

“The Cause of the Riots in the Yangtse Valley” (1891)  
Missionary Commentary on an Illustrated Anti-Christian Chinese Pamphlet

Introduction by Peter C. Perdue



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## INTRODUCTION

This text, entitled in English *The Cause of the Riots in the Yangtse [Yangzi] Valley: "A Complete Picture Gallery,"* or in Chinese "In Accord with the Imperial Edict: Complete Illustrations of the Heretical Religion," was published in 1891 in Hankou, a major city on the Yangzi river in the central interior of China. It consists of a collection of 32 images used by local agitators to stir up anti-Christian movements in the central Yangzi region, and a commentary by the missionary editor. The Western author, the missionary Griffith John, had found these images bound in a pamphlet, and he blamed the author of the pamphlet for inciting violent action against Christian missionaries. He attributed the text to a Mr. Zhou Han 周漢, whom he described as a lower level circuit official in Hunan, and sent it to his missionary and official contacts in order to provoke suppression of these anti-Western books. This text, then, has two authors, Western and Chinese. Each of whom had a different purpose in publicizing it. The Chinese author published it in order to arouse sentiment against Christian missionaries and Chinese converts. Griffith John used it to call attention to the dangerous rise of anti-Christian sentiment among the local Chinese elite. The images themselves, however, appeal directly to the folk and elite traditions of China's classical past. In vivid colors, they depict graphic violence in order to stir up popular emotions. Although the artists employed this violent imagery against the Christian faith, popular artists in China, long before the Christian impact, had used similar imagery. Thus the text itself and its images speak with multiple voices, which clash and complement each other. They show graphically the growing conflict between Western missionary views of China and Chinese views of the Western presence.

## The Rise of Anti-Christian Movements in the 19th century

The treaties ending the second Opium war in 1860 allowed Western missionaries to gain access to the interior of China. They could now purchase properties and establish missions in regions of China where very few foreigners had ever traveled. Once again, since the arrival of Buddhism in the first and second centuries CE, and the spread of Islam in the 13th century, a foreign religion now attempted to convert large numbers of Chinese to a new faith. The earliest Christian missionaries, the Jesuits and other Catholic orders, had aimed to convert the elite level of Chinese society, by proving that they had mastered the classical texts. In the 19th century, however, the new Western missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, targeted the poorest levels of the population, aiming to convert large numbers of villagers in rural China. They had the backing of foreign powers, who could force the Qing court to suppress resistance to missionary penetration, and they often became large landowners in Chinese villages and towns.

Once the missionaries became landowners and residents in Chinese villages and towns, they could not avoid becoming involved in the economic and cultural life of their communities. Poor members of the villages who converted to Christianity could improve their standard of living by taking advantage of charities, orphanages, and the protection of the Church in local disputes. On the other hand, Christian converts had to reject the classical village rituals, which missionaries denounced as pagan idolatry. By refusing to contribute to the funding of festivals and ceremonies they isolated themselves from the social life of the village. As they married other Christians, they created insular communities, dividing the village into rival clans. Many villages in north China soon split into two sections: a Christian district and a non-Christian one. When famine struck these communities, the presence of Christians aggravated perennial resource conflicts within villages and towns.

The local elites, educated in the Chinese classical tradition, whether or not they had degrees from the examination system, also had reason to resent the rise of Christianity. Their authority in the community depended on their knowledge of classical learning and their privileged access to state officials. Foreigners often called them "gentry" or "notables," invoking the image of British or French local landowning elites who also held informal power in the countryside. The arrival of competing elites, backed not only by an alien religious tradition but by foreign powers, aroused great suspicion. The missionaries carried out many of the same charitable activities as the Chinese local elites, but they had more resources and they appealed openly to all classes. They did not respect the carefully graduated distinctions of lineage, locality, and bureaucratic status that were built into Chinese social behavior. For most common people and elites alike, these Christians seemed to be an alien invading force. Worst of all, they seduced poor Chinese with attractive tales of salvation, undermining the carefully preserved authority of fathers, landowners, educated people, and the elderly sages.

