomination in 1950.[20]

Displaced and personally jeopardized by the civil war with the communists, the Chao family and the RPCNA joined an international coalition of Christians against communism during the Cold War. Though American missionaries and Christians in general were not uncritical advocates of the Western bloc, many shared the consensus that communism was both a geopolitical threat and a religious rival. Billy Graham, who preached on communism more than any other political topic in the early years of his ministry, called it "a total system encompassing and threatening every aspect of the culture," complete with its own set of gods and priests.[21] Reinhold Niebuhr, in his widely circulated critique, traced communism's overoptimistic view of human nature to "the modern man's confidence in his power over historical destiny" and the "modern man's confidence in this virtue, [based on] the rejection of the Christian idea of the ambiguity of human virtue."[22] Several American political leaders saw a tactical advantage in framing the Cold War as a religious war between the theistic West and the atheist East, where "terrible fanaticism… denie[d] the existence of God [and] stamps out the worship of God," in President Truman's words.[23] Though Christians in the United States did not answer the president's anticommunist rallying cry in a uniform manner, the early decades of the Cold War did foster a mentality of "us vs. them" among many Christian communities. Several outspoken anticommunist crusaders in the evangelical and fundamentalist churches also rose to prominent positions.

[19]Charles Chao, *Shen'en haoda: wohewoyijia de jianzheng* 神恩浩大:我和我一家的见证 [Great is the Grace of God: Me and My Family's Testimony] (Taipei: Reformed Translation Fellowship, 1983 (2000)), 35–40.

[20]Ibid., 35–37.

[21]Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 233.

[22]Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008 (1952)), 4.

[23]William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge, Maas.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

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As a global anticommunist front began to take shape under a loose leadership of US presidents and religious leaders, the Reformed Presbyterians around Charles Chao found it difficult to remain consistently distant toward mainstream American politics. After all, as their chief periodical made clear, the Reformed Presbyterians thought that the battle between Christianity and communism "is God against the Devil, as basic and as simple as that."[24] While it was an enduring feature for the RPCNA to critique US society as inadequately Reformed and the US Constitution as woefully unchristian, articles also began to appear in their periodical that toyed with the idea of having Reformed Presbyterians join the US politicians in a political and even military alliance.[25] Samuel Boyle, while staying with the Chao family in American-occupied Japan, envisioned a future where "Japan can be a Christian nation." But since "the United States is the only country with resources adequate to supply gospel arms and ammunition," Boyle called on the evangelical churches, with a rather uncharacteristic affirmation of US politics, to become "a spiritual munitions plant" for American frontline troops.[26] He even observed with joy that "the whole nation [of Japan] is 'going to school' to absorb…the know-how of American democracy," and he called his Reformed Presbyterian colleagues to contribute to the movement.[27] One could thus observe a change of tone in the early 1950s, when the conventional distaste for US power and democracy from the Reformed Presbyterians began to give way to a more appreciative attitude.

Blessing the global expansion of US power and democracy from church pulpits would have been a common enough strategy for many evangelical churches at the time. For the RPCNA, however, close identification with the US goal of global manifest destiny created theological difficulties. As conservative outliers within American Protestantism, the Reformed Presbyterians had long taken pride in distancing themselves from mainstream US politics. Communism, however, seemed to be too great a threat, and too heretical a religion, to warrant such aloofness. The challenge for the Reformed Presbyterians who wanted to take up the American patriotic cause was how to endorse US power and democracy while standing firmly on the ground of the conservative outliers.

The answer was to praise American freedom, but, at the same time, proclaim that such a gift came exclusively from their own theological background alone: strict Westminster-style Calvinism. In this effort, RPCNA's China mission had some good resources to draw from. Earlier in the twentieth century, when some liberal Protestants accused the fundamentalists, especially the premillennialists, of turning their backs on the patriotic duty to make the world safer for democracy, one common retort of the fundamentalists was to argue that American liberty was indebted to their particular religious heritage.[28] Now finding this line of argument particularly useful in their situation, Charles Chao and his colleagues began to translate some of these works into Chinese. In 1948, while still in Hong Kong, Charles Chao and Samuel Boyle rented a

[24]Editorial, "Counter Crusade against Communism," *Covenanter Witness* 49, no. 11 (September 1952): 169.

[25]For example, see William H. Russell, "Current Events," *Covenanter Witness* 51, no. 11 (September 9, 1953): 163.

[26]Samuel Boyle, "Japan can be a Christian Nation," *Covenanter Witness* 44, no. 5 (February 1, 1950): 65.

[27]Ibid., 74.

[28]J. Gresham Machen, for example, makes several allusions to how modernity and liberal Christianity threatened to reduce human freedom, while fundamentalist Christianity guarantees it. See Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: J. J. Little & Ives Company, 1923), 14–16, 153–154.

