

Article

From Criticism and Rejection to Sino-Western Communication: The Evolution of Zheng Guanying's Understanding of the Spread of Christianity in China

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Abstract: Zheng Guanying paid close attention to the issue of the spread of Christianity in China since his youth. Over a period of more than three decades, he produced five monographs specifically addressing Christianity, from unequivocally opposing the spread of Christianity in China in the mid-to-late 1870s, to advocating for the adoption of the preaching form of the Christian “gatherings every seven days” to disseminate the village covenants and sacred edicts among the Chinese people in the 1890s. He proposed that the Chinese people should hold the right to spread Christianity. In 1906, he advocated for the establishment of a “common religion” and proposed “one religion for all nations” to eliminate wars around the world. In his later years, he proposed the “Five great wishes” to integrate and govern the various religions of the world with Taoism as the core, attempting to reconstruct global order from the perspective of religious unity. He envisioned the establishment of a sacred Taoist monastery, the dissemination of religious concepts, and the cultivation of talents, which drew on the organizational structure and missionary methods of Christianity, reflecting the thinking and efforts of modern Chinese intellectuals to bridge the Chinese and Western civilizations, seek solutions for modern China, reconcile conflicts between China and the West, and pursue global unity.

Keywords: Zheng Guanying; Timothy Richard; Christianity; Taoism; “common religion”



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1. Introduction

Zheng Guanying's (1842–1921) 郑观应 real name was Guanying 官应, and in his youth he was known as Yingjun 应钧, Zhenxiang 振翔, Taozhai 陶斋, alias Qiyou Sheng 杞忧生, and after his middle age, alias Daihe Shanren 待鹤山人 and Luofu Daihe Shanren 罗浮待鹤山人. He is acclaimed as “the earliest bourgeois reformist with a complete system of reform thought in modern China” and considered to have been “an enlightenment thinker who opened the prelude to democracy and science” (Xia 1981, p. 6). Zheng was an advocate and practitioner of modernization, but his close friend Xia Tonghe 夏同龢 (1868–1925) described him as most rich in religious thoughts and a man who “admired chivalry and understood Taoism” (崇任侠而明黄老) (Xia 2013b, p. 330). He devoted himself to seeking Taoism and immortality from his youth, and he never ceased in his pursuit, which lasted more than six decades.

Zheng also had a sensitive understanding of the Christianity that came with foreign aggression and the infiltration of Western culture and civilization. Looking at the changes in his thought throughout his life, his attitude toward Christianity underwent several changes. From the mid-to-late 1870s, he unequivocally opposed the spread of Christianity in China. In the 1890s, he proposed the dissemination of village covenants and sacred edicts among the Chinese people by adopting the preaching form of the Christians, while suggesting that China follow Japan's example of selecting righteous religious people and priests to carry out missionary work instead of Western missionaries. Then, in the 1910s, he successively proposed the creation of a “common religion” (putong jiao 普通教) (Zheng 2013b, p. 393) and advocated for “uniting all religions into one” (合各教为一教) (Zheng 2013g, p. 125), rooted in

Taoism, by borrowing and absorbing the organizational forms and rituals of Christianity and other religions. It is evident that Zheng's observation and contemplation of Christianity were continuous, profound, and rational, deeply reflecting the fluctuations in Chinese intellectuals' thought during this period.

At present, the academic research on Zheng's understanding of and attitude toward Christianity has achieved some notable results (Li 2002; Ou 2009; Wu 2004; Xie 2018). However, most existing studies have focused on Zheng's fierce denial of Christianity and his emphasis on stopping missionary work, failing to explore the later changes in his thought in depth. This article aims to conduct a comparative analysis of Zheng's multiple monographs on Christianity and its dissemination in China in different periods, to determine the context of the changes in his attitude toward Christianity, to analyze the reasons behind them, and to examine the spiritual path of modern, advanced Chinese people's efforts toward national salvation, with a view to further deepening the relevant research.

2. "Stopping Missionary Work": Zheng's Early Rejection and Criticism of Christianity

Zheng authored a number of specialized articles discussing the origins of Christianity as well as its spread and influence in China. For example, in 1880, he published a collection of essays titled *Yi Yan* 易言 (including 36 essays), among which was the first article discussing Christianity, titled "*Lun chuanjiao*" (论传教 *On Missionary Work*). Thereafter, he continued to explore Christianity and its dissemination in China in the 20-essay version of *Yi Yan* (around 1882), as well as in the 5-volume version (published in 1894), the 14-volume version (published in 1895), and the 8-volume version (published in 1900) of *Shengshi Weriyan* (盛世危言 *Warnings to the Prosperous Age*), all under the title "*Chuan jiao*" (传教 *Mission Work*). Thus, five specialized monographs on Christianity were formed. Furthermore, the essay "*Xun Su*" (训俗 *Civilizing the people*) in *Shengshi Weriyan*, "*Zhi yingguo boshi litimotai shu*" (致英国博士李提摩太书 *A letter to the British missionary Timothy Richard*), and other articles or letters also touched upon Christianity. Zheng Guanying's early criticism of Christianity focused mainly on the destructive effects of the "Jiao' an" (教案, Church Cases), and his rejection and criticism of Christianity were mainly manifested in the following five aspects:

First, missionary work disrupted the peace between China and the West. Zheng believed that both trade and missionary work were means by which the West invaded China. Western countries used trade to encroach on China's rights and occupy Chinese territory, while they used missionary work to gather intelligence and win the hearts of the Chinese people. These two activities were interconnected and, relying on their wealth and military strength, Western powers caused China's economy to decline and made its people's livelihoods increasingly difficult, leading to social unrest. Zheng noted that while people could be "accustomed to" (习而安之) the impact of trade, the purpose of missionary work was to create ideological divisions, thereby fracturing Chinese society. Therefore, he consistently believed that the harm caused by missionary work far outweighed that of trade and, hence, saw missionary work as the chief culprit in undermining the "harmony between China and the West" (中西和局) (Zheng 2013d, p. 183).

