

Religion, Resistance, and Cultural Sovereignty: Shandong Province's Anti-Christian Movement and Protestant Efforts in the 1920s

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Abstract

This article investigates the Anti-Christian Movement and Protestant efforts in Shandong Province during the 1920s, situating it within the broader context of China's response to foreign religious influence amid rising nationalism and communism. From the 19th century, China was impacted by Western powers in culture, education, and other aspects, and the Protestant churches played a crucial role. By the early 20th century, China had experienced multiple political upheavals and revolutions, which had triggered social, cultural, and ideological upheavals, as well as further changes in the attitudes of various sectors of Chinese society towards Christianity. As one of the earlier regions exposed to Protestant missions, Shandong became a focal point of tensions between Chinese cultural identity and Western religious presence, particularly in the aftermath of sustained imperialist encroachment and political upheavals in early twentieth-century China. This study employs archival research methods, drawing primarily on sources such as missionary reports, government announcements and local gazetteers. This study aims to address the following issues: the causes, processes, and outcomes of the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong, as well as the responses and activities of local Protestant churches during this period. This study finds that the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong is a critical expression of cultural security and sovereignty. It influenced government policy on religion, reshaped the strategies of Protestant churches under mounting pressure, and contributed to the reconstruction of Sino-Western relations during a formative period. Local communists also succeeded in expanding their influence among students and intellectuals through the movement. Despite opposition, Protestant institutions adapted through local partnerships and shifts in educational and social engagement, revealing the complex interplay between internal resistance and external religious influence in Republican China. Protestants in Shandong continued to pursue educational and social initiatives, adapting to new social and political realities by forging closer ties with local actors.

Keywords: Anti-Christian Movement; Shandong Province; Chinese Nationalism; Protestantism in China; Communism in China

Introduction

The 1920s were a period of the transition and modernisation in China. After the First World War and the May Fourth Movement, a series of political changes promoted social transformation. As a significant social force in China since the 19th century, the Protestant churches also faced the new conditions, especially the Anti-Christian Movement. According to the previous study, the Anti-Christian Movement in China was gestated from 1919 to 1922 and covered three main phases: dissemination period (1922-1924); direct action period (1924-1925); consolidation and expansion (after 1925).¹ The

existing research focuses more on the Anti-Christian Movement in Beijing, Shanghai, or the whole of China, while there is a lack of research on other provinces or cities, especially with little exploration of the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong Province. Cohen discusses the similarities and differences between the Anti-Christian Movement of the 1920s and historical anti-Christian trends in China;² Zhu illustrates the influence of the Anti-Christian Movement in the aspects of social beliefs and enlightenment in thought; Tatsuro Yamamoto and Sumiko Yamamoto equated the importance of the Anti-Christian Movement with the Boxer Rebellion.³ Although existing research has achieved certain results, it often stays at the description and simple analysis of events, lacking in-depth exploration of the underlying reasons and significance behind the movements. However, there is a lack of systematic research and comprehensive evaluation on the impact and consequences of the movement. This study aims to conduct in-depth exploration and systematic research on this topic to fill the existing research gap and provide richer historical data and theoretical references for subsequent related research.

In the vast expanse of China, Shandong was an early province to embrace the Protestant movement, with American missionaries establishing churches and schools as early as the 1860s and gradually developing into an important area of Protestant activity in China. Located on the eastern coast of China (see Map 1), Shandong is one of the most densely populated provinces in China. Its capital city, Jinan, is an important railway hub connecting many large and significant cities in China. This geographic and transport advantage made Shandong an important missionary area for Protestant missionaries in the 20th century, facilitating the church's connection and expansion to other regions. In terms of historical and cultural status, Shandong is known as the "Holy Land" of China and is the home of ancient Chinese thinkers such as Confucius and Mencius, and its educational traditions were based on the Confucian cultural atmosphere.⁴ This deep Confucian cultural tradition presents both challenges and opportunities for missionary activity, as missionaries need to interact with local traditions and culture, while also drawing on Shandong's cultural influence to promote Christianity. And the geographic location of Shandong (on the seacoast) makes it the frontier of Sino-foreign relations after the Opium Wars. Analysing its missionary activities and influence helps to understand more comprehensively the process of the spread and localisation of Christianity in China.

WHERE IS SHANTUNG?



THE Province of Shantung is located on the north-east coast of China. Its area is 55,984 sq. mi., approximately the same as that of the State of Iowa, or the whole of England with Wales, or the combined provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. But Shantung has a population of about 35,000,000 souls, making it the most densely settled province in all China.

Its capital, Tsinan, a rapidly growing city of some 350,000 people, is situated at the junction of two important trunk railways, one of which connects it with Peking, Tientsin and Nanking, whilst the other extends to Tsingtao, the port on the eastern coast which is still held by the Japanese since its capture from Germany in 1914.

Map 1: Map and Introduction of Shandong.

Source: United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 1924.