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small apartment and set up the Reformed Translation Fellowship (RTF).[29] Despite its humble beginning, the RTF has since expanded into a full printing press and now also runs its own bookstore with global shipping capacity.[30]

The early years of the RTF featured a translation lineup that revealed its concerns about communism and its attempt to find theological justification for American freedom. The first four books translated included two short works: V. Raymond Edman's *Karl Marx? Or Jesus Christ?* and Samuel Boyle's *Communism's Three-Fold Challenge to the Christian Church*, both translated in 1949. Soon, work began on lengthier monographs. By 1952, J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* and Loraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* were translated. Both books contain sections in which the authors discuss the contribution of what scholars call "Old School fundamentalism" to the American Republic. Boettner's book, in particular, presented an exclusive historical narrative toward its end: "History is eloquent in declaring that American democracy was born of Christianity and that that Christianity was Calvinism. The great revolutionary conflict, which resulted in the formation of the American nation, was carried out mainly by Calvinists, many of whom had been trained in the rigidly Presbyterian College at Princeton, and this nation is their gift to all liberty loving people of the world."[31]

Boettner was right that Princeton College was fervently patriotic during the Revolutionary period, but his account simplified the complex web of intellectual traditions that went into the patriotism of Princeton's theologians. As Mark Noll has argued, the political theology of Princeton's John Witherspoon and Samuel Stanhope Smith represented a "fusion of traditional religion with the new moral philosophy" predicated upon Scottish commonsense philosophy, which cast humans' natural intelligence and natural capacity for knowledge in a much more positive light than the traditional Puritans did.[32] The political view of several early American patriotic theologians, such as John Witherspoon, reflected not the conventional Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, but a "Protestant-republic perception" of politics that fused together a pair of unlikely allies – orthodox Christianity and civic republicanism.[33] Boettner's account, in contrast, completely omitted the ways in which the Old Princeton tradition incorporated classical and Enlightenment thought into its theology.

To drive the point home, Boettner cast his sight on the world history of the Reformed movement, and wherever he looked, he saw Calvinists as the most loyal, if not the only, fighters for liberty. In England, Puritans were "the true heroes." From Cromwell's New Model Army and rejection of the crown to Protestant martyrs, Boettner found examples to suggest that "had it not been for the Puritans, political liberty would probably have

[29]Samuel Boyle, "Huiyi niannian" 回忆廿年 [Remembering the Past Twenty Years], *Xinyang yu shenghuo* 信仰与生活 [Reformed Faith and Life] 20, no. 1 (January 1969): 1–2.

[30]The US and the Taiwanese branches of the RTF later diverged, and the Taiwanese branch now publishes the majority of the RTF's Chinese works. Browsing the website and the online bookstore page of the Taiwan Reformed Translation Fellowship yields abundant evidence of its numerous books and its global shipping capacity. See "About TRTF," https://www.crtsbooks.net/trtf/index.html, and "CRTS Books," accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.crtsbooks.net/.

[31]Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1936), 383–384.

[32]Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 112.

[33]Ibid., 75.

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disappeared from the world."[34] In Scotland, John Knox was the one who "planted the germs of religious and civil liberty" out of his radically Calvinist predispositions. In the American colonies, Puritan settlers alone inherited the sparks of liberty, as they "had an aversion for formalism and oppression whether in the Church or in the State," which eventually translated to the broader American freedom.[35] He also tapped into a long-running argument that viewed the Presbyterian system of church government as a precedent of modern republicanism. Boettner declares that "Calvinism and republicanism are related to each other like cause and effect; and where a people are possessed of the former, the latter will soon be developed."[36] The metanarrative concludes with a lamentation on how the Calvinist founders of the United States have been largely forgotten by biased historians.

His narrative was not entirely fabricated, and scholars in his time, as well as today, have noted how Calvinists often "fought and died for" virtually "every modern principle of civic liberty" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[37] Yet compared to more serious historical accounts, Boettner portrayed a convenient set of heroes and villains, the former being the Calvinists and the latter, Arminians and Catholics. Greek philosophers, Renaissance humanists, or modern political theorists were nowhere to be found. His understanding of "liberty" or "freedom" was also overwhelmingly colored by the ability of religious minorities – though not Baptists or Anabaptists – to resist state persecution. In his work, the single-origin narrative of American liberty has reached its most mature form so far; this idea would later take a prominent place in the arguments of several Chinese Christian thinkers.

## III. The Next Generation

The RTF's translations might have occupied a niche corner for the first twenty years of its ministry, but things changed with China's reform and opening up in 1978. By that time, the Chao family had immigrated to the United States and settled down in California, thanks in no small part to the funding provided by Reformed Presbyterian connections. Charles's second son, Jonathan, had become an active missionary and a Christian intellectual in his own right. From 1978 to his death in 2004, Jonathan Chao made "over a hundred trips into China, often carrying with him Chinese Bibles and Reformed literature produced by the RTF."[38] Chinese-speaking missionaries based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia joined him, pointing to the proliferation of intra-Asian missionary networks in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Among those who had collaborated with him, one standout was Stephen Tong. The charismatic Indonesian-Chinese preacher was among the first generation of missionaries who introduced Calvinism to Chinese Christians after 1978.[39] For his effort in promoting reformed theology globally, Tong was awarded the Kuyper Prize by Calvin Theological

[34]Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 372.

[35]Ibid., 383.

[36]Ibid., 391.

[37]John Witte Jr., "The Protestant Reformation of Constitutionalism," in *Christianity and Constitutionalism*, ed. Nicholas Aroney and Ian Leigh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 146.

[38]Alexander Chow, "Jonathan Chao and 'Return Mission': The Case of the Calvinist Revival in China," *Mission Studies* 36, no. 3 (2019): 444.

[39]They, alongside Samuel Ling, are identified as China's earliest Reformed missionaries after 1978 in Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 99.