Second, Zheng felt that missionary work harmed rural society. Zheng referred to the Chinese who used religion as a pretext for rebellion as "rogues" (youmin 莠民) (Zheng 2013c, p. 124). He pointed out that missionaries often neglected to assess the character of their converts. Some people joined the faith due to financial incentives, while other people, suffering from "incurable madness" (狂病, which should refer to mental illness) (Zheng 2013c, p. 125), found solace in religion. Moreover, cunning individuals or criminals treated Christianity as a "talisman" (护符) (Zheng 2013d, p. 183), causing havoc in the countryside and engaging in criminal activities, which were too numerous to detail. These individuals even openly defied local authorities, severely disrupting the social order. Therefore, Zheng proposed that converts should be registered, with the list jointly held by local officials and consuls of the countries to which the churches belonged. In case of incidents, Chinese laws and regulations should be enforced, and consuls could participate in the hearings. However, Zheng

emphasized that missionaries must not interfere; if they did, then they would be immediately deported.

Third, Zheng felt that missionary work directly triggered religious incidents. Zheng Guanying discussed in great detail the causes and dangers of the “Jiao’ an”, arguing that the root cause of the “Jiao’ an” was that the missionaries “interfered in public affairs” (干预公事) (Zheng 2013c, p. 124) and obstructed the administration of justice. To protect their religion, missionaries often condoned the various misconducts of these “rogues” who had ganged up to join the religion, harbored criminals, or allowed them to escape overseas, making it difficult for local officials to apprehend them. As a result, the people felt deeply wronged and had nowhere to appeal, leading to deep-seated grievances. The conflicts between the missionaries and locals gradually intensified, leading to frequent incidents of churches being demolished, missionaries being insulted, and endless clashes between different religious groups.

Fourth, Zheng felt that Christianity sparked conflicts in Western society. Zheng studied both Chinese and foreign literature such as *Ying hai lun* (瀛海论 *Treatise on Ying Hai*, by Zhang Mu 张牧 of the Qing Dynasty) and *The Ten Commandments* (摩西十诫), along with their impact on Western society. He concluded that the three major denominations of Christianity¹ “have different views and regulations” (见解各殊, 规条各异) (Zheng 2013c, p. 124), slandering and fighting with one another and becoming enemies, which often led to conflicts and wars. Western society itself had begun to reflect and had taken many measures to restrain Christianity, and countries such as India, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Switzerland had resisted various denominations of Christianity. Such a religion, with doctrinal differences recognized as harmful by Western society and rejected by many countries around the world, yet insisted on in China, prompted Zheng to question its acceptability. He also pointed out the enormous expenses involved in maintaining and protecting churches with garrison troops and ships, which imposed a heavy burden on various countries.

Fifth, Zheng felt that missionary work was incompatible with Chinese ethics. Zheng noted that most missionaries often displayed arrogance when dealing with issues related to Chinese and Western cultures, “frequently denouncing” (多所毁斥) the ethics of Confucianism and resorting to coercion against nonbelievers, and that they lacked the tolerant attitude of the Apostle Paul toward nonbelievers “whose time has not yet come” (其时未至) (Zheng 2013e, p. 189). The aggressive methods of evangelism and the condescending attitude toward Chinese culture among missionaries often provoked anger among the people, intensifying the conflicts between the two sides and perpetuating the ongoing clash between China and the West.

In the essay *Lun chuanjiao* in the 36-essay version of *Yi Yan* published in 1880, Zheng suggested that the opium trade and missionary activities were the two main reasons for the deterioration of relations between China and the West. To ensure peace between China and foreign countries, it was necessary to gather nations and “persuade Britain to stop trading opium and France to stop carrying out missionary work” (劝令英不贩烟, 法不传教) (Zheng 2013c, p. 126). In the 20-essay version of *Yi Yan*, published around the following year, the phrase “stop missionary work” (不传教) was removed, and other parts of the text were also revised (Zheng 2013c, pp. 183–84), but the main viewpoints remained largely the same as in the 36-essay version. According to Mr. Xia Dongyuan’s evaluation of the two versions of *Yi Yan*, the 36-essay version more systematically and truthfully reflected Zheng’s understanding of the situation at the time than did the 20-essay version.² Therefore, regarding the issue of missionary work, the advocacy of “stopping missionary work” proposed in the 36-essay version of *Yi Yan* represented Zheng’s true attitude toward missionary activities in his early days.

Chinese superstitions and customs, the strangeness of Christian culture as a foreign culture, and the distinctive cultural colonialist tendency of “conquering China for Christ”, which was commonly accepted by the missionaries, posed a direct challenge to the mainstream ideology and sense of national identity of China at that time.

Local officials, gentry and intellectuals were the main anti-Christian groups in Chinese society during the period of 1860–1874 (Lü 2005, pp. 3–4), and the causes of the “Jiao’ an” was the result of the interplay of many contradictions (Liu 1986, p. 148), the key factors need to be looked for at a level other than religion, such as the civil-religious disputes caused by the return of the old churches, the forcible intervention of foreign missionaries in lawsuits and local affairs, the lack of respect for Chinese etiquette and arrogance of some missionaries in dealing with Chinese officials, the superstitious beliefs and customs of the Chinese, the unfamiliarity with Christian culture as an exotic culture and the common acceptance by missionaries of the idea of “conquering China for Christ”, the strangeness of Christian as a foreign culture, and the distinctive cultural colonialist tendency of “conquering China for Christ”, commonly accepted by missionaries, posed a direct challenge to the dominant ideology and sense of national identity in China at that time. (Hu 2000, p. 4). However, the fundamental crux of the problem was that the foreign missionaries depended on the support and protection of the policy of conquest by force, while the Western governments made use of the “Jiao’ an” to negotiate and seek more aggressive rights and interests (Zhang and Liu 2000), and this close relationship between foreign missionaries and their governments in dealing with the “Jiao’ an” made the Christian mission no longer a purely religious matter, thus, the nature of the movement against Christianity in modern China was not primarily religious, but political. In 1871, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (总理衙门) drafted the Eight Articles of the Missionary Statutes (传教章程八条) to restrict and regulate missionary activities and behavior, which included such provisions as “the clergy shall not interfere in lawsuits” (教士不得干涉词讼), missionaries residing in China “shall be governed by local officials” (应一体归地方官约束) (Li 2008, pp. 3298–304). Zheng Guanying’s idea of “stopping Missionary Work” was obviously more conservative by comparison, and to a certain extent, it represents the common political demands expressed by the local officials, gentry, and intellectuals who “instigated and planned” (Lü 2005, p. 3) numerous anti-Christian incidents during this period.