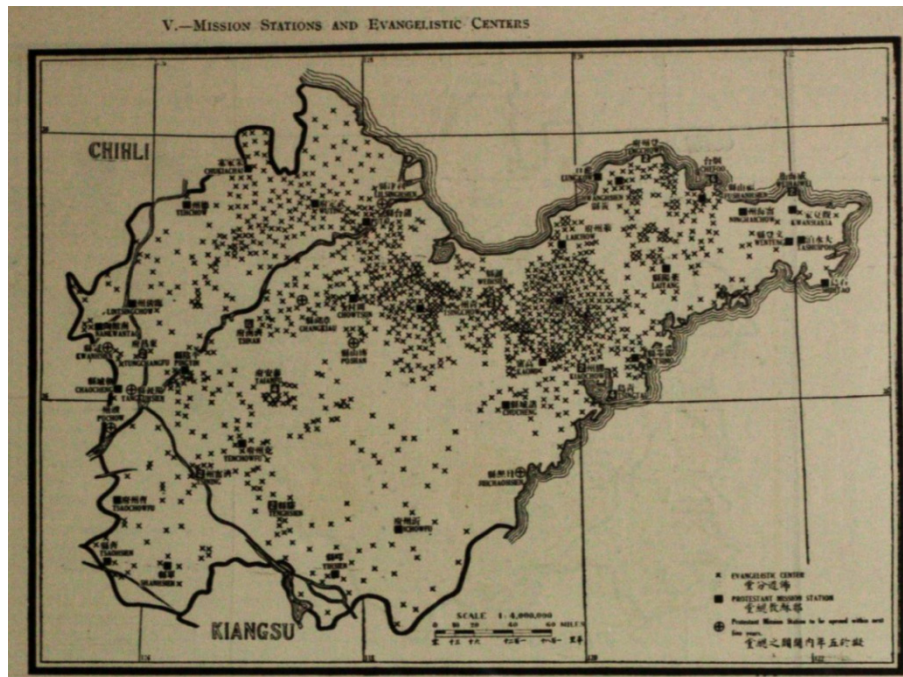
From the perspective of international politics in the early 20th century, the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong was not merely a local expression of nationalist resistance but also relevant to the post-First World War Sino-Western relations, exploring how it intersected with China's diplomatic strategies and Western responses. This study aims to analyse how China's efforts to reclaim educational and religious sovereignty paralleled its pursuit of national recognition in forums such as the Washington Conference and its subsequent diplomatic negotiations with Western powers. Furthermore, this study examines the diplomatic consequences of anti-Christian agitation, assessing how Western governments and missionary organisations navigated the growing tensions between their religious, commercial, and geopolitical interests in China. By using the method of archival study, this paper aims to explore the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong, a social phenomenon that was easily overlooked but had a profound impact. The historical source on which this article is based mainly comes from official reports of Western Protestant churches and their sponsoring institutions, as well as government announcements and local gazetteers from China and Shandong Province. Various types of sources may have a certain bias towards their own side, which needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis. This paper will delve into the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong in the 1920s. For the research significance, this study can expound the changes and development of Chinese society on a provincial level and provide inspiration for the relevant modernisation and internationalisation of contemporary China and Shandong.

The Protestant Achievements in China and Shandong up to early 1920s

The Protestant Movement in China stemmed from the transformation of Protestant churches in the West. Since the end of the 18th century, inspired by the Second Great Awakening Movement and the rise of Christianity's desire to transform and conquer the world, a group of American missionaries came to China, believing themselves to be on a "divine mission" to educate the Chinese people.⁵ In Britain, the founder of China Inland Mission strongly called for the importance of missionary work in China, to save "Four hundred millions of souls."⁶ These became the motivations of the early Protestant missionary career in China. Before Protestantism entered China in the 19th century, the Qing government still adhered to the worldview under the tributary system and lacked understanding of Western development until the defeat after the Opium War in 1842.⁷ The Protestant missionaries started their work in Shandong in the 1860s, and similar to Malaya in the 19th century, education was the primary undertaking of the missionaries.⁸ In the late 19th century, the anti-missionary riots and the Boxer Rebellion broke out and damaged the churches.⁹ The Protestant churches recovered after the siege between China and the Western powers. According to the Xinchou Treaty between the Qing Court and Western powers in 1901, the Chinese government was required to pay reparations, and most of the reparations were used for the rebuilding and expansion of missionary schools and hospitals.

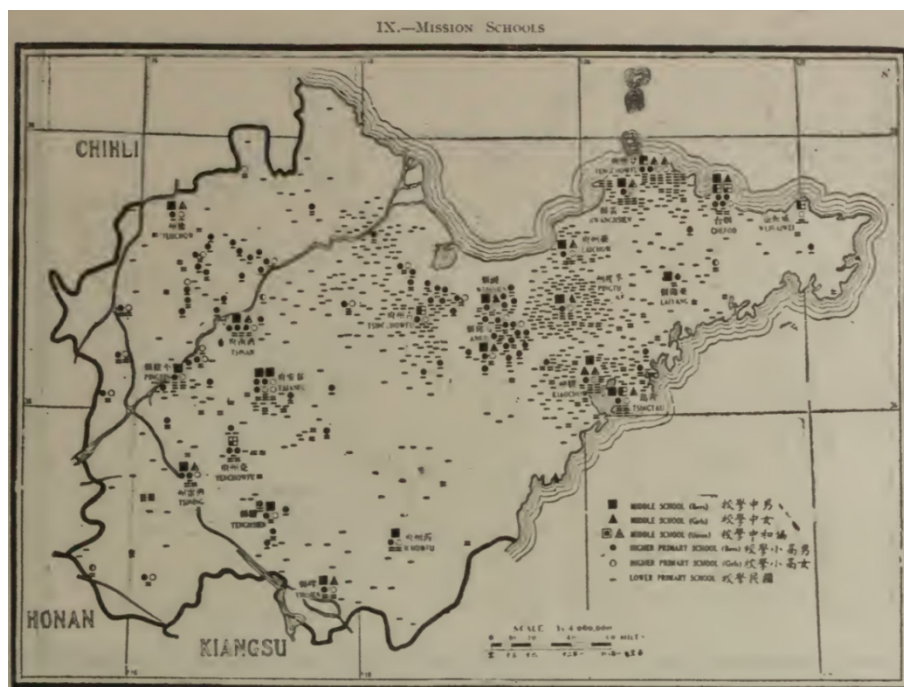
After the establishment of the Republic of China, the Protestant movement in Shandong experienced significant expansion and adaptation, laying the groundwork for broader engagement with Chinese society. Despite challenges, missionary schools achieved notable success in promoting literacy, modern education, and healthcare training. Overall, the Protestant educational and medical work in Shandong established a network of services centred on large cities and radiating to the countryside, providing the local population with more advanced services (See Map 2, Map 3, and Map 4). By the early 1920s, there were more than 40,000 communicants and over 50,000 Christian constituencies in Shandong; the Christian schools included 942 lower primary schools, 142 higher primary schools and 40 middle schools, supporting 21,354 boys and girls in Shandong; 28 hospitals and 36 dispensaries in the province served nearly 6,000 inpatients annually.¹⁰ These endeavours not