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Seminary in 2025.[40] According to Tong's recollection, he first caught the attention of the senior and junior Chaos in the 1970s. Charles and Jonathan Chao flew to Indonesia to meet Tong in 1970 and 1971, respectively, and the three soon began to collaborate in several ventures, including co-founding the Chinese Graduate School of Theology and starting a series of conferences designed to teach the basics of Christian theology to the public.[41] Jonathan Chao's knack for planning events and building connections complemented Tong's oratory prowess. Jonathan Chao later published many of Tong's talks as short books. As shall be shown later, Yu Jie would cite Jonathan Chao and Stephen Tong as his inspirations.

Stephen Tong and the Chaos, alongside several other Christian intellectuals, had revived the single-origin narrative of American democracy and liberty into a modified form. The catalyst for the new wave of political theology was the June Fourth repression of student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Following the brutal crackdown, many intellectuals who participated in or watched closely the democratic movement were convinced that Communist ideology had gone bankrupt, and they began exploring other sources, Christian theology included, to soothe their emotional pain and to find another path for China's political reform.[42] The upsurge of intellectual interest in religion following June Fourth was so apparent that Yang Fenggang, sociologist of Chinese religion, called June Fourth "the spiritual awakening for the Chinese people."[43] The renewed interest in the political relevance of Christianity did not necessarily point to Calvinism. Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, two pioneers of Sino-Theology, for example, had explored a wide range of contemporary theologians, including Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann, to address the controversies of China's modernization.[44] Nevertheless, missionaries such as Chao and Tong saw in the aftermath of June Fourth an opportunity to present Reformed Christianity as particularly relevant to China's predicament.

In their publications shortly after June Fourth, Chao and Tong made a case for Christianity's unique ability to offer Chinese reformers what Marxism and modern philosophy could not. As Tong explained, "In the May 4th Movement people cried out 'democracy and freedom!' On June 4th people cried out at Tiananmen 'democracy and freedom!' So what have we been doing these past seventy years? We did this and did that, we still haven't done it! …The church's path forward, and China's path forward, requires people to bring out boldly, not Marxism, but Jesus Christ. That is a path we have yet to try."[45] The connection between Jesus Christ and "democracy and freedom," according to these missionaries, linked several arguments with Reformed coloration. One, the Puritans' self-perception of participation in a covenantal community with God inspired them

[40]"Renowned Evangelist to Receive 2025 Kuyper Prize," *Calvin News*, October 29, 2024, accessed February 25, 2026, https://calvin.edu/stories/renowned-evangelist-receive-2025-kuyper-prize.

[41]Stephen Tong, "Wosuo renshide zhaotianen mushi," 我所认识的赵天恩牧师 [Pastor Jonathan Chao as I Know Him] in *Anthology in Memory of Rev. Dr. Jonathan Tien-En Chao*, ed. Samuel Chao (Taipei: CMI Press, 2004), 40.

[42]Lian Xi, "'Cultural Christians' and the Search for Civil Society in Contemporary China," *The Chinese Historical Review* 20, no. 1 (May 2013): 74.

[43]Zhang Boli and Zhou Fengsuo, "From Tiananmen's Most Wanted to Followers of Jesus: Thirty Years after the Deadly Massacre, Two Dissidents Reflect on Hope for China," by Jenny McGill, *Christianity Today*, June 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2019/05/tiananmen-square-30-anniversary-zhang-boli-zhou-fengsuo/.

[44]Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 58–59.

[45]Stephen Tong, *Cong renlun kan ziyou, minzhu, renquan, fazhi* 从人论看自由,民主,人权,法制 [Freedom, Democracy, Human Right, Sovereignty] (Taipei: CMI Press, 1991), 25.

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to adhere to a baseline of public morality and to sacrifice their private desires for the common good when necessary. Two, since Calvinism teaches that princes were appointed to their offices by the sovereign will of God, political leaders, therefore, ought to be held under judgment for whether they satisfied God's justice through their governance.[46] Third, seeing human beings as created in the image of God was a necessary first step toward recognizing basic human rights. Fourth, belief in the divine inspiration of laws helps cultivate a law-abiding culture, but also denies the legitimacy of anyone who places oneself above the law.[47] The conclusion was clear to Jonathan Chao: "Without the efforts of evangelization and a long process of Christianization, no authentic and lasting democratic system of government has ever been maintained. Perhaps that is why human rights, freedom, democracy and legal rule have not yet developed in China."[48]

It must be noted that, as much as Jonathan Chao insisted that Christianity was the most glaring missing link in China's democratization, he did not single out Calvinism as the true form of Christianity. Neither did he propagate a single-origin historical narrative of Western democracy. In his historical overview, "Western liberty, democracy, and rule of law on one hand came from Greco-Roman culture, and on the other hand came from the teaching of the Bible," and even then, it went through a long history of "the Renaissance, Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, [and] the American Independence."[49] Although Christianity occupied "the foremost position" among these historical factors, it was not the only one.[50] Jonathan Chao's role in the transmission of the single-origin narrative was not so much in replicating this narrative as in providing a platform and a contextualization for those who did replicate it.