Although Confucian texts promulgated the virtues of harmony, and foreigners often viewed China as an extraordinarily peaceful, harmonious society, strong undercurrents of violence had always run through classical China. The ruling emperors and their military forces constantly fought wars, both against domestic enemies and outside threats. Commoners forced to serve in the imperial armies soon grew inured to violence, and these demobilized soldiers returned to their villages with weapons and very tough skins. Besides the imperial military, local people formed their own militia groups for self-defense against bandits and rivals from other villages. Lineage feuds mobilized toughs for hire to serve as enforcers in disputes over land, water rights, and proper ritual behavior. Even Confucius himself, and his scholarly interpreters, justified righteous warfare against barbarians who threatened the sacred norms of the imperial dynasty. The Buddhist and Daoist traditions, although they too preached benevolence and compassion, invoked horrific images of torture in bureaucratic hells for those who violated the teachings of Buddha and Laozi. Although Confucians discouraged too much dangerous enthusiasm in ritual behavior, many popular rituals encouraged large crowds of people to gather together, relying on the blood sacrifice of animals, self-flagellation, and passionate exhortation to bring down Heaven's power for human relief.

Furthermore, despite the Confucian and Buddhist stress on forgiveness, ideals of vengeance remained powerful in rural China. Particularly in the 19th century, as

restraints by imperial officials and elites grew increasingly ineffective, lineage feuds and vendettas expanded. The original causes might be a dispute over land or water rights, or an inappropriate marriage, or an illicit love affair, but the conflict could easily metastasize into large scale violence. In the disturbed conditions after the suppression of the large-scale rebellions of the mid-19th century, people learned only with difficulty to reconcile themselves to losses. Even before the Christians arrived in large numbers, the search for scapegoats had begun. Who had inflicted such devastation on the country? Was it wandering priests, lascivious monks, sturdy beggars, youthful rapists, or other unknown demonic forces?

On the positive side, from the point of view of the pamphlet agitators, the wars had created large numbers of powerful militiamen, or braves (*yong* 勇), who could fight for the orthodox values that were under threat. Heroic warriors could carry out righteous battles on behalf of Heaven's way (*ti tian xing dao* 提天行道).

The anti-Christian pamphlets also relied on a longstanding practice of woodblock printing that depicted many popular festivals in vivid colors. The themes of these prints often included innocent pictures of flowers, dances by children, feasts and offerings presented to local protective gods. Other prints, however, warned people against bad behavior with terrifying images of demons, or they celebrated the glorious conquests of famous generals. By the 19th century a well-established publishing industry had produced cheap booklets and prints that anyone in urban or rural areas could see. Lending libraries allowed readers to sit in the street and read these small pamphlets for a few cents per hour. Some of the prints also referred to current events. Even before the advent of the mass publishing of images in Shanghai by the *Dianshizhai Huabao* (the illustrated supplement to the *Shenbao* newspaper), popular imagery about China's current situation in the world, its relationships with foreigners, and the wonders of new technology certainly circulated widely. The "News from Abroad" (Kaigai Shinwa)—the Japanese illustrated account of the Opium War—clearly relied on Chinese woodblock prints and stories that had circulated in Canton.

Very little of this ephemeral material has survived. Because foreign missionaries collected it, this pamphlet is one of the few that circulated outside the country, escaping the conflagrations of war and upheaval that afflicted so much of China during the 19th century. It represents a type of popular illustrated literature, however, that effectively combined images and texts to disseminate widely-held conceptions of foreigners, religions, and rituals throughout urban and rural areas.

### The Authors

Zhou Han (1842-1911) was a conservative scholar who tenaciously resisted the intrusion of Western Christian ideas into Chinese society. He was a native of Ningxiang county in Hunan. The Hunanese had a long reputation for being extremely conservative and militant in defense of their beliefs. His father, a distinguished scholar and local official, had joined a military unit to fight the Taiping rebellion. When Zhou Han's father died in 1860, Zhou joined the Hunanese provincial army and followed its campaigns to suppress rebellions in Hubei, Anhui, Jiangxi, and the Muslim rebellion in Shaanxi and Xinjiang. He returned to Ningxiang after his service, and obtained the honorary rank of *daotai*, or circuit intendant in recognition of his service, from the famous scholar-general Zuo Zongtang.

During his absence, Christian missionaries, churches, charity halls, and schools had penetrated extensively even into remote parts of Hunan. There were at least 25 churches in the province, and perhaps 8000 believers. Zhou dedicated himself to publishing a large number of moral tracts, urging Chinese to adhere to classical values derived from the ancient sage kings. Some of them had perfectly innocuous titles, such as "The Successful Rearing of Foundlings," but other publications directly attacked the Christian faith and its converts. He used vernacular language, images, and a variety of formats to spread his message—posters, small booklets, broadsides, and even songs. Officials estimated that several hundred thousand copies of his most popular anti-Christian texts had spread through the province, and from there down the Yangzi river. At least 43 titles—including this text—are attributed to him or the pseudonyms he used. They have titles such as "Death to the Devils' Religion," "Death Blow to Corrupt

Doctrines,” or “Complete Set of Images to Ward Off Heterodoxy.” He described the Christian tracts as “devils’ books, filled with dogshit,” which defiled the sacred ancestors, seduced the Chinese into immoral sexual activity, and drugged their women and children into submission to foreign ways.