only raised the educational and health standards of the local community, but also laid the foundation for the further spread of Protestantism in Shandong.



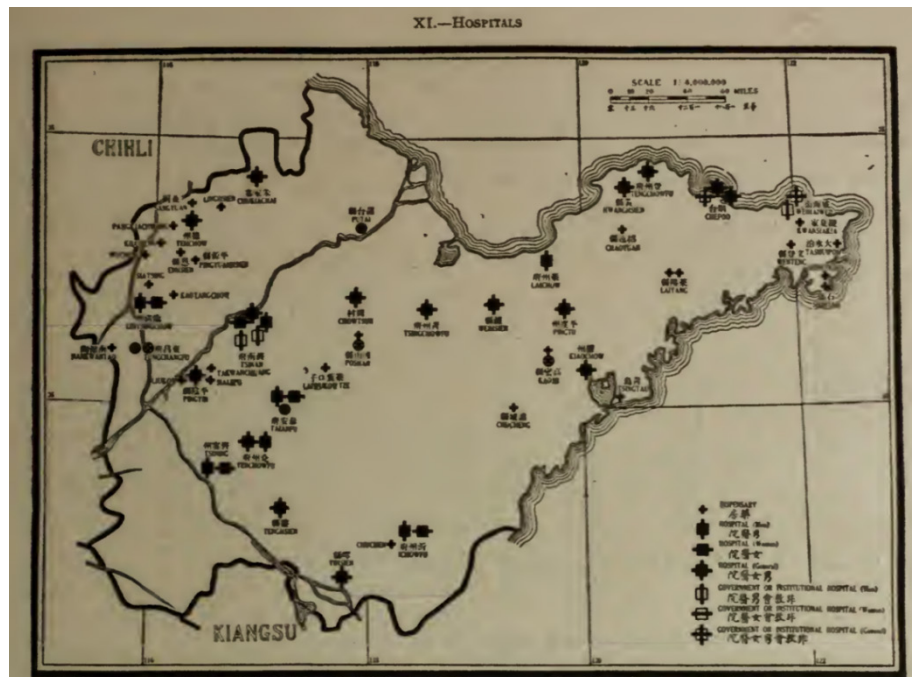
Map 2: Missionary institutions in Shandong until early 1920s.

Source: Milton T. Stauffer (ed.), 1922.



Map 3: Missionary schools in Shandong until early 1920s.

Source: Milton T. Stauffer (ed), 1922.



Map 4: Missionary hospitals in Shandong until early 1920s.
Source: Milton T. Stauffer (ed.), 1922.

In addition, the Protestant churches in Shandong also offered other social services. For women's rights, the Protestant missionaries held an anti-foot-binding attitude and helped local women to untie their feet.¹¹ The missionary schools in Shandong also provided women with opportunities to get professional skills but also helped to awaken women to a sense of liberation and independence.¹² In Yantai, from the late 19th century, the missionaries built schools for deaf children and called for educational assistance for China's 400,000 deaf-mute people.¹³ In general, up to the early 1920s, the Protestant churches in Shandong had made remarkable achievements in education, healthcare, and social charity. In 1922, all Protestant achievements in China up to the early 1920s were fully accounted for and compiled. The author emphasised that the main purpose of the statistics was to promote further success in the evangelisation of China.¹⁴ However, due to several factors at that period, Chinese attitudes towards Christianity began to be regionally negative and gave rise to anti-Christian thoughts.

The Causes of Anti-Christian Movement

As the Protestant movement brought changes to Shandong, it also challenged some of the inherent norms of the local society at that time. In addition, as the local society developed and changed, negative attitudes towards Christianity were also being reborn and expressed in new and different forms.

Contradiction between Christianity and Confucianism

As one of the main forces in modern Chinese society, the intellectual tradition had a deeper contradiction with Confucian traditions. A typical example is Watson McMillan Hayes in Shandong. In 1901, after the Boxer Rebellion, the Qing court started the educational reform and established the Imperial University (*Da Xue Tang*) in Shandong. Hayes, an educator of the American Presbyterian

Mission, was invited to attend the preparation of the university and became the Teaching Director (*Zong Jiao Xi*). But less than one year later, Hayes decided to resign, because he disagreed with the university's policy of setting the worship of Confucius as an obligatory activity for students.¹⁵

In 1924, the General (*Du Li*) and Provincial Governor (*Sheng Zhang*) of Shandong wrote to the President of Beiyang Government, advocating the promotion of the study of the Confucian classics of Confucius and Mencius, and pointing out that religions, including Christianity, had their own limitations and were insufficient to forge a consensus among the people and unite the social forces.¹⁶ At that time, although the republican regime had already possessed theoretical freedom of religious belief, the positive social roles of Christianity and other religions were still questioned and belittled in the thinking of the local government leaders, and the traditional thought of Confucianism was still deeply rooted. It was also argued that traditional thinking, represented by Confucianism, still provides the framework and direction for the Chinese to accept and learn from Western civilisation, and allows Chinese society to translate those foreign elements.¹⁷ The Confucian tradition did not become the direct ideological pioneer of the Anti-Christian Movement, but constituted the foundation on which the movement was formed.