3. Chinese in Charge of Christianity: Clarifying the Issue of Religious Sovereignty over the Spread of Christianity in China

Zheng perhaps realized the impossibility of prohibiting the spread of Christianity in China and gradually became aware of its value. Therefore, while adhering to the early proposal of “stopping missionary work”, he also proposed compromising measures such as the registration of believers and contractual protection. In the initial 36-essay version of *Yi Yan*, Zheng emphasized that missionaries should not inquire into cases involving believers. However, in the subsequently published 20-essay version of *Yi Yan*, a revision was made to allow missionaries to hear such cases. In the mid-1890s, in addition to advocating for the registration of believers, Zheng added proposals such as one law for believers and another law for nonbelievers, as well as the separate registration of believers, which allowed for the existence of Christianity while restricting the rights of believers, reflecting Zheng’s internal conflicts and fluctuations in his thinking.

During the four or five years from the mid-1890s to around 1900, Zheng’s response to the spread of Christianity in China changed significantly compared to his early views around the 1880s. In the 5-volume version of *the Shengshi Weriyan*, published in 1894, Zheng stressed that the management of Chinese converts was “China’s own right” (本中国自有之权) (Zheng 2013e, p. 185). In the 14-volume version of the *Shengshi Weriyan*, published in the following year, he proposed that Japan’s example of “selecting righteous religious people and Chinese priests to carry out the missionary work instead, while Westerners are not needed” (择公正教民与华教士代为传教, 无须西人) (Zheng 2013e, p. 190) should be followed, explicitly raising the issue of Chinese sovereignty over the spread of Christianity in China. In the eight-volume version of the *Shengshi Weriyan* in 1900, not only did he retain the above-mentioned views but he also further proposed emulating Japan in “establishing new laws, creating a Ministry of Religion, and placing all priests from each province under its jurisdiction. If misconduct occurs, then they should be removed, and otherwise, they are not allowed to spread the religion” (仿日本定新律颁行, 设教部, 凡各省各种教士均归管辖).

如不端, 准其裁撤, 否则不准传教) (Zheng 2013e, p. 188). This is actually a program that advocates Chinese ownership of all religions in China, including Christianity. In 1906, Pastor Yu Guozhen 俞国桢 (1852–1932) and others initiated the establishment of the “Self-Reliance Society of the Jesuits in China” (中国耶稣教自立会), which advocated self-reliance, self-support, and self-propagation, as well as the propagation of the Church and the washing of insults. The Christian Self-Reliance Movement (CSRM) (基督教自立运动), formed in the 1920s under the stimulus of the May Thirtieth Massacre (五卅惨案), put forward the demands of canceling the provisions of the unequal treaties, asking missionaries to give up the protection of the unequal treaties, and declaring the self-run Church. Looking back to Zheng Guanying’s proposal in 1900 that the Chinese should take control of Christian missions, it is easy to see that he was in fact the forerunner of the localization of Christianity in China (Mei 2006, pp. 276–77; Luo 2000).

The underlying reason for Zheng’s change in attitude toward Christianity was the inevitable result of his long-term continuous observation of the Western world. As can be seen from his five monographs on Christianity, the evidence regarding the conflicts caused by Christianity in Western society became more abundant and detailed as time passed. In later monographs, not only was there an increased affirmation of the original intention of Jesus to “persuade people to do good by means of blessings and sins” (以福罪之说劝人为善) (Zheng 2013e, p. 187), it was also explicitly pointed out that the wars and conflicts in the West over the past millennia were not initiated by Jesus. This change suggests that he saw the non-evil side of Christianity through the accumulation of historical and documentary research and that he revised his earlier “convergence with conservative official rhetoric on missionary issues” (Yi 1998, p. 183).

As an important representative of the Self-Strengthening Movement, Zheng Guanying, on the basis of inheriting the foreign affairs concept of “Learning Merits from the Foreign to Conquer the Foreign” (师夷长技以制夷) from the early reformer Wei yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), turned to seek a comprehensive modernization and transformation of society, realized the logical shift from Lin Zexu’s 林则徐 (1785–1850) “seeing the world with open eyes” (睁眼看世界) to “seeing the world in a holistic way” (全面看世界). Therefore, his ideological system is huge, involving philosophy, religion, politics, economy, culture, social management, and other levels (Xia 2009a, pp. 91–222), and each level contains vertical and horizontal comparisons of tradition/modernity, China/West. In terms of his religious thought, three main sources can be identified: his own experience, his absorption of traditional classics, translated books and Western books, newspapers, etc., as well as his contacts with missionaries.

Zheng Guanying was born and raised in the coastal areas of Fujian and Guangdong. From an early age, he studied Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism at the private school founded by his father, Zheng Wenrui 郑文瑞 (1812–1893). At the age of 17 (1859), after failing his first imperial examination, he followed his father’s arrangement and went to Shanghai to learn to be a comprador (mai ban 买办) in Dent & Co (宝顺洋行). At the same time, he studied English with the missionary John Fryer (1839–1928), which enabled him to read Western books and newspapers. It was also during this period that he began to “study politics and industry” and attempted to write some of the chapters of *Writings on the Brink of Crisis* (Jiushi jieyao 救时揭要). After that, he served as a comprador for the Butterfield & Swire (太古洋行) for many years until the expiry of the contract in 1882. Subsequently, he accepted Li Hongzhang’s 李鸿章 (1823–1901) appointment to the General Administration of the Shanghai-based China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company (上海轮船招商局), and from then on, he was deeply involved in the Self-Strengthening Movement, organized and participated in a number of Yang-wu Enterprises (洋务企业, Western-style Enterprises), such as the Shanghai Machine Weaving Bureau (上海机器织布局), the Telegraph Bureau (电报局), the Hanyang Iron and Steel Works (汉阳铁厂), Yuehan Railway (粤汉铁路, Canton-Hankou Railway), and other foreign affairs activities, during which time he also briefly joined the military and politics. He had many contacts with Chinese and foreign celebrities such as Li Hongzhang, Sheng Xuanhuai 盛宣怀 (1844–1916), Zhang Zhenxun 张振勋 (1841–1916),