Chao's colleague Stephen Tong, on the other hand, presented a much more exclusive historical narrative. In several of his publications with CMI, a recurring motif is the decisive separation between, on one hand, the Reformation and its true heirs, and on the other hand, the various manifestations of "secular humanism," such as the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Only the former generated Western democracy and liberty. As Tong argued, "If we study Western history, we would discover that whichever place Calvinism went to, it adopted a democratic system, and its politics were democratic. But Calvinism absolutely denies secular democracy. Rather, it supports the rule of divine sovereignty. Dignity for humanity, and the true realization of human value, were only discovered after the Reformation."[51]

On the other side of history stood the villains – Renaissance, liberalism, Marxism, and all the other elements of secular modernity, such as evolutionism. To put it in blunt terms,

[46]Yu Daxin, "Cong shengjing kan minzhu zhengzhi" 从圣经看民主政治 [Democratic Politics from a Biblical Perspective], *Zhongguo yu Jiaohui* 79 (August 1990): 11–13.

[47]Jonathan Chao, "Renquan, ziyou, minzhu, fazhi de neizai guanxi" 人权,自由,民主,法制的内在关系 [The Internal Connections between Human Right, Freedom, Democracy, and the Rule of Law], *Zhongguo yu Jiaohui* 78 (July 1990): 2–5.

[48]Jonathan Chao, "Why is the Gospel Good News for China? A Talk to Chinese Intellectuals in Search for God," *China Prayer Letter and Ministry Report* (June 1991): 5.

[49]Jonathan Chao, "Wutu yu wumin – zhongguo fuyinhua yixiang" 吾土与吾民—中国福音化异象 [My Country and My People – A Vision for the Evangelization of China], *Zhongguo yu jiaohui* 4, no. 8 (August 1985): 3.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Stephen Tong, "Minzhu sixiang yuanyu duirenxingde liaojie" 民主思想源于对人性的了解 [Democratic Thoughts Originate from our Understanding of Human Nature], *Zhongguo yu jiaohui* 79 (September 1990): 13–14.

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"Important elements of faith, such as the existence of God, revelation and salvation, supernatural intervention, timeless values, and heaven and hell, were completely denied during the Renaissance."[52] Since "Western democracy born out of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and Western democracy born out of the Reformation, are two completely different paths," according to Tong, "future leaders of China would do well to see that the influence of Western democracy from secular movements and that of western [sic] democracy from the Christian understanding of human nature are two different things, and two different results."[53] It was not a coincidence that this single-origin narrative reminds one of Francis Schaeffer, who later in life had become an intellectual supporter of the Christian Right, largely by appealing to a dualism between proper, conservative Christianity and "secular humanism."[54] Tong had met Schaeffer in person during one of his trips to the United States, and he recalled vividly how the knowledgeable Edith Schaeffer, Francis's wife, impressed him as well as the high regard for *How Should We Then Live*.[55]

For Chao and Tong, the country that most successfully put into practice the allegedly Reformed principles of democracy and freedom was the United States, though their arguments about how remained scattered. In places, Chao suggested that the image of God within human beings meant that "man is created free and is endowed with certain inalienable rights by his Creator" – as the Declaration of Independence proclaimed.[56] Elsewhere he argued that the practice of laying hands on the Bible when swearing oaths in court demonstrated how the US legal system recognized the Bible as the supreme source of truth.[57] Familiar tropes such as the phrase "In God We Trust" on US dollar bills, or the numerousness of Presbyterian churches, became proof for Tong that the US was a Christian nation.[58] Although "obsession" with drugs, sex, abortion, and, interestingly, guns smudged the Christian image in the United States, for Tong, the Puritan chapter of the country's history and the lingering influence of Calvinist churches suggested that the United States had been a formerly Christian country, if its current status was in doubt.[59]

Unsystematic though their thoughts were, their unapologetic endorsement of Christianity as the most sorely missing element in China's democratization – if not the only possible motor for it – as well as their adoration of the United States as a Christian country resonated with a subset of Chinese Christians. Some of the politically active and intellectually curious among the newly emerging urban elite churches would find in the historical narrative of Chao and Tong an answer to their needs.

## IV. Finding Resonance

When Jonathan Chao and Stephen Tong began their China mission in earnest after 1978, Chinese Christianity was also undergoing some momentous changes. After China

[52]Ibid., 15.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 83–85.

[55]Tong, *Cong renlun kan ziyou, minzhu, renquan, fazhi*, 52.

[56]Chao, "Why is the Gospel Good News to China," 5.

[57]Chao, "Renquan, ziyou, minzhu, fazhi de neizai guanxi," 3.

[58]Tong, "Minzhu sixiang yuanyu duirenxingde liaojie," 14.

[59]Stephen Tong, *Shenquan, renquan, zhengquan* 神权,人权,政权 [The Divine Authority, Human Rights and Political Power] (Taipei: CMI Press, 2000), 160. For his critique of American gun violence as unchristian, see the same book, 69–70.