The New Culture Movement

The New Culture Movement promoted the ideals of democracy and science but also instigated a critical reassessment of traditional religions and foreign belief systems. Within this intellectual climate, Christianity became a prominent target of critique. As Chinese intellectuals advocated for national independence and cultural self-awareness, they increasingly questioned the cultural and political motives behind missionary activity in China. Thus, the New Culture Movement furnished the Anti-Christian Movement with ideological support and shaped its confrontational and critical discourse.

The New Culture Movement laid the intellectual foundation for the Anti-Christian Movement. The New Culture Movement laid the intellectual foundation for the Anti-Christian Movement. According to Chen Duxiu, there were several reasons why Christianity had generated some strife in Chinese society: Firstly, there were many Chinese Christians who profited from the religion and few who were sincere believers; secondly, Western governments used missionary work as a weapon of aggression; thirdly, the government's attitude towards Christianity was ambiguous.¹⁸ After the outbreak of the Anti-Christian Movement, Hu Shih argued that compared with the Boxer Rebellion period, the "enemy" of Christian missionary activities in the 1920s had become the rationalism of the masses.¹⁹ Cai Yuanpei emphasised that religion, as a form of mythological superstition, is not conducive to the cultivation of students' scientific spirit in modern Chinese education.²⁰ Cai also suggested that schools should not include theological courses or conduct prayers, and clergy should not participate in educational affairs.²¹ These attitudes from the famous intellectuals in China could reflect the tendency of suspending the status of Christianity in Chinese society after the New Culture Movement.

From the Late Qing, the ideological consciousness of Chinese intellectuals was constantly improved. They began to criticise traditional culture and social systems, advocating modernisation and democratisation. Especially in the 1920s, intellectuals played an important role in social movements. Their thoughts and actions influenced the masses and promoted the development of the Anti-Christian Movement.

Rise of Nationalism and Communism

The rise of the Anti-Christian Movement was closely related to the upsurge of China's nationalism and communism in the early 20th century — originally initiated by the Communists in the early 1920s and subsequently supported by the Nationalist Government, led by Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party), from the mid-1920s.²² At the beginning of the 20th century, China's weak position in international politics had still not been reversed, and the domestic politics were unstable and turbulent. The Anti-Christian Movement gained momentum in the early 1920s as Chinese intellectuals and students increasingly associated Christianity with imperialism. Missionary institutions were seen as instruments of Western cultural and political domination, leading to protests, school boycotts, and demands for educational autonomy.²³ These movements coincided with broader nationalist efforts to regain control over Chinese institutions, particularly after the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when anti-foreign sentiment had intensified.

The domestic and international images emerged as a powerful nationalist movement, directly triggered by the great indignation of the Chinese people after the First World War. The May Fourth Movement brought anti-imperialist sentiments to a climax, and Christianity, because of its foreign nature and its links with Western powers, came to be regarded as a symbol of “cultural aggression”.²⁴ In 1922, the National Students' Union stated in its statement that Christian schools were “spiritual fortresses of imperialism” and demanded that Chinese education be freed from religious fetters.²⁵ In 1925, the governments of China and Great Britain signed a memorandum and made a statement on the rights and duties of British missionaries in China; the memorandum also expressed respect for China's sovereignty and a vision for China to respect the freedom of worship.²⁶ While China hoped that these agreements would strengthen its position, nationalist groups remained sceptical, arguing that Western powers continued to place their economic and religious interests above genuine sovereignty.²⁷

The Communist Party of China (CPC), established in 1921, was a significant leading force of the Anti-Christian Movement. The Communist International had organisations in different parts of China with the goal of absorbing large numbers of students and radical intellectuals into social movements. These social movements could help the Communist Party take the initiative in a co-operative revolution with the Kuomintang.²⁸ The Comintern actively supported the communists (and its Youth League) in China in expanding their influence among students and intellectuals by promoting mass social movements, including the Anti-Christian Movement. The aim was to weaken Western influence and expand the influence of the Communist Party among young people.²⁹ In Shandong, after the nationalists and communists gradually established cooperation in the early 1920s, on the same page in their opposition to Christianity, leading to an increasing squeeze on the space for Protestant activities.

Privileges and Misdeeds of Christians

Among the factors that led to the Anti-Christian Movement, the privilege and vicious behaviour of the church members also stimulated anti-Christian sentiments among the locals. After the Boxer Rebellion, the Chinese government's attitudes towards Christianity became more tolerant. According to the laws and regulations of China during the Late Qing Reforms, Chinese Christians were called “*Jiao Min*” (people who believed in Christianity) rather than ordinary civilians and enjoyed special legal status.³⁰ While the Protestant church was expanding its influence, it also attracted some individuals with lower moral standards or poor ethical qualities, which negatively impacted the church's image. For instance, in Juxian of Shandong, a church member used the church's influence to commit various misdeeds.