Yet, as a returned soldier and prominent scholar he had close relations with local officials, and was popular among the general public. From the Chinese point of view, he was merely a conservative Confucian who aimed to reform the morals of his local area.

Griffith John (1831-1912) was the Western counterpart to Zhou Han, equally dedicated to propagating his moral ideology among the Chinese of Hubei and Hunan.

As a leader of the London Missionary Society who took long journeys into the Chinese interior, he had set up a base for his proselytizing in Hankou. He preached in Chinese, translated the Bible into Chinese, and established schools, hospitals, and training colleges, while also publishing many popular pamphlets. Although the Chinese Christian community in Hunan was small, John’s dedication, his foreign backing, and his penetration of remote villages posed a cultural threat to the entrenched local elite.

[1]

During the riots of 1891, “the cathartic climax of the first phase of central China’s response to the West,” [2] crowds rose up in nearly one dozen cities along the Yangzi river, stretching from Nanjing to Yichang, and hundreds of Chinese Christians and two Englishmen were murdered. Foreigners and officials knew that these widely-distributed texts had stirred up public violence, but at first they did not know who was responsible. Griffith John collected many of these materials and traced them back to Zhou Han’s publishing house in Changsha. He informed the British consul, who went to the Governor-general of Hubei and Hunan province, Zhang Zhidong, insisting that the publishing house be shut down and Zhou Han dismissed.

Zhou Han, for his part, wrote a letter to the Governor of Hubei province in which he claimed full credit for distributing anti-Christian writings, while proclaiming his complete loyalty to the dynasty. When five men were arrested with copies of “cartoons, representing a hog on a cross with mandarins worshipping before it,” they named Zhou Han as the publisher. Griffith John described Zhou Han as “a bitter hater of foreigners and everything that is foreign,” and called for his arrest, even though Zhou had close relations with the high provincial officials. In John’s view, Zhou was directly responsible for the outbreak of the riots along the Yangzi river: “they themselves seem to have been the principal agents in inflaming the popular mind and raising the uproar.” [3] He estimated that one of Zhou’s disciples had distributed 800,000 copies of one of his tracts, at a price of six cents per book, or given away for free. He demanded that Zhang Zhidong (the governor-general of Huguang) punish Zhou for his inflammatory behavior.

When Griffith John saw the images themselves, he was overcome with shock. He wrote,

*Anything more horribly beastly and disgusting than these painted representations it would be impossible to imagine. Here you have, depicted in brilliant colours, the licentious worship of the Crucified Hog, the extracting of the foetus, the cutting off of the nipples, the gouging of children’s eyes, the emasculating of boys, the slaying of the goats (foreigners), the offering in sacrifice to ancestors of the dead Hog (Jesus) and the dead goat (foreigner), etc., etc., etc. I have not seen anything, during my long sojourn in this land, that has made me feel so sick at heart.*

[4]

He summarized very accurately the main themes of the booklet presented here.

Zhang Zhidong and the Chinese Foreign Ministry were reluctant to crack down on Zhou Han, because they knew that arresting him would inflame public opinion even further. The official investigation was not able to prove that Zhou was directly involved in printing the pamphlets. Several witnesses said that Zhou had suffered a mental illness, that “he talked nonsense and had spiritualistic fantasies, being a great believer in divination,” but that he did not publish anti-Christian placards. They claimed that others, knowing of his high reputation, had forged his name. [5] Yet they also revealed that 90 percent of the local population were singing his songs! Ultimately, the officials had the printing blocks destroyed, and Zhou was stripped of his rank and sent back to

his native town of Ningxiang, but the anti-Christian publications continued. Eventually Zhou was put on trial and jailed, but he delivered three defiant confessions in court. He claimed that he was the truly loyal servant of the emperor, and that officials who bowed to foreign pressure were cowards and traitors.