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reopened to the world in 1978, foreign observers noted with surprise that Chinese Christianity, far from extinct, had grown considerably during the Maoist years.[60] Strong numbers, however, posed other challenges. Since above-ground theological education had virtually halted during the Cultural Revolution, and the underground churches were reluctant to associate with the state-sanctioned seminaries after they were reinstituted, the burden of theological and pastoral training for new believers "fell extremely heavy on the old generation trained pre-1949," many of whom only had rudimentary theological education.[61] The clandestine mode of operation for the underground churches was also a ripe condition for indigenous sects and even heresies to grow. The structured Reformed theology of Chao and Tong provided many Chinese churches with some theological guardrails against heresy.[62]

The Christians who would take Chao and Tong's theology and historical narrative to more extreme political ends, though, belonged to a new type of church, which observers have called urban elite Christianity. Compared to the older and less literate demographics of rural churches, the urban elite church featured more young people, white-collar workers, people with advanced education, and even political activists. The root of urban elite Christianity is complex. In general, the eclipse of traditional morals, a sense of rootlessness in an ever-shifting market economy, and other challenges of a rapidly modernizing society drove more young urban workers into the church.[63] Some urban elite Christians belonged to what Ding Guangxun and other observers called "cultural Christians." This much-contested term was used in the 1980s to designate people who did not necessarily identify as Christians, but were drawn to Christianity as an intellectual resource for social modernization and Westernization.[64] A number of urban elite Christians were the same students and intellectuals who became disillusioned with the party-state and its Marxist ideology after the June Fourth crackdown at Tiananmen, and in turn, "hoped to find in Protestant Christianity a path to democracy and civil society in China."[65] The "Rights Defense Movement" consisted mostly of Christian lawyers who provided legal aid to unconstitutionally repressed religious communities and represented a politically activist slice of the post-June Fourth upsurge of Christianity.[66] It was mostly his encounters with this type of Christian that convinced the renowned journalist David Aikman to paint an optimistic picture of a potentially Christianized and pro-American China.

The "cultural mandate" of the Reformed tradition, especially Dutch Neo-Calvinism, became an attractive feature for these publicly minded urban church members. Scholars have noted how some high-profile urban churches have connected their Reformed theology with activism in political, legal, and social issues in mainland China.[67] A degree

[60]The numbers given by Yang Fenggang were that China had 0.8 million Protestants in 1956, and 3.2 million in 1982. See Yang Fenggang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 93.

[61]Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 186.

[62]Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 99.

[63]Yang Fenggang, "Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald's: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (December 2005): 425.

[64]Xi, "'Cultural Christians.'"

[65]Ibid., 74.

[66]Ibid., 75–76.

[67]Xu Ximian, "How to Make Sino-Reformed Theology Possible? Retrieving Abraham Kuyper's Proto-Reformed Contextual Theology," *Journal of Chinese Theology* 8 (2022): 180.

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of diversity existed among the urban Reformed churches. Alexander Chow highlights two common approaches to publicness exemplified by two such churches. Beijing's Shouwang Church worshipped in public to demonstrate a "third path" between the underground churches' clandestineness and the state-sanctioned churches' submissiveness, while Chengdu's Early Rain Church proclaimed from its pulpit a dissenting political message that struck at the heart of China's many social ills.[68] Both churches understood publicness as involving the capacity to worship in a public space without the preapproval of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, as well as a sense of social responsibility. They differed, however, on the degree to which their ministry ought to reflect a confrontational spirit, and on the range of issues their church-based reform ought to address. A similar degree of diversity is also present among the Christian lawyers. The legal defense of religious freedom that many Calvinist lawyers had organized often ended up in court-room battles against the local government. Yet as Ryan Dunch reminds us, fighting for religious autonomy should not be confused with political rebellion, for the Christians' demands for autonomy "are made precisely on the basis of the state's formal granting of that on paper," in the 1982 Constitution, which formally grants freedom of religious belief.[69] Urban elite Reformed Christians thus demonstrated considerable diversity in their rhetoric and tactics.

For a few urban Reformed Christians who fell on the more confrontational end of the spectrum, however, the single-origin historical narrative advanced by the RTF and reinterpreted by Jonathan Chao and Stephen Tong was extremely appealing. The well-known political dissident, cultural critic, and self-proclaimed Puritan Calvinist Yu Jie initially gained fame in the late 1990s for his fierce critique of traditional Chinese culture and the Communist Party leadership. After converting to Christianity in 2003, he started a Bible study in his apartment in Beijing, which eventually grew into Fangzhou Church. Despite frequent police harassment, he was determined to let Fangzhou become a bridge that connected such unlikely demographics as Christian migrant workers and university professors. Until his internationally reported exile to the United States in 2012, his church and the periodical he co-edited with Wang Yi, another renowned urban elite pastor, were a hub for Christian-inspired political dissent in China.[70]

Judging by the number of followers, Yu Jie does not represent Chinese urban elite Christianity nor even the political dissidents within. Both foreign observers and Yu Jie himself had often commented on how his church-based dissent seemed like the work of a lone crusader.[71] As a prolific writer, however, Yu Jie's influence on Chinese Christianity could perhaps be best assessed not by how many people followed in his footsteps, but by

[68]Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 108–111.

[69]Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing," in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, ed. Stephen Uhalley Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 214.

[70]For an overview of Yu Jie's early life and Christian dissent, see Fredrik Fällman, "Calvin, Culture and Christ? Developments of Faith among Chinese Intellectuals," in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural Perspectives*, ed. Francis Khek Gee Lim (New York: Routledge, 2012), 154–155. For the *New York Times* report of his mistreatment in China and his exile, see Edward Wong, "China: Dissident Author Flees to the U.S.," *The New York Times*, accessed January 18, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/19/world/asia/china-dissident-author-flees-to-us.html.

[71]In her fieldwork, Gerda Wielander recalls how nearly all of her interviewees were critical of Yu Jie's high-profile Christian practice. See Gerda Wielander, "Bridging the Gap? An Investigation of Beijing Intellectual House Church Activities and their Implications for China's Democratization," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 62 (November 2009): 857.