DengHuaxi 邓华熙 (1826–1916), Zheng Zaoru 郑藻如 (1824–1894), John Calvin Ferguson 福开森 (1866–1945), Francis Lister Hawks Pottet 卜舫济 (1864–1947) al. Throughout his life, Zheng Guanying was always in the coastal cultural circle where Western civilization converged and Chinese culture flourished (Wang 2002, pp. 66–69), and thus he was able to “raise and think about issues from different perspectives, and to form opinions and propositions that were closer to the Western idea of modern capitalism” (Zhang et al. 2000, p. 246). Nurtured by the East-meets-West culture and the advantages of location, he eventually grew up to be one of the Enlightenment thinkers with modern consciousness (Du 2019, pp. 222–25). Among those with whom he interacted were a number of Christians or people with an in-depth knowledge of Christianity, such as Wang Tao 王韬 (1828–1897), Rong Hong 容闳 (Yung Wing, 1828–1912), Wu Tingfang 伍廷芳 (1842–1922), He Qi 何启 (1859–1917), Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1864–1925), these “Double Vision People” (Xiong 2021) greatly broadened Zheng’s perceptions of China and the world, this enabled him to compare and integrate Chinese and Western religions based on his own Taoist beliefs.

Due to the influence of his father, Zheng Wenrui, who was a strong believer in Taoism and passionate about charity, Zheng Guanying was highly influenced by the Taoist principle of “accumulating hidden virtue in order to become immortal” (积阴德以成仙) from his youth, and he actively participated in all kinds of disaster relief and relief activities, which led to his acquaintance with the English missionary Timothy Richard (1845–1919)³, who was actively involved in charitable activities. Through extensive interactions with Chinese and foreign Christians, Zheng directly observed charitable acts such as “establishing tuition-free schools, providing medical care, and raising children” (设义塾, 施医药, 育婴孩) carried out by Christians, leading him to fully recognize the positive role of Christianity in promoting kindness. Therefore, he highly praised missionaries such as Young John Allen (1836–1907), Timothy Richard, John Fryer, Joseph Edkins (1823–1905), and Ernst Faber (1839–1899), who had long been in China and “could not bear to see its difficulties” (Zheng 2013e, p. 185). Around the 1890s, while criticizing some monks and priests for only knowing how to perform sacrifice and transcendence of the dead (jianjiao chaoyou 建醮超幽) or rake in money, he also affirmed the good deeds of Jesus and Catholic missionaries in founding schools and hospitals and carrying out other charitable acts (Zheng 2013f, p. 312), as well as the idea of transforming the traditional Chinese religion by borrowing some elements of Christianity to benefit the society that had already sprouted at this time.

The external cause of the change in Zheng’s attitude toward Christianity and its spread in China was the influence of the adjustment of the methods and means of such spread. Timothy Richard’s *Forty-five Years in China: Reminiscences* focused on the records of this adjustment. In 1876, when Timothy Richard was a missionary in Qingzhou (青州), Shandong Province, he noted that “the Chinese have their own set of methods in the dissemination and education of their religious doctrines. Their organizations are self-sufficient”. This led to the idea that “the best way to localize Christianity is to adopt Chinese missionary methods”. Dr. John Livingstone Nevius (1829–1893), a pastor of the American Presbyterian Church in Yantai (烟台), Shandong (山东), took this as the core of his new missionary policy, which developed into the Nevius method (倪维思方式), advocating for indigenous people, rather than foreign missionaries, to lead missionary work (Timothy 2018, p. 78). In 1885, Timothy Richard proposed three amendments to the missionary methods to the committee of the British Baptist Missionary Society. The first amendment emphasized that missionaries who had newly arrived in China should not only learn the language but also devote themselves to studying the local religion (ibid., p. 162).

Zheng obviously noted the Christian localization approach of Timothy Richard and others, and he responded with the utmost goodwill. In 1900, when he advocated for Chinese control over the missionary work of Christianity, Zheng emphasized that Christianity “naturally has its own rules” (本自有此教规) (Zheng 2013e, p. 190); at the same time, Zheng also pointed out the extensive and profound nature of the Chinese sages’ teachings, historically accommodating foreign religions such as Buddhism and Islam. Thus, there was no need to reject the spread of Christianity in China (ibid., p. 190). Zheng also

considered the fact that Xu Guangqi 徐光启 (1368–1644), during the late Ming Dynasty, did not suffer a demotion for converting to Christianity, as well as the absence of Sino–Western hostility for over two hundred years of trade with the Netherlands during the Shunzhi period (顺治朝) of the Qing Dynasty, compared with the different situation after the Opium War, when Sino–Western relations soured. On this basis, he clearly indicated that attempts by countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France to protect Christianity by force would only make missionary work more difficult. He emphasized that missionary work should “prioritize the conversion guidance, with the conversion of the mind and body being more important than the use of power” (先贵乎化导, 化导在身心, 不在乎势力也), and that those who did not believe or follow should be “left alone” (置之可也) (ibid., pp. 188–89). These arguments fully demonstrate that Zheng was not opposed to mutual respect and friendly religious and cultural exchanges between China and the West; what he did oppose was the unequal cultural penetration and cultural invasion carried out by Western powers through coercion and high-pressure tactics.

Around 1900, Chinese believers who grew up gradually began to serve as pastors, evangelists, teachers, and medical workers in churches or Christian organizations originally dominated by missionaries, and a large number of outstanding Chinese Christian leaders emerged, who worked together with missionaries (though not necessarily on an equal footing with them) to substantially promote the development of Christian missions, education, medical care, and other endeavors, thus bringing the so-called “golden age” of Christianity in China (1902–1927) (Liu 2012). Zheng Guanying had obviously observed the growth of Chinese Christians and was therefore able to foresee the important role they were going to play in the mission of Christianity in China, which was the basis of the reality that he was able to put forward the idea of “selecting righteous religious people and Chinese priests to carry out the missionary work instead, while Westerners are not needed” before 1895.

