On June 19, 1898, in the midst of China’s intense Hundred Days’ Reforms, Kang Youwei, the leading advocate for fundamental changes according to the Western model, submitted a memorandum to the Manchu emperor calling for a state-sanctioned church (jiaohui) of Confucianism. The proposal never came to fruition. By the end of the summer, the conservative faction in the court re-established control, revoked all the directives of institutional change and divested the reform-minded young emperor of executive power. Kang Youwei fled to Japan and many of his associates were executed. As Ya-pei Kuo reveals, however, the idea of a state-sanctioned religion based on ‘Confucianism’ did not die.

Ya-pei Kuo

IN THE NEW CENTURY, China continued to witness various political attempts to institute Confucianism as some sort of state religion. The Qing government’s stipulation of the worship of Confucius at all levels of the new-style schools in 1904 and Yuan Shikai’s revival of the state worship of the sage three years after the Republic was founded, were only two of the earliest examples. Meanwhile, remaining active and vital throughout the 1910s was the campaign led by Kang Youwei and his disciple Chen Huanzhang, petitioning for the constitutional acknowledgment of Confucianism as China’s national religion.

Historians have explained these 20th century impetuses for giving Confucianism public and institutional recognition in two ways. First, and a more cynical approach, is to read them as a form of modern identity politics. Cultural symbolism allowed the powers that be to build a tacit rapport with the conservative constituency without compromising their forward-looking plans of socio-economic modernisation. The second approach places them in a larger historical context and sees them as part and parcel of the nation-building process. Cultural elements familiar to the population were transformed into national emblems and utilised for promoting group awareness and national solidarity among citizens, a phenomenon that was by no means unique to China.

These explanatory models, however, do not seem to be applicable to the late 19th century. Rather than strengthening the dynastic regime’s constituency, Kang Youwei’s reformist ideas alienated a large portion of the elite and provoked their most vehement protests, neither were there indications of a consistent nationalistic thinking at this stage of Kang’s career. Although his idea was visionary enough to prefigure upcoming developments, it was motivated by a totally different set of political concerns than those of later years.

To understand the historical forces that fuelled the idea of a Confucian Church, one should probably start with Kang Youwei’s memorandum itself. In the document drafted in 1898, Kang made plenty of references to Christianity and left no doubt about his source of inspiration. As an institution, the Confucian Church was meant to be the Chinese equivalent of the Christian Church. The political purpose of its creation, as Kang clearly explained to the emperor, was to establish a church-to-church channel of communication between China and the Western countries, and to depoliticise religious tensions caused by the increasing presence of missionary activities in China, which in the second half of the 19th century had often led to diplomatic disagreements and even wars.

More than a device of diplomatic manoeuvring, the church organisation was also an administrative tool for ideological and religious streamlining. Kang’s memorandum lamented the rampant practice of heterodoxy in Chinese society: people worshiped all kinds of spirits and gods, and ignored the temple of Confucius. The creation of a church network would provide a new apparatus for systematically re-educating the people about the sagely teachings and recreating a cohesively pious Confucian society. Kang bluntly admitted that this institutional mechanism was based on Western models. ‘Their chapels spread all over the land. Every day during the week, Kings and ministers, men and women venerate their god and recite from their scripture. Although their doctrine (jiao) is shallow, their practice is methodical and orderly. In comparison, our doctrine is refined, but our practice has been crude.’

Kang Youwei’s fascination with the religious practice of the West was not uncommon among those who bothered to learn about Christianity. However, placed in the whole elite stratum, they were the minority. The widespread anti-Christian sentiment among the socio-political leaders had its deep roots in the international conflict caused by Western expansionism. For most educated Chinese, Christianity, which had been illicit since 1724, could only be openly practiced on Chinese soil because of the Western powers’ intervention. The Treaty of Tianjing, signed after China’s military defeat by France and Great Britain in 1858, forced the Qing government to acknowledge that ‘the principles of the Chinese religion... have proven to lead people to good deeds,’ and to warrant Christian missionaries the rights to travel and preach freely in China. Although historians nowadays are cognisant of the different social and ideological origins of the global mission activities emanating from Europe and North America and those of Western colonial imperialism, to the elite of 19th China, these were indubitably intertwined forces.