This behaviour led to the villagers destroying the church in retaliation.³¹

The special status of Christians in China was also evident in the economic aspect, which also provoked social discontent. In the early 1920s, the church's massive land purchases for the construction of schools and hospitals provoked resentment from local gentry, who felt that this exacerbated the problem of land resource constraints.³² The Church's economic independence made its special position in the local economy highly controversial. An American missionary wrote a letter to the local administration about the unfairness of the rent tax and hoped that the government would enforce the law impartially.³³

The Anti-Christian Movement in China and Shandong was sourced from multiple motivations, both directly and indirectly. It is also confirmed that the movement was promoted by the different classes and groups of Chinese society, including the traditional bureaucrats, patriotic intellectuals, and ordinary people. While government bureaucrats proposed restrictive policies against Christianity, intellectuals and ordinary people issued direct declarations and acts of defiance against Christianity.

Process of Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong

Combined with the driving forces described above, the internal and external troubles in China in the early 1920s, and the fruits of the Christian cause, brought a deep sense of crisis to the Chinese. In March 1922, the Anti-Christian Students' Federation of various schools in Shanghai declared that the world's capitalism "has successively invaded China and implemented economic aggression, and the current Christianity and Christian churches are the vanguard of this economic aggression", and people "must oppose modern Christianity and Christian churches that support capitalism and deceive ordinary people".³⁴ The World's Student Christian Federation meeting at Tsinghua University in Beijing in April 1922 played a catalytic role in spreading the Anti-Christian Movement. As a representative of local educational administrators and intellectuals, Cai Yuanpei, in his speech delivered at the Beijing Anti-Christian Alliance Conference on 9 April 1922, questioned the rationale behind the World Christian Students' Federation holding its conference, suggesting that the activities of religious alliances would inevitably provoke opposition from non-religious groups. He underscored that freedom of belief encompasses both the right to believe and the right not to believe, and thus, the actions of the Anti-Religious Alliance did not impede religious freedom but were a natural counteraction to religious movements.³⁵

In the early phase of the Anti-Christian Movement from 1922 to 1924, Shandong did not actively participate, and the movement in other areas of China was still limited to prodding the people for anti-imperialist and anti-Christian agitations.³⁶ But after the Kuomintang and CPC began their cooperation in early 1924, the nationalist consensus of recovering the sovereignty of China promoted the Anti-Christian Movement into a more pragmatic phase. The movement in Shandong also began to enter an active period from 1924, especially under the leadership of local communists. Several anti-Christian organisations were established in Jinan (provincial capital), Qingdao, and some other cities of Shandong. Wang Jinmei, one of the earliest communists in China and Shandong, played a pivotal role in advancing the Anti-Christian Movement. In Jinan, Wang and other communists vigorously promoted anti-imperialist and anti-Christian discourse and actively shaped public opinion to resist ecclesiastical influence. The weekly journal *Modern Youth* (*Xiandai Qingnian*), edited by Wang, contributed significantly to the widespread diffusion of anti-Christian sentiment in the province, thereby providing the movement with a robust foundation of popular mobilisation.³⁷ The building of public opinion and propaganda of anti-imperialist thoughts were the main features of the early phase of the movement. The demand for the recovery of educational sovereignty within the Anti-Christian Movement gained recognition from both the Beiyang Warlords and the subsequent Nationalist

Government. Particularly in the later stages of the movement, strengthening control over Protestant schools became a significant component of its agenda.

After 1925, as the Anti-Christian Movement entered the later phase, the Regaining Educational Rights Movement became the main spirit of the movement. The deepening of nationalism during this period prompted the Beiyang warlord government to reconsider its stance towards Christianity. Particularly, the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 reignited nationalist fervour across China, including in Shandong. The May Thirtieth Movement was a nationwide anti-foreign demonstration sparked by the killing and wounding of protesters by British police in the Shanghai Concession. Missionary schools and churches were seen as symbols of Western capitalism and imperialism. The efforts to restore the control of missionary schools by the new government were also treated as a part of the cultural and educational sovereignty of China. The nationalist spirit of the movement, which criticised foreign dominance in education, resonated with the government's agenda of asserting sovereignty over key institutions. Both the Beiyang Government and Nanjing Nationalist Government implemented policies to take back the management of schools previously controlled by missionaries and to ensure that the curriculum was in line with national values and priorities. On November 16, 1925, the Beiyang Government regulated that in the private schools, Chinese should be included in the management, and the religious subjects should not be included in compulsory courses.³⁸ In Shandong, from 1925, some missionary schools reduced their religious curriculum in response to student protests.³⁹

Around 1925, Anti-Christian activities in Shandong began to rise again. The Jinan Anti-Christian Alliance issued a declaration on 12 December, calling on workers, farmers, students, and other social classes to unite and overthrow Christianity. The declaration stated that Christianity was the vanguard guiding imperialists to invade China and an important carrier of cultural aggression. Whenever there was a conflict between China and Christianity, foreign governments would intervene and sign unequal treaties with the Chinese government to cede territory and compensate, thereby continuing to strengthen imperialism in China.⁴⁰ At the same time, a letter targeting students in missionary schools was publicly released. The letter stated that students in missionary schools were influenced by Christian forces. Missionary schools prohibited students from participating in patriotic activities, such as marches and speeches, and required them to adopt a Christian faith. These were all expressions of disrespect towards Chinese people. The letter's initiatives included: establishing anti-Christian organisations within missionary schools to advance anti-imperialist and anti-religious campaigns; cancelling compulsory worship and Bible classes in favour of freedom of belief and curricular autonomy; seeking the right to assembly, association, and participation in patriotic movements; respecting female students' personal dignity and freedom of correspondence; employing strikes and withdrawals as means to reclaim educational rights.⁴¹