With the expansion of modern Western colonialism and the powerful spread of Christianity around the world, Zheng had to admit the unequal reality of cultural exchanges between China and the West at that time. Together with the intensification of Japanese aggression against China, to compete for support from Western powers, especially the United Kingdom and the United States, he revised his early negative evaluation of Christianity in the 14-volume version of the *Shengshi Weiyuan* (1895), which was published during the First Sino–Japanese War, and in his subsequent monographs on Christian missionary work. Zheng argued that Christianity at the time was “enlightened and different from the past” (道术修明, 已异于古) (Zheng 2013e, p. 188), unlike the Russo–Turkish war and the religious struggles that preceded it. He also praised the United Kingdom and the United States as the “supervisors of religion”, with their Christian missionaries spreading their teachings worldwide, resulting in “universal peace” (一律相安) (ibid., p. 188) among nations on Earth.

4. “One Religion for All Nations”: Borrowing from and Integrating Christianity in Zheng’s Later Years

Zheng’s proposal that the Chinese be in charge of Christianity did not become the definitive view of his understanding of Christianity. In entering the 20th century, with the rapid changes in the times—especially the escalating ethnic and class conflicts—Zheng’s desire to use religion to save the nation became increasingly urgent. His attitude toward Christianity changed again to advocate for uniting all religions, hoping to borrow some characteristics and elements from Christianity and integrate them with traditional Chinese religions to establish a “common religion” and achieve global harmony.

In fact, Zheng’s desire to draw on some elements of Christianity was not a momentary impulse. As early as the mid-to-late 1890s, in his essay “Civilizing the people” (Xun Su 训俗), he was keenly aware of the civilizing role that could be played by Christian gatherings and communion ceremonies. In this essay, he proposed emulating the form of Christian gatherings every seven days, convening the people every seven or ten days, with experienced

scholars and educators speaking in urban and rural academies and temples, expounding “*The Shengyu Yaoyan*” (圣谕要言, *essentials of sacred edicts*) (Zheng 2013a, p. 264) and promoting the teachings of Confucius and Mencius (孔孟之道), as well as Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism (程朱理学), in a clear and comprehensive manner. Zheng believed that this approach would rectify people’s hearts and strengthen the state’s civilization of the people. In addition, to prevent overseas Chinese people from adopting Catholicism or Christianity, Zheng proposed the establishment of academies and public offices in various trading ports, regularly preaching *The Shengyu Guangxun* (圣谕广训, *the Sacred Edict of the Kangxi Emperor and Yongzheng Emperor*) and *The Quanshan Yaoyan* (劝善要言, *the Important Words for the Exhortation to Good*), with those who listened being “registered and provided with meals” (记以籍, 授以餐) (ibid.), quite similar to the sacrament of Baptism and Holy Communion in Christianity. In “Civilizing the people”, Zheng’s discussions resemble the national spiritual, moral, or civic education that is practiced in various countries today. This work also became an early form of the second of the “Five great wishes” (wu dayuan 五大愿) (Zheng 2013g, pp. 125–26) that he put forward in his later years.

As a prominent figure within the Self-Strengthening Movement, Zheng Guanying’s analyses of Chinese and Western cultures were comprehensive and in-depth, and he dedicated his life to the pursuit of cultural integration. His approach to cultural integration began with the integration of Chinese culture with Taoism as the core, then extended to the integration of Chinese and Western cultures with the integration of Western culture into Chinese culture, and in his later years evolved into the unification of world religions with Taoism as the nucleus. In the 1870s, he proposed a solution to the predicament of Confucianism by means of the Immortal Way and advocated the three religions in one (儒释道三教合一) (Xu and Zheng 1874, pp. 539–41). On the one hand, Zheng Guanying continued to criticize the chaos that had arisen under the decadence of the Buddhist and Taoist religions since the Ming and Qing dynasties⁴, and on the other hand, he spared no effort to expound and develop the fundamental “Tao” (道) of Taoism. The first article in the *Shengshi Weriyan* (1894), entitled “*Dao Qi*” (道器), focuses on his exposition of the “Tao”. In this article, Zheng Guanying also believed that the “Qi” (器) of various Western disciplines would eventually “return from the broad to the simple, and all five directions would be integrated into the Middle Kingdom” (由博返约, 五方俱入中土) in their respective fields of exploration of the ultimate truth, and he predicted that the differences between the “zhong xue” and the “xi xue” would gradually disappear in a few hundred years, and that the “xi xue” would certainly be “folded into the correct trend of Confucius and Mencius” (折入于孔孟之正趋), i.e., the “xi xue” would be integrated into the “zhong xue”. This statement centrally embodied Zheng Guanying’s Chinese culture-based view of the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures (Zheng 2013j, pp. 19–23).

After the Gengzi state changed, Zheng Guanying’s desire for religious salvation became stronger. Around August 1901, in his letter to the layman Yang Wenhui 杨文会 (1837–1911), a Buddhist scholar during the late Qing Dynasty, Zheng Guanying used “crying at the Xinting” (tongku xinting 痛哭新亭, It means to be sad about the national tragedy) to express his grief over the national calamity after the Gengzi National Disaster (庚子国难) as follows: “while the opportunity of stealing thoughts and doing good things is hindered, the way of being kind alone is possible” (窃思兼善之机既阻, 独善之道可为) (Yang 2008, pp. 305–6). This reflects that he wanted to turn his main energy toward his own practice and pin his hope of changing the world on his wish to become a Taoist and save the world through his own efforts. (Yang 2005, p. 125). During this period, he followed Wan Qianzhai 万潜斋 (1834?–1915?) to practice the internal alchemy of *Jindan zhenchuan* (金丹真传) (Shi and Chen 2017; Liang 2023), and escorted him to live in seclusion and practice. He discussed with Luo Mengqiu 罗梦秋, Li Jinchuan 李锦川 and other Taoist practitioners in the Bashu area to explore the secret art of making gold elixir and the Yin–Yang Dualism Sect Internal Elixir. Additionally, he searched for the “Sword Immortal” (jian xian, 剑仙) in many ways with his colleague and Taoist friend Wu Hantao 吴瀚涛 (1855–1919).⁵ At the same time, he still paid close attention to the current situation. In the summer of