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the popularity of the arguments he put forward in more than thirty books he wrote or edited. As illustrated earlier, the intellectual foundation Yu Jie erected for political dissent, an important component being the single-origin historical narrative of American freedom, echoed numerous Chinese Christians who based their right-wing political leaning upon the same assumption. Yu Jie is therefore an important case study of how Chinese Christian dissidents adopted a particular narrative of Christianity in the United States.

Yu Jie's fascination with Calvinism began around the same time as his conversion. According to his autobiography, the people who introduced him to it were "two contemporary theologians with the qualities of intellectuals… One is Stephen Tong. The other is Jonathan Chao."[72] He "listened to dozens of CD-disks of Stephen Tong's sermons, [sic] and had many chances to talk with him in person."[73] He did not meet Jonathan Chao in person, for Chao died in 2004, shortly after Yu Jie's baptism. Chao attracted Yu Jie, however, with his written words; Yu Jie praised various pieces of Chao's writings as "foundational works" that offer "profound insight."[74] Through Chao and Tong, Yu Jie "entered the brilliant palace of Calvinist theology,"[75] finding in it the theological foundation for church-based political activism and dissent.

Yu Jie's interest in Chao and Tong's branch of Reformed theology was part of the growing interest of many Chinese churches in Calvinism around the turn of the twenty-first century. Several Chinese Christians, urban and rural, saw the doctrinal rigor of the Reformed tradition as protection against indigenous heresies. In some of China's burgeoning centers of global trade, "boss Christians" and classical liberal economists believed that the Protestant ethics imbedded in Calvinism matched the spirit of capitalism.[76] For urban Chinese churches that were growing in size and in need of a clearer structure of church governance, the Reformed tradition, and especially the Presbyterian Church, offered a tried-and-true formula of organizing the church's political structure. In these areas, Yu Jie and Fangzhou Church did not necessarily stand apart from various other churches in China that adopted the Reformed tradition.

In other ways, the historical narrative of Stephen Tong and the Chaos justified the particular aims of a confrontational political dissident. One major point of resonance was the conviction that the United States represented an ideal Christian country and that Christianity was the missing link in China's progression toward that ideal. Yu Jie's admiration of the United States was in the spirit of the New Enlightenment of the 1980s and 90s, when civilizational comparisons between East and West, such as that portrayed in the TV documentary *River Elegy*, enjoyed great popularity.[77] For Yu Jie, the United States was more than a beacon on the other side of the ocean. In May 2006, George W. Bush invited Yu Jie alongside two other Chinese Christians to visit the White House to discuss the state of religious freedom in China. The meeting concluded with all three

[72]Yu Jie, *Woshi youpai, woshi dupai* 我是右派,我是独派 [I Am a Rightist, I Am a Loner] (Taipei: Avanguard Press, 2019), 139.

[73]Ibid., 140.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid.

[76]The most classic study of the rise of "boss Christians" and their usage of Weber's thesis is in Cao Nanlai, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[77]Over 200 million people watched River Elegy, a documentary that pitted the restrictive Chinese civilization against the free, open, "oceanic" civilization of America. See Timothy Cheek, *The Intellectuals in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 243.

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holding hands with Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney in prayer, a powerful experience by all accounts.[78] Personal and intellectual reasons both pushed Yu Jie to associate Christianity with conservative US politics, making it little surprise that Yu Jie adored the United States as the archetypical Christian nation.

For Yu Jie, the United States could not have been great without a politically active church. Another point of resonance, and perhaps the most potent one, was Yu Jie's commitment to a public and reformist faith. In contemporary Chinese Christianity broadly construed, Christian dissidents such as Yu Jie were the exception rather than the norm. Considering the large intellectual and cultural gap between Yu Jie's style of urban elite Christianity and popular Christianity, Christian reformers like Yu Jie mostly remained "generals without an army," in Lian Xi's words, in their reforming crusade.[79] Several urban elite Christian reformers thus harbored quite an ambivalent attitude toward the kind of indigenous Christianity represented by the "underground church." On one hand, they admired the underground church for being one of the very few civic societies that successfully resisted the ideological indoctrination of the totalitarian party-state during the Maoist years.[80] On the other hand, they found the traditional underground churches "reclusive," "anti-intellectual," and worst of all, singularly "disinterested in public and political affairs."[81] Some Chinese churches were convinced that, compared to the underground churches, the public church in urban centers marked a corrective step, and even a new phase, of Chinese Christianity. Sun Yi, an elder of Beijing's Shouwang Church, for example, had written much on how the urban church in today's China ought to "emerge from the underground," "transition from a fellowship-based church into an established congregation," and "bear its due responsibility in Chinese society."[82] This self-designation as a new stage of church development was not always the result of foreign missionaries' influence, and different churches debated what precisely constituted this new development.

Yu Jie's perception of the Chinese church, though, was clearly influenced by Jonathan Chao. Chao, who had received his PhD in East Asian Studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1986, wrote his dissertation on Chinese church history in the early twentieth century. Historical research was one of Jonathan Chao's foremost concerns, and the influence of his historical narrative of Chinese Christianity may prove to be his most enduring legacy. For the present inquiry, Yu Jie embraced Jonathan Chao's narrative that the Chinese urban elite church had entered a new phase because it had once again taken up the Reformed "cultural mandate" that the earlier underground church had neglected.

