

The belated formation of the China Bible House (1937): Nationalism and the indigenization of Protestantism in Republican China

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Abstract

This paper investigates the belated formation of the China Bible House, the first national Bible society in China, as a result of the interplay between the politics of foreign Bible societies and the indigenizing Chinese church in relation to rising nationalism during the Republican era. The challenge of Chinese nationalism to Christianity drove foreign Bible societies and Chinese Protestants to work towards the indigenization of Bible work. However, distrust and conflicts hindered foreign Bible societies' co-operation among themselves and also with Chinese Protestants. While Chinese church leaders saw the founding of a Chinese Bible society as a manifestation of the Chineseness of the Protestant church in China, they agreed with foreign Bible societies on the global identity of Bible work, which justified the latter's continuing presence in China. This understanding, together with the need for foreign financial support and expertise, explains why Sino-foreign co-operation existed in Bible work in China.

Keywords: American Bible Society, British and Foreign Bible Society, China Bible House, Indigenization, National Bible Society of Scotland, Nationalism, Protestant Christianity, Republican China

While indigenization took place in various aspects of the Chinese Protestant church during the 1920s, Bible work, including the translation, publication and circulation of the Bible, seemed immune to it, as missionaries and Chinese church leaders in general accepted the status quo, i.