1906, Zheng Guanying wrote to Timothy Richard, earnestly requesting that he petition the British minister in Beijing to sponsor the Qing government's constitutionalism. In the letter, Zheng proposed the establishment of a "common religion", the essence of which was to "integrate the essence of various religions into one" (集各教之精义合而为一), thereby realizing "one family under heaven, one religion for all nations, and the governance of a unified moral code" (四海一家, 万国一教, 道一风同之治), to convene a worldwide conference for the promotion of peace. Zheng believed that in order to end the chaotic era of competition among the great powers with "fierce firearms" (火器酷烈) at that time, it was necessary to rely on the "learning of sages inside and the kings outside" (内圣外王之学) and the manifestation of divine power possessed by individuals with "six kinds of magical power 六通", thereby establishing a great unified and prosperous era at the global level. This era, as Zheng believed, would involve "venerating morality, practicing constitutional governance, promoting industry, enhancing people's livelihoods, and widely disseminating education, without division of territories, regardless of race, and treating all equally" (崇道德, 行宪政, 兴实业, 厚民生, 广施教育, 无分畛域, 不论种族, 均一视同仁).⁶ The idea of creating a "common religion", from the perspective of religious unity (Li 2002), actually responded to Timothy Richard's desire to vigorously promote a "peace movement" during the same period (Timothy 2018, pp. 319–28).

The concept of creating a "common religion" that "integrates the essence of various religions into one" in order to eliminate world conflicts developed into a proposition of religious salvation in the pursuit of world unity in the 1910s. On New Year's Day of 1917, Zheng issued his "Five great wishes", clearly advocating for the "uniting all religions into one" by establishing the "General Sacred Taoist Academy" (圣道总院) (Zheng 2013g, p. 125) in China, with branches at Catholic churches, Protestant churches, mosques, and Confucian temples in various countries. Zheng believed that talent cultivation was a prerequisite for the realization of the "Five great wishes"; thus, he proposed the establishment of a (sacred) Taoist monastery in Shanghai to echo the Taoist monastery in Yangzhou (扬州) presided over by Taoist master Wan Qixing 万启型 (1874–1919) (Wang 2024) in his later years, with the aim of nurturing sacred Taoist talents to lay the foundation for great harmony. The proposal of the "Five great wishes" was his attempt to resolve the crisis of the First World War in a religious and moral way from a humanitarian standpoint (Wan 2012), marked the advent of Zheng's religious salvation proposition that "only with true divine power can the world be governed" (非假神力不足以平治天下) (Zheng 2013g, p. 125). In May 1920, he further proposed the establishment of Taoist cultivation academies (修真院) and the Seven Religious Jungles (qijiao conglin 七教丛林) (The Seven Religions refer to Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Jesus, Islam, Catholicism, and the Greek Religions) (Wan 2012; Liang 2023), and he drafted relevant regulations (Zheng 2013h, p. 343). By this point, a religious approach to salvation, in which the "Five great wishes" were gradually fulfilled by establishing cultivation academies to train Taoist people, had matured.

According to the analysis of Zheng's religious salvation propositions and practice plan from the perspectives of four elements of religion (i.e., concept, experience, behavior, and institution), the core and foundation at the internal level were the Taoist belief, while the religious behaviors, organizations, and institutions at the external level would learn from and absorb much from institutional religions such as Christianity. Taoism was at the core of the "one" religion in "uniting all religions into one", while the organizations and institutions of monotheistic religions such as Christianity constituted the shell of this "one" religion. In the first and second of his "Five great wishes", Zheng proposed the establishment of the General Sacred Taoist Academy, where the supervisors would be elected by the leaders of various religions, and its branches would be established in every country and port where Catholic churches, Protestant churches, mosques, or Confucian temples were present. The General Sacred Taoist Academy recruited sincere monks for secluded cultivation. After completing their cultivation, these monks would be appointed as leaders by the supervisor and would have to give public speeches on self-cultivation, family harmony, and state governance every week "just like today's priests and pastors"

(即如今日之神甫、牧师是也) (Zheng 2013g, p. 126). This situation shows that the conceptual model of the General Sacred Taoist Academy and its branches largely borrowed from the organizational structure and missionary methods of Christianity.

The “Five great wishes” of “uniting all religions into one” and “peaceful governance of the world” (平治天下) (ibid., p. 125) aimed to create a global village with unified values. This approach was essentially a grand plan to bridge cultural differences and reconstruct the world order, and it was also Zheng’s vision of integrating world cultures of various religions through Taoism. This approach not only involved the analysis and consideration of contemporary issues, rooted in the idea of seeking common ground while preserving differences in Chinese culture but also reflected Taoism’s reference to and absorption of Christianity and other cultures around the world. Since the Han and Jin dynasties, there has been a fusion of religions in China. In modern times, with the emigration of the Han Chinese and the organized arrival of Westerners, the co-existence of the five religions has appeared in society. In the early years of the Republic of China, there began to be a wave of voices advocating the unity of the five religions. This was coupled with the emergence of the “salvation” argument in the mid-to-late Qing period, religious salvation behaviors were common in the late Qing Dynasty. Consequently, Zheng Guanying’s concept of “one religion for all nations” was not out of the ordinary in the atmosphere of the time (Liang 2023; Li 2021).

Zheng’s “Five great wishes”, though spoken from a religious perspective, were not confined to religion. He regarded the elimination of human barriers and conflicts as both the starting point and the ultimate goal, with a self-evident rationale. The inclusivity of Chinese civilization, which embraces diverse cultures, served as the foundation of the salvation plan proposed in the “Five great wishes”, while the catalyst for its emergence lay in the inevitable requirements of communication between China and the West. At the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, as exchanges between China and the West deepened, both sides came to recognize the commonalities between different cultures and religions. The International Institute of China (IIC), founded by United States missionary Gilbert Reid (1857–1927), and its interactions with various social strata in modern China, represented the most typical case. The IIC received donations from Chinese officials and businessmen such as Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909) and Liu Kunyi 刘坤一 (1830–1902), as well as the China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company. Moreover, the IIC attracted intellectuals from both China and abroad, exerting a profound influence on contemporary Chinese society. Starting in 1910, the IIC organized monthly seminars in Shanghai, where representatives from various religions participated, with Timothy Richard invited to serve as the foreign chairperson (Timothy 2018, p. 306), to discuss the merits of different religions in China and to advocate for joint actions to safeguard the rights of all religions. Prominent figures from Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, and other sects were involved in IIC activities. Hence, some scholars regard the IIC as the most important platform for religious dialogue in modern China (Zhang 2018).