[78]Xi, "Cultural Christians," 81.

[79]Ibid., 86.

[80]The most high-profile expression of Wang Yi's admiration for the resilience of the underground church was the last of his "95 Theses." Wang Yi, "Women dui jiating jiaohui lichang de chongshen (jiushiwu tiao)" [95 Theses on the Position of the Chinese House Church], August 2015, https://www.cclifefl.org/View/Article/4248.

[81]This became somewhat of a consensus among this generation of urban intellectual Christians. For example, see Yu Jie, "Gongyi he ping'an bici xiangqin – ping Chengdu qiuyuzhifu jiaohui zhengqu gongkaihua de nuli" 公义和平安彼此相亲—评成都秋雨之福教会争取公开化的努力 [Righteousness and Peace Had Kissed Each Other – On Chengdu's Early Rain Church's Endeavor for Publicness], *Ganlanzhi* 11 (December 2009): 41.

[82]Sun Yi, "Zuo shanshang de cheng – dui chengshi jiating jiaohui fazhan de yidian sikao" 作山上的城 – 对城市家庭教会发展的一点思考 [To be a City on a Hill – Thoughts on the Development of Urban House Churches]. *Behold* 举目45, accessed September 1, 2010, https://behold.oc.org/?p=3716.

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Jonathan Chao concluded one of his overviews of Chinese church history with a bold forecast:

> Our situation now is the second golden age in the development of Christianity in China. The first was from 1900 to the May Fourth of 1919. Back then Chinese Christian intellectuals did not stand up. They could not shoulder the task of reforming the country or the society, [sic] and lost the opportunity to change [China]. Today we are facing the second golden age for the proliferation of Christianity in China. We must seize this opportunity to promote the evangelization of China, the kingdomization of the church, and the Christianization of its culture.[83]

The last three items in Chao's call to action – evangelization of China, kingdomization of the church, and Christianization of culture – are jointly called Chao's "threefold vision" (*sanhua yixiang*, sometimes translated as "triple vision"), which many consider to be his greatest legacy. It can be interpreted as a Chinese restatement of the perennial Calvinist drive to reform society, whether in Geneva or New England.[84]

One innovative aspect of Jonathan Chao's narrative is that he linked the urgency of this public drive to the historical conviction that the Chinese church in the 1990s was now entering a "second golden age." Yu Jie held this commitment as well. In one of his articles titled "My Reflections on Reading Jonathan Chao's *Collected Essays on Chinese Church History*," Yu Jie argued, "At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese politics, economics, and culture have undergone unprecedented change. The old systematic ideology had crumbled, utilitarianism and nihilism are rising like ocean waves… As Christians, are we ready to enter the second golden age of spreading the gospel [in China]?"[85] Like Chao, Yu Jie believed that the separatist and spiritualist practices of the traditional underground churches were not the way to go. "When the church overseas only sang praises for the house churches' resilience under suffering," Yu commented, "Jonathan Chao saw the crisis. The 'monastic' style of house churches does not comport well with the Protestant spirit."[86]

Whether the underground church is "monastic," or whether such practice betrays "the Protestant spirit," is beside the point. This intellectual exchange completed the fusion of Yu Jie's public ambition with the historical awareness and the public mandate supplied by Reformed missionaries such as Chao and Tong. That Chinese urban Christians found in the Reformed tradition a public mandate is common enough, yet the idiosyncrasies of Yu Jie's political theology, and especially his historical narrative, echoed that of Tong and the Chaos. To support a publicly active form of Christianity, Yu Jie adapted Loraine Boettner's clean-cut historical narrative in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* and infused it with even loftier political ambition. For Yu Jie, as it was for Boettner, the

[83]Jonathan Chao, *Zhongguo jiaohuishi lunwenji* 中国教会史论文集 [Collected Essays on Chinese Church History] (Taipei: Cosmic Light, 2006), 88.

[84]Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 103.

[85]Yu Jie, "Yingjie zhongguo fuyin chuanbo de dierge huangjin niandai – du zhao tian'en 'Zhongguo jiaohuishi lunwenji'" 迎接中国福音传播的第二个黄金年代 – 读赵天恩"中国教会史论文集" [Welcoming the Second Golden Age of Evangelization in China – Reading Jonathan Chao's Collected Essays on Chinese Church History], *Behold* 31, accessed May 1, 2008, https://behold.oc.org/?p=4918.

[86]Ibid.

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history of the modern West was a history of "elect nations" blessed by Calvinism. The Netherlands welcomed Calvinism, became a "capitalist republic," then won independence from Spain; England welcomed Calvinism, defeated the Spanish Armada, and later became a world power; the United States welcomed Calvinism and, more than two hundred years later, defeated the Empire of Japan, outlasted the USSR, and became the only superpower in the world. This simple history offered a clear lesson: "That which controls the transitions of visible power and norms in the past five hundred years is the invisible hand of God, the worldview and social order forged by the Reformation."[87] Wherever the Reformation went, power and prestige followed.