At the peak period of the Anti-Christian Movement, slogans such as "Religion is an opiate" and "Down with Christianity — the running dog of capitalism" became prominent, reflecting the influence of communist ideology — these slogans were initially borrowed from Russian propaganda but soon took root in China, further fuelling anti-Christian agitation.⁴² From 1926 onwards, intellectuals and workers increasingly contributed to the movement. Intellectuals published anti-Christian essays and declarations, such as the Anti-Christian Declaration of 1927, which called for the complete rejection of Christianity in China. The movement's critique of Christianity extended beyond its religious dimension to its perceptible political, social, and economic consequences, further broadening its appeal to different segments of society. Under the Anti-Christian Movement, Shandong presented a somewhat distinct situation compared to other regions of China, as it experienced two significant evacuations. The first occurred in the spring of 1927 amidst the extensive retreat of the Nationalist Army; the second evacuation took place nearly a year later, triggered by the advance of

the Nationalist forces, the occupation of major cities, and the complexities in international relations arising from the events in Jinan during April and May. Most missionaries in Shandong vacated with consular officials advising or instructing them to relocate to coastal cities.⁴³

In the late 1920s, changes in the strength of various political forces within China brought about changes in the Anti-Christian Movement. From 1926, when the Kuomintang started the Northern Expedition, it gradually controlled more provinces from the Beiyang government in the following years. From 1927, the movement began to wane due to multiple factors. Protests by foreign diplomats, an anti-leftist purge within the Kuomintang, and a gradual decline in anti-foreign sentiment all contributed to a decrease in activity. Reports from Shandong in 1928 noted that anti-Christian propaganda and threats had significantly diminished. This allowed for a period of relative stability, during which missionary schools and churches adjusted their operations to accommodate changing circumstances.⁴⁴ External factors also diverted attention from the Anti-Christian Movement. The unstable position of the Kuomintang was dramatically reflected in Japan's intervention in Jinan, Shandong. From 1927 to 1928, with the approach of the Northern Expeditionary Army and the complications of international relations with Japan resulting from the Jinan Incident, most of the missionaries in Shandong moved to the coastal areas and even out of China.⁴⁵ The Jinan Incident of May 3, 1928, involving a conflict between the Kuomintang government's expeditionary forces and Japanese troops, once again ignited a nationwide anti-Japanese movement, making Japan the primary target of nationalist attacks. Despite tight control, Chiang Kai-shek's attitude towards Christian work in China also showed a noticeable change. In 1929, during a conversation with Eugene Barnett of YMCA, Chiang expressed his belief that YMCA could help the government "correctly guide the youth".⁴⁶

Although the movement passed its peak with the changing domestic and international situations, the movement had lasting effects. The hardships endured by Christian institutions highlighted their vulnerabilities, while also spurring efforts to promote indigenous leadership and self-support within the Chinese church. The movement exposed weaknesses in missionary work but simultaneously encouraged greater independence and resilience among local Christian communities.⁴⁷ From 1927, the Ministry of Education of the Nanjing Government (Republic of China) issued a series of statutes and regulations governing the registration of private schools, as well as the proportion of foreigners in school management. The policies and regulations required missionary schools to teach a standardised curriculum on Chinese culture and history, further weakening their foreign influence.⁴⁸ This policy shift was not only a response to the Anti-Christian Movement but also a reflection of a broader drive to modernise and revitalise the country's culture after the reign of the Nanjing Nationalist Government from 1928. The missionary schools in Shandong, like those elsewhere in China, had to adapt to this new reality by working with Chinese officials or transferring control to local church leaders to consolidate state authority in education. In the later phase of the movement, hostility towards Christianity persisted in some areas, even giving rise to small-scale violent incidents. Around 1929 and 1930, attacks occurred at English Baptist mission stations and Shandong Christian University, resulting in property damage and temporary closure of hospitals and classes.⁴⁹

By observing the process of the Anti-Christian Movement, it can be discerned that the movement was initially launched by Communists and met with active participation from patriotic intellectuals. As the movement developed, both the Beiyang and Nationalist Government extended policy support, though this support was primarily focused on restricting Protestant education rather than other areas. Student groups led boycotts and strikes against Protestant schools, demanding government control and reduction of missionary influence. Major incidents, such as the May Thirtieth Movement, intensified anti-Christian sentiment, resulting in attacks on Christian institutions. Despite diminishing after 1927 due to diplomatic protests and a decline in anti-foreign sentiment,

the movement left a lasting impact by highlighting the vulnerabilities of Christian institutions and encouraging greater indigenous leadership within the Chinese church. External factors, including the Jinan Incident of 1928, diverted attention from the movement, shifting focus to broader nationalistic goals. In 1929, the Ministry of Education of the Nationalist Government ordered missionary schools in Shandong to strictly limit the scale and scope of religious activities.⁵⁰ Starting in the same year, Shandong Christian University began applying for registration with the government. The registration process did not proceed swiftly, as some missionaries were reluctant to alter the religious character of their schools too significantly and maintained a wait-and-see attitude towards the policy, coupled with resistance. The registration process still involved struggle and compromise between the schools and government in some details of teaching and management. It was not until 1931, after the university's leadership had significantly expanded the number of Chinese staff, that the process was gradually completed.⁵¹

For the characteristics of the movement, different from the Boxer Rebellion around 1900, it was dominated by modern educated intellectuals and students. They criticised the influence of Christianity, emphasised scientific rationality, and pushed for the autonomy of China's education system, mainly through public opinion battles, publications, and academic discussions. This strategy was in keeping with the democratic and scientific spirit of the May Fourth Movement and represented a major shift in the approach of the Chinese nationalist movement.⁵² The movement also reflected the transition of the nationalist struggle from violent confrontation to ideological critique, foreshadowing the future evolution of China's nationalist struggle strategy. In the face of foreign cultural and religious influences, Chinese society gradually moved from xenophobic violence to a more mature and institutionalised form of resistance.