Wu Tingfang was a politician, diplomat, and jurist who was contemporaneous with Zheng Guanying. He was deeply engaged in the activities of the IIC since 1903, served as a director, provided financial support, delivered speeches, and organized discussions. Subsequently, he initiated the establishment of the “tian ren ming dao hui” (天人明道会, later renamed the “zheng dao xuehui” 证道学会) in Shanghai (Wu 1923, p. 54), where he authored books and gave speeches, “melting the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam into one pot” (熔儒教、佛教、耶稣教、回教诸教精义于一炉) (Zhang 2015, pp. 22–23) to eliminate religious barriers, thus sharing the same aspiration as the IIC. Zheng and Wu were of the same age and from the same hometown, and both harbored ambitions to benefit the world and paid attention to health preservation. In his later years, Wu became obsessed with “theosophy” (通神学) and devoted himself to “studying the principles of yin-yang and life-death” (考究阴阳生死之理) (Wu 1916, pp. 0–3). Based on years of experience in foreign affairs activities, Zheng Guanying wanted to explore the principles and methods of immortality through advanced Western science and technology.⁷ Both of them were deeply interested

in the reconciliation of Eastern and Western religions, science and religion. In letters to Wu, Zheng noted that he believed that the racial boundaries and prejudices among countries were the main causes of turmoil in the world, and he suggested that Wu should spread the knowledge of the soul to the world and make people understand that the human soul knows no national or racial boundaries. Zheng believed that this was the prerequisite for eliminating racial prejudices and achieving world peace (Zheng 2013i, p. 333), endowing the concept of equality for all with a deeper philosophical meaning.

5. Conclusions

Zheng Guanying's position on the dissemination of Christianity in China changed from "stopping missionary work" in the 1880s to the Chinese being in charge of religion in the 1890s and then to the integration of various religions into one in the 1910s. This evolution, from rejection and criticism to borrowing and absorption and, finally, to integration and consolidation, represented a process of thinking and cognition transitioning from sentimentality to rationality and a deepening of understanding.

After the Opium War, the people who first realized that the world was changing and that China might fall behind were not the literati but the compradors who engaged in trade with foreigners or those who had been baptized into Christianity (Xu 2009, pp. 273–75). Zheng belonged to this small group. He received a traditional education through the imperial examination system from a young age, but he abandoned it at 17 years old to become a comprador. After working in foreign firms for many years, Zheng was proficient in English, engaged in Western industries and various Sino–Western enterprises, and had extensive interactions with Christian missionaries such as Timothy Richard and Chinese converts to Christianity. Therefore, Zheng had more practical experience and a more intuitive understanding of Western people and culture than the average Chinese individual.

Precisely based on his long-term close observation and deep contemplation of Western civilization, Zheng, amidst the strong waves of nationalism and patriotism, was able to propose the issue of Chinese sovereignty over the spread of Christianity in China, and he rationally called for resolving the differences between China and the West through equitable dialogue. This response differed from the fervor of the common people, and even from the anti-Christian intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, demonstrating a calmness and rationality beyond the reach of both the group and the times, and conveying the complex characteristics of the coexistence of revivalistic and perpetuative, magical and rational, in the modern Chinese nativist movement (King 1999, pp. 125–26). It was not until as late as 1905 that Timothy Richard drafted seven regulations on civil and religious relations, which mentioned respecting Chinese religious and administrative–judicial sovereignty, stating that "any missionary who distributes disrespectful texts toward Chinese religions shall be dismissed" and that "any missionary who interferes in lawsuits involving Chinese subjects shall be dismissed".⁸ Similar propositions were clearly made by Zheng as early as 1895 in his 14-volume version of *Shengshi Weiyuan*. In fact, Professor Dongyuan Xia once commented that Zheng had "a forward-thinking consciousness (Xia 2009b, p. 250)", an evaluation that stemmed mainly from the perspectives of politics, arts, democracy, and science. In addition, from the perspectives of cognition and communication between Chinese and Western religions and cultures, Zheng undoubtedly showed forward-thinking tendencies. The question of Christian sovereignty, which he raised in the 1890s, actually touched on the core issue of the Chinese-ization of Christianity. However, it did not make an impact on the Christian community. He raised it too early, and this general idea of self-reliance and self-propagation did not emerge in the Chinese Christian community until the 1920s. Zheng Guanying's ideas also only partially reflect the shift in Chinese intellectuals' attitudes towards the West, from total rejection to limited acceptance. However, this is not a universal pattern.

The changes in Zheng's understanding of and attitude toward Christianity reflected his exploration of the path for China and the world based on the theme of the times and combined with his own Taoist beliefs. These changes reflected the kind of thinking and choice of Chi-

nese intellectuals at that time when facing the impact of Western culture; they transcended the three goal paths of traditional culture, foreign culture, and utopia and took the world's culture as the goal of reorganization. These intellectuals attempted to promote the progress and development of Chinese society by absorbing certain elements of Western culture, thereby realizing the ideal of "great harmony under heaven", where all of humanity, regardless of race, beliefs, or borders, collaborates for development and peaceful coexistence. They were seeking a synthesis at a level higher than that of traditional and foreign cultures, which is the theme of the pure modernization movement (King 1999, p. 128–29). Zheng Guanying's thinking and choices are different from the superstitious concepts of ghosts, gods, and divination of his contemporaries, such as Yan Fu 严复 (1854–1921), Wu Tingfang and Ding Fubao 丁福保 (1874–1952), not only is it a reflection and summary of his own life history (Liang 2023), but also his sublimation of the Taoist concept of "the body and the state are one and the same" (身国同构), i.e., the individual and the world are one and the same in the modern world, and his thinking on the future of the destiny of mankind is still of significant revelation and reference significance for us to carry on intercultural exchanges and to solve the conflicts of various parties under the background of globalization today.