The numerous legal disputes involving Christian missionaries and converts in the mid and late decades of the 19th century further aggravated officials and elite members in China. Most of these legal cases were about sanctioned church properties during the Christian proscription and civil conflicts between Christian and non-Christian communities. They almost invariably ended with the invocation of treaty rights by missionaries and the interventions of the foreign legations through China’s bureau of international affairs, Jìjìng yuán. The process compromised the juristic power given to local officials and magistrates, leaving them with a bitter antagonism against the missionaries and their political backers.
The implications of some controversies reached further than property disputes and community violence, touching upon bigger issues of Christianity to their communities. In 1861, for example, the Franciscan missionaries in Shanxi sent a report for an official request of Chinese Catholics from the papal court for a local temple festival. Their argument ran as follows: A Christian, whose first and ultimate religious obligation was to his chapel, having no other church, or state, or civil society to which he owed his allegiance, and who, besides being a member of the Church, was also a member of the society of his country, and a citizen of the state, was by the very nature of his religious profession, bound to obey the laws of all the countries under which he might reside, and to the minister, constituted a political infringement upon Chinese Christians' conscience and deterred Catholics from participating in the examinations.

With their nationwide impact, legal cases like these revealed to Chinese reading public an utterly different concept of religion than what they had been familiarized with. Missionaries' protests against Chinese customs and conventions were often premised on an assumption that was unique to Christianity, i.e. a person could belong to only one religion. A Christian's choice of faith had to be absolute and exclusive. This emphasis on the fixed boundaries between various religions was in sharp contrast with the Confucian attitude toward religious others. Placing premium on the social and moral effects, a Confucian could generously extend toleration to other religions as long as they conformed to basic ethical and ritual norms and did not pose a threat to the existent order. In late imperial times, a wide range of sectarian practices, many with Daoist and Buddhist roots, were tolerated, or even incorporated into the state cult, because they 'had proven to lead people to good deeds'—the same justification for lifting the Christian ban in 1858.

The far-reaching repercussions and sheer number of these legal cases involving Christians probably made many curious about the religion from the West. Introductory essays on Christianity and case collections started to appear in the 1870s-80s, attesting to the demand. Most of these texts gave basic information about the religion's origins, history, major branches and tenets, along with summaries of the Chinese government's ruling on important cases. Most authors/compiers also offered comments with personal insights on the ongoing conflicts. One point that many of these texts repeated was Christianity's obstinate fixation with the community boundaries between the believers and non-believers. The unique Christian notion of religious exclusivity did not pass unnoticed by their Chinese observers. For those who wanted to acquire more direct and educated knowledge about Christianity, missionary should be their first choice.

Kang's memo-

Kang's memoir documented the rampant practice of heterodoxy in Chinese society: people worshipped all kinds of spirits and gods, but ignored the temple of Confucius. The creation of a church network would provide a new apparatus for systematically educating the people about the sage's teachings and recreating a cohesive society.

Confucianism as world religion?

Christianity also provided a new model for re-imaging Confucianism's relationship with the existent political structure. In its imminent confrontation with Christianity, Kang saw an opportunity for religious expansionism. Confucianism, with its supreme profundity, had the potential to become a true world religion. In order to overcome this religious threat, it would achieve a global fame and enjoy unprecedented following from all over the world. In this fantastical projection of a future scenario, Kang imagined a politically stronger China to aid Confucianism's expansion. Yet, Kang emphasized in a private letter, the ultimate objective of modernizing the ancient teaching was to give it the ability to spread beyond the land of its origin, and transcend the ups and downs of its political patron. Like Christianity, Confucianism had a large part to play in human history and could not afford to seal its fate with merely one nation.

The recognition of religion as an autonomous force on its own constituted probably the most significant legacy of the 19th century re-encounter between Christianity and Confucianism. No matter how vague Kang's idea of a Confucian Church was, it expressed a clear vision of administrative demarcation between the religious and the non-religious in state affairs. Still seeking the state's backing, the proposed church was meant to be an institution independent from the church and non-Confucian state. Undermining the proposal for a Confucian church lay a new model for the relationship between Confucianism and the Chinese state. In its new form of state religion, 'Christian elements' were to personify its religious and moral ethos and offered no theoretical underpinning for the state's cosmological claims. The 19th-century-old mission idea to a more precarious patron-client relationship. Religion remained an important aspect of politics, but the terms in which religious politics played out were fundamentally altered.