The Impact of the Anti-Christian Movement and Protestant Efforts

The Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong represented a major setback for Christianity in China. It disrupted missionary activities during a period often regarded as the "golden age"⁵³ of Christianity in China, marking a turning point towards decline. The movement's critique of missionary education and its alignment with broader anti-imperialist struggles underscored the complex interplay between religion, politics, and society in the 1920s. The data on the decrease in the Protestant scale in Shandong are shown below (see Table 1).

Table 1: Statistics of Protestant Missionary Activities in Shandong (1921–1929)

Year	Outstations	Church Communicants	Missionary School Students	Inpatients in Missionary Hospitals
1921	508	16,144	9,866	3,005
1922	510	17,154	10,982	2,569
1923	528	17,684	11,805	2,394
1924	532	18,125	11,855	3,044
1925	524	19,223	12,229	3,063
1926	533	20,124	11,241	2,885
1927	533	19,491	9,627	3,046
1928	445	19,224	8,506	3,184
1929	427	18,908	7,465	3,060

Data source: Minutes of the Annual Meeting, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Shantung Mission, 1921-1929.

From the data above, around 1926, except for the medical work, the negative impact of the Anti-Christian Movement on the Protestant movement in Shandong started to decrease. This can be seen as the beginning of the impact of the climax of the Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong after 1924 came to the fore. From 1927 to 1928, with the approach of the northern expeditionary Army by the Kuomintang and the complications of international relations with Japan resulting from the Jinan Incident, most of the missionaries in Shandong moved to the coastal areas and even out of China.⁵⁴ In the educational area, the Regaining Educational Rights Movement was still partially inherited by the Nationalist Government, such as the recovery of management rights over missionary schools. A few of the missionary schools was “greatly annoyed by anti-Christian propaganda” — some middle schools were closed, and the registration and recognition of all by the government was delayed, but compared with the experiences in some other provinces, the conditions in Shandong were still not very extreme and dangerous.⁵⁵ For example, in Northeast China, the movement was oppressed by the warlord Zhang Zuolin.⁵⁶ The spirit of the Regaining Educational Rights Movement was still partially inherited by the Nationalist Government after it controlled Shandong. Most of the missionary schools were registered with the government (unless some others finished in the early 1930s). This marked an important step towards aligning educational institutions with national priorities and reducing dependence on foreign control, and reflected the remaining challenges posed by nationalistic sentiments and xenophobic attitudes. Standing at the end of the 1920s, the missionaries had to admit that the educational work of the Protestant churches in Shandong faced an uncertain future.⁵⁷ The Anti-Christian Movement had deepened Chinese society’s scepticism towards Western culture and religion, forcing Christian churches to reposition their role in Chinese society, particularly by gradually shifting their focus from education to social services.

Unlike the missionary schools, the Protestant medical work in Shandong was not impacted significantly by the movement.⁵⁸ That was due to the tremendous progress in missionary medical work since the early 1920s and the resulting social recognition, as well as the increase in the proportion of Chinese staff.⁵⁹ Moreover, compared with educational activities, medical activities themselves had weaker religious characteristics and stronger charitable characteristics, especially after more professional doctors participated in Protestant medical activities.⁶⁰ These factors also led to less hostility from local society in Shandong during that time. Prior to 1925, the China Medical Board, though cooperating with the medical school of the Shandong Christian University, had made no direct contribution in aid of the teaching of physics, chemistry, and biology in the college of arts and sciences. The university had, however, assembled a group of competent teachers and had provided two large laboratory buildings and considerable equipment, by means of which a successful demonstration had been conducted in the teaching of these sciences in the Chinese language.⁶¹

The Anti-Christian Movement also accelerated the indigenisation and localisation of Protestant Christianity, contributing to efforts to reduce the dominance of foreign missionaries and to establish a more autonomous Chinese church. A prominent aspect is the further development of local churches in China and Shandong. In the face of the crisis, the acceleration of the localisation process of the Christian churches was inevitable. The missionaries also realised that Christian schools were seen as too foreign and that this view would not change unless they became part of the Chinese education system through greater local control, registration, or less reliance on foreign funding.⁶² The time for the Chinese Church to take over missionary activities is rapidly approaching, and foreign guidance and management should be withdrawn as soon as possible to ensure safety.⁶³ The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) played a pioneering role in integrating Protestantism with local Chinese society. Shandong is at the forefront in the exploration of localisation of YMCA institutions in China. Under the Anti-Christian Movement, the YMCA in Shandong was still trying to expand its scale.⁶⁴ In the YMCA’s exploration of localisation, the YMCA’s civic education movement was

popular in local society.⁶⁵ In 1923, the YMCA started a pilot programme of civilian education in Yantai, Shandong; in the same year, the YMCA in Yantai started a pilot programme of civilian education in Shandong. The YMCA in Yantai opened more than 60 civilian schools for boys and girls, with more than 100 classes, training more than 2,100 students, including more than 600 girls, and graduating 1,147 students that year, including 372 girls; in 1929, the civilian schools had trained more than 9,800 students, of whom more than 5,000 had successfully graduated.⁶⁶