### The Perils of Graphic Imagery

Both Griffith John and Zhou Han knew that colorful images, coupled with virulent language, could excite strong feelings. Many images in the pamphlet attack religious heterodoxy and sexual deviance with violent rhetoric. They portray the Christians as animals, who know nothing of the moral codes that define humanity. The pictures portray the Western missionaries as goats and their Chinese followers as pigs. The play on words linking "Jesus" as "master (*zhu* 主) with "hog" (*zhu* 猪), or "Westerner" (*yang* 洋) with "goat" (*yang* 羊), reduced the Christian believers to a bestial level. Not only were they animals, but they behaved in deviant ways that went beyond even natural animal behavior. The use of the color green, indicating "cuckold," in the characters referring to Christians signified the undermining of the family by the alien believers. In addition, anti-Christian propagandists tirelessly repeated allegations of illicit sexual relations between priests and their followers. A long tradition of popular literature, endorsed by Confucian literati, mocked Buddhists who secretly violated vows of celibacy; now the same mockery was turned against Christian priests. But the foreigners, with their large hairy beards and ugly noses, were not merely human seducers. They looked much more like feared demons than simply corrupt humans.

Pigs and goats, however, not only represented the reduction of humans below the level of civilization; they were also objects of sacrifice. Since traditional Chinese raised few beef cattle, the most common meats consumed at ritual sacrifices were pigs, goats, and sheep. (The Chinese character *yang* [羊] stands for both goats and sheep.) One way to justify images of blood slaughter outside of depictions of battle is to illustrate a ritual sacrifice. In a number of these images, the animalistic Christians are brought before a god or magistrate, who sits in judgment and offers them as sacrifices by having their throats slit.

The bright red colors, signifying blood, invoke both the excitement of vengeance against evil interlopers and the purifying power of sacrifice to remove the tainted elements from the village. But vengeance does not have to include immediate bloodshed. A persistent theme in the Chinese political tradition is the brooding, deferred vengeance of a defeated king against his enemy. In the third century BCE, the king of the state of Yue, Wu Jian, practiced this form of delayed retribution against the enemy who had destroyed his state. This motif, summarized in the epigram "sleep on hides and taste gall" (*qinpi changdan* 寝皮尝胆), urges constant dedication and remembrance of humiliation in order to keep alive the thirst for ultimate vindication. Heroes in this tradition endure hardships, but never lose sight of the final goal of exterminating the hated enemy.

One of the more puzzling pictures in the collection deploys this type of vengeful spirit against the Christian incursion (#25). It portrays two scholarly gentleman apparently engaged in amicable discussion of a text. But if we look closely, we see that the man on the left, holding a gall bladder, is lying on an animal skin labeled in green "Jesu" (耶稣), and the man on the right sits on a skin labeled "Western skin." (西皮) Each of them sits beside a footstool with a green cross. The caption remarks, "At home he constantly drank gall: his heart was firm in the resolve to have his revenge on the enemies of Yue." The caption on the right reads "In summer take in the skins; who among the flesh eaters can equal Wen Zhong (the advisor of King Yue)?"

This elaborate play of classical allusions in fact would have been easily understandable by the gentry elite, and by most commoners as well. The foreigners and their collaborating officials (the eaters of green, Western flesh) had betrayed and humiliated the Chinese people. Revenge would come slowly, but everyone must dedicate himself to the task of eliminating the foreign menace. This theme of humiliation crowned by a vindicating bloodbath of retribution became a powerful motivating force for Chinese nationalists in the early-20th century. This image shows that the anti-Christian agitators clearly knew how to use this ancient classical tale to serve the anti-foreign movement.

It prefigures the alliance of threatened elites and mass movements that would break out in the Boxer rebellion ten years later.

The missionary commentator has provided a detailed introduction and notes on the imagery of each picture. In this unit, we have reproduced each of the images and transcribed the notes of the original. Although the missionary writer naturally denounced the threatening anti-Christian movement, he also accurately describes the classical motifs embedded in these popular texts. Reading through the missionary's bias, we can perceive the underlying traditional tales that informed Chinese viewers of the meaning of the Christian impact in their villages.

This imagery, the tip of an iceberg, gives us only a glimpse of a riotous, colorful popular culture that responded to current events by melding ritual sacrifices, historical allusions, and violent emotional agitation. The anti-Christian images stand between the images of the classical past, which referred to ancient kings, and the secular imagery of the 20th century, which addressed global political developments. They show us graphically how 19th-century Chinese used their inherited cultural practices to ward off the onrush of Western ideologies and technologies that threatened the survival of their civilization.

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