The countries that did not adopt Reformed Christianity, on the other hand, landed in disaster: "Because the Enlightenment intellectuals 'banished God,' their democracy was like mercury spilled on the floor. Given a little push, and they all roll up in a ball of authoritarianism and oppression. From France to Germany, from Russia to China, from Marxism to fascism… these all began from those philosophers who declared themselves enemies of the Bible's cultural legacy."[88] As Stephen Tong had exhorted, Chinese people ought to realize that "the path of Jerusalem, Geneva, and Philadelphia, and the path of Athens, Paris, and Moscow are two completely different paths."[89] The notion that New England Puritans were the progenitors of Calvinism, Presbyterianism, or even "freedom" in the United States was a fiction transpired by the actors studied in this article. Historical controversies between the Puritans, the Presbyterians, and American revolutionaries render any unbroken chain between New England Puritans and twenty-first century Reformed theology an invention. Spurred by what he perceived to be urgent and practical concerns facing Chinese Christian dissidents, however, Yu Jie, in the late 2000s, found the single-origin narrative of modern American freedom much suited to his intellectual aspirations.

## V. Conclusion

From the Reformed Presbyterians of the mid-twentieth century to Chinese Christian dissidents and Christian Nationalists of the twenty-first century, an intellectual thread informed the political outlook of several generations of interconnected Chinese Christians. It is the conviction that Western freedom came only from Reformed Christianity, to the exclusion of Renaissance humanism, Catholic theology, or Enlightenment philosophy. Even within this very narrow slice of Reformed thinkers, this single-origin historical narrative manifested in slightly different forms for each of its Chinese adopters. Jonathan Chao differed from his father and from Stephen Tong insofar as he did not promote a single-origin historical narrative of how modern Western freedom came to be. Stephen Tong's single-origin narrative resembled Francis Schaeffer's, who in turn got much of his narrative, especially about the United States' allegedly Christian founding, from Christian

[87]Yu Jie, *Daguang: zongjiao gaige, guannian duijue yu guozu xingshuai diyijian – qingjiao zhixu wubainian* 大光:宗教改革、观念对决与国族兴衰第一卷:清教秩序五百年 [A Great Light: the Reformation, Clash of Ideologies, and National Revival, vol. 1: Five Hundred Years of Puritan Order] (Taipei: Ba Qi Culture, 2022), 15–17.

[88]Yu Jie, *Sheiwei shenzhou lijiujiang* 谁为神州理旧疆 [The Reconstruction of Faith and Society in China] (Taipei: Christian Arts Press, 2010), 72.

[89]Ibid.

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Reconstructionism, as his biographer Barry Hankins argued.[90] In that case, the differences between the theonomist strain of "Reformed" political theology and the Reformed Presbyterianism of Charles Chao, especially regarding Old Testament laws and eschatology, also add an unneglectable diversity within this small group. Finally, Yu Jie's historical narrative in his magnum opus was in many ways not merely a replication, but an embellishment and exaggeration of the one he inherited. Not only did the Netherlands, England, and the United States get their freedom from Calvinism, in Yu Jie's formulation, they also got their market economy, military might, and international prestige.

These differences qualify the present argument. As much as this article contends that a clear connection exists between the missionaries and Chinese Christians studied here, this connection ought not to be exaggerated as to claim any necessary causality between them. Yu Jie's ambitious interpretation of modern Western history as a sequence of elect Reformed nations was the result of complex social conditions, intellectual movements, and personal contingencies. While the influence of Charles and Jonathan Chao and Stephen Tong was clearly discernible, it does not constitute a sufficient cause. Neither should the argument here be exaggerated as to claim that the Chaos and Tong were the only channel through which a single-origin historical narrative of American freedom has been transmitted from the United States to China. Scholars have only begun to explore the transnational connections between the United States and Chinese Christianities in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It would not be surprising if future works reveal how politicized evangelicalism in the United States has a profound degree of influence on the Chinese church.

These caveats notwithstanding, the intellectual thread through three generations of Chinese Christians or return missionaries reveals important historical connections within modern and contemporary Chinese Christianity. While the popularity of Calvinism in contemporary Chinese Christianity has been a familiar subject of study, previous scholarship has not always paid adequate attention to the US connection of the Chinese Calvinists. Scholars have debated whether the Calvinism adopted by Chinese urban elite Christians should be called "New Calvinism" or "Old Calvinism."[91] There are some good reasons for both, though this article contends that a more accurate label should be "American fundamentalist Calvinism" or "Christian Nationalist Calvinism." While these labels oversimplify the complexity of the religious phenomena named in them, important intellectual pillars in the thought of Chinese Christians studied here were indeed connected with various US Christian movements, such as Reformed Presbyterianism, Old School fundamentalism, and the intellectual output of Francis Schaeffer – all of which provided some measure of intellectual support for Christian Nationalism. Recent scholars have noted how the Reformed faith sometimes "goes down the rabbit hole" for failing to contextualize itself for Chinese society.[92] This article suggests that one way in which this failure of contextualization is most conspicuous is in the single-origin historical narrative that influential Chinese Calvinists had proclaimed. If one is to make sense of the hard turn toward the political right and Christian Nationalism of some well-known Chinese Christian exiles, then one cannot ignore the American influence on their political theology. This article offers a glimpse into what will surely turn out to be a more complex

[90]Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, 198.

[91]Fredrik Fällman makes a case for "New Calvinism" in "Calvin, Culture and Christ?" 153. Alexander Chow makes the case for calling them "Old Calvinists," with roots in sixteenth-century Reformed church, in *Chinese Public Theology*, 110.

[92]Ximian, "How to Make Sino-Reformed Theology Possible?" 164.

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and robust international connection between contemporary United States and Chinese Christianities.

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