The Anti-Christian Movement encouraged nationalism in Shandong and other parts of China and shaped the policies of the Nanjing Nationalist Government. By 1928, when the Nationalist Government took control of Shandong, foreign teachers were gradually reduced, curricula were adjusted to fit the new regulations, and some missionary schools were renamed or converted to vocational training institutions to circumvent the policy.⁶⁷ By the end of the 1920s, the Christian education system had been severely impacted, and many schools were forced to close or transform into private schools, marking the official end of the Protestant mission's educational enterprise in Shandong at its peak.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, since the 1860s, Shandong missionary schools have introduced a modern Western education system, promoted the development of science, medicine, and girls' education, and respected traditional Chinese culture, contributing to the modernisation of Chinese education. The Anti-Christian Movement also promoted the local Communist expansion. Although various intellectuals and groups joined the movement for different reasons—ranging from nationalism and anti-capitalism to pure atheism—the CPC maintained tight control over its direction. They used the legally registered Anti-Christian Federation as a front for revolutionary propaganda, issuing declarations, infiltrating Christian organisations, and organising local branches across the country. The movement spread rapidly, with strong participation from students and widespread media coverage, becoming one of the largest propaganda campaigns led by the CPC during this period. Ultimately, the Anti-Christian Movement served the dual purpose of attacking foreign religious influence and demonstrating the CPC's organisational capacity. It affirmed that communist cells in China, despite being small and often divided, could direct large-scale revolutionary mobilisation — a key objective in the Communist International's broader strategy for China.⁶⁹

Although suffering the crash of the Anti-Christian Movement, the Protestant churches in Shandong still resisted the pressure and made new achievements to maintain and recover their career. In the 1920s, the educational endeavours of the Protestant churches in Shandong underwent a transition from expansion to limitation. As the only Christian University in the province, the Shandong Christian University grew steadily in the early 1920s, adding medicine, theology, and the humanities, and introducing graduate programmes to promote higher education.⁷⁰ The university not only provided higher education but also housed medical facilities, making it a “beacon” of missionary influence in Shandong.⁷¹ Education for females grew rapidly during this period, especially in the girls' high schools, whose enrolment reached a record high in 1924. The female schools began to teach science and maths courses in 1925.⁷² In addition, the promotion of rural education in Shandong was effective, with a gradual increase in night schools and literacy classes, improving the educational opportunities of peasant children.⁷³ Meanwhile, the graduates of the Shandong Christian University were becoming increasingly more useful as practitioners, and making less urgent the need for additional foreign doctors in the mission hospitals of China.⁷⁴ The Protestants also used international efforts to help modernise local agricultural production, including the upgrading of sericulture and silk weaving in Shandong.⁷⁵

During this period, in addition to the American Presbyterian Church as the main supporting force, many denominations from the West contributed to local education. For example, by 1928, the Methodist Episcopal Church had established 30 schools in Shandong, with 569 primary school students, 165 upper primary school students, 212 secondary school students, and

53 teachers, one of whom was not Chinese.⁷⁶ Starting in 1927, a Christian revival movement swept across many parts of China. The revival in Shandong was actively led by the Southern Baptist Convention.⁷⁷ The Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong led to the challenges and decline of the Protestant movement in the province and promoted the transformation of Protestantism under the new social atmosphere. It was a lesson for the Protestant movement in Shandong and provided valuable experience for Christianity to face further challenges and crises in the 1930s.

Conclusion

The Anti-Christian Movement in China and Shandong during the 1920s was driven by a combination of rising nationalism and communism and was based on the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement. The Anti-Christian Movement in Shandong was also rooted in the contradiction between Confucian traditions and foreign culture, including Christianity. The movement was characterised by its organised leadership from intellectuals, students, and social groups, demonstrating a systematic approach to opposing Christianity and imperialism. Additionally, the movement in the 1920s relied more on propaganda, education, and peaceful demonstrations and less on violence. The spirit of regaining educational rights of the movement promoted the control by the Chinese government over the missionary schools in Shandong. At the same time, however, it can also be seen that in the face of enormous social and political pressure, the Protestant churches in Shandong still endeavoured to promote social services such as education and medical care and achieved certain successes, thus continuing to contribute to China's modernisation in many respects. The movement highlighted the vulnerabilities of foreign Christian institutions and spurred efforts to promote indigenous leadership within the localised Chinese church.

The Anti-Christian Movement led to deeper scepticism towards Christianity. This also contributed to a shift in the social role of Christianity, forcing Christian churches to reposition their role in Chinese society. The Anti-Christian Movement and the integration of Christianity in China influenced and interacted with each other, and together they formed part of the transformation of Chinese society at that time. The movement in Shandong reflected both the continuities and changes in Chinese society's resistance to foreign dominance. It underscored a transitional phase where China sought to redefine its cultural and national identity amidst the challenges posed by external and internal forces. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the social movements that shaped modern Chinese history and the Protestant efforts that persisted despite the prevailing adversities. Due to the bias in the sources of the archives, this study still has some limitations. For the study of this area, future research would benefit from more comparative studies with different regions of China on the Christian movements, and from finding more diverse historical sources to further verify the findings. For the process of adaptation of foreign cultures in this land, how to face the long-lasting continuity and transformation of Chinese society and culture is always a proposition. The historical impact of the Protestant movement in China remains a valuable area of inquiry, particularly regarding its potential insights into the modernisation and internationalisation of today's Chinese society.

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