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Notes

- ¹ In his writings, Zheng referred to the three major Christian denominations as Protestant, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox. In the two versions of *Yi Yan*, Zheng primarily criticized French Catholicism. Following in the footsteps of France, countries such as the United States and Britain also began missionary activities in China. In his later writings (e.g., *Shengshi Weriyan*), Zheng also took note of the similarities and differences among the three major denominations.
- ² Mr. Xia Dongyuan believed that, overall, the 36-essay version of *Yi Yan* was more progressive than the 20-essay version. In terms of ideological content, the 36-essay version of *Yi Yan* had a certain continuity with Zheng's previously published *Revealing the Essentials for Saving the Times* in terms of theoretical understanding. This signified Zheng's shift in thinking about Chinese issues from perceptual understanding to rational understanding, as well as his change in stance from advocating Westernization to advocating reform. In terms of form, *Revealing the Essentials for Saving the Times* was a collection of (most of) the articles published by Zheng in the Chinese newspaper *Shenpao* 申报 (*Shanghai News*), while the 36-essay version of *Yi Yan* had a clearly defined purpose, as he stated the following in the preface: "To change the current ways with present principles, to conform to ancient ways with natural laws, to seek advice from distant sentiments, to learn from their experienced skills and attack their weaknesses, and to take away their support". Each essay in the 36-essay version of *Yi Yan* revolved around this purpose, discussing the necessity of social change as well as the specific ways and methods of change. In his view, China's most urgent problems were, first, to "change", to reform outdated institutions and customs, and second, to borrow from Western political systems and learn advanced Western technology. Only in this way could China overcome foreign aggressors (Xia 2009a, pp. 224–25).
- ³ In 1859, Zheng Guanying left his hometown of Xiangshan 香山 and went to Shanghai 上海, where he studied to be a buyer at the Baoshun Foreign Exchange Company and, at the same time, learned English from John Fryer. It was during this period that he began to "study politics and industry" (究心政治、实业之学) and attempted to write some of the chapters of the *Jiushi Jieyao* 救时揭要 (Xia 2013a, p. 747; Li 2002). As early as during the Northern China Drought period of 1876 to 1878, Zheng had already corresponded with Timothy Richard, who was involved in the relief efforts in Shanxi 山西. "A Letter to the Missionary Timothy Richard in Shanxi 覆山西教士李提摩太书" (Xia 2013a, p. 1367) might be the first letter that Zheng wrote to Timothy Richard, expressing sincere gratitude for his donations. Following this, Zheng wrote to Timothy Richard several times, and their correspondence continued until the 1910s (letters from Zheng to Timothy Richard were included mainly in the *Supplement to The Dangerous Words of the Shengshi*, published by Zheng in his later years).
- ⁴ Zheng Guanying abhorred the many chaotic phenomena that existed in Buddhism and Taoism, and he wrote about them in "Lun sanjiao yaozhi pengmen huoshi" (论三教要旨旁门惑世, written before 1872) (*Jiu shi Jieyao*. pp. 48–49), "Seng Dao" (僧道,

- written around 1890) (*Shengshi Weiyan*, pp. 309–13), and in his preface to the book “*Dao fa ji gang*” (道法纪纲, written by Wang Tianyi and published by Zheng Guanying in 1910), he consistently criticized these chaotic phenomena.
- ⁵ Sheng Xuanhuai Archive (盛宣怀档案) in the Shanghai Library contain many letters between Zheng Guanying and Luo Mengqiu, Li Jinchuan, Wu Hantao and other Taoist friends, some of which were written in the period after the Gengzi National Disaster to around the Xinhai Revolution.
- ⁶ In 1905, the Qing government dispatched five ministers to study constitutionalism abroad. In July of the following year, the government formally announced its “preparations for constitutionalism 预备仿行立宪”. Timothy Richard returned to China in the summer of 1906 after more than one year of vacation and then went to Beijing to report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the attitudes of the United Kingdom and United States governments toward establishing alliances of nations to promote world peace (related accounts can be found in Timothy Richard’s *Forty-five Years in China: Reminiscences*, pp. 324–25). Zheng’s letter mentioned the following: “Now, our government intends to establish a constitution, hearing that you are currently in Beijing 今我政府有意立宪, 闻先生日间晋京”, suggesting that the time of writing of this letter (i.e., *Zhi yingguo boshi litimotai shu* 致英国博士李提摩太书) (Zheng 2013b, pp. 392–93) would have been before Timothy Richard’s trip to Beijing in 1906.
- ⁷ In his letters to Taoist friends such as Wu Tingfang, Huang Suizhi 黄邃之 (1866–1933), Lü Xiantang 吕献堂, Sun Zhongyu 孙仲瑜 (1874–1924), Zheng Guanying talked about the application of Western science and technology to Taoist alchemy (道炼金丹术) and Taoist internal alchemy (道教内丹术). For related letters, see “zhi Wu Zhiyong shu” (Letter to Wu Zhiyong) (pp. 92–93), “zhi huaxue huangjun suizhi yishi lvjun xiantang foxue yanjiu hui zhangjun runsheng shu” (Letter to Huang Suizhi, Lü Xiantang, Zhang Runsheng) (pp. 81–86), “zhi sunjun zhongyu, zhengjun dingchen, huangjun yizhai shu” ((Letter to Sun Zhongyu, Zheng Dingchen, Huang Yizhai) (pp. 149–51), in *Supplement to The Dangerous Words of the Shengshi* (Xia 2013a).
- ⁸ The seven regulations on civil and religious relations proposed by Timothy Richard were drafted after the death of the French missionary Pierre Favier in April 1905. When Timothy Richard returned to England from China for vacation in 1905, he personally submitted these regulations to the Archbishop of Westminster of the Roman Catholic Church. As the Archbishop stated, “If these rules had been followed earlier, then we would not need to mourn for the murdered missionaries. If you are willing to leave me a copy, then I will personally submit it to the Pope and recommend its implementation in China in the future”. Refer to Timothy (Timothy 2018, pp. 271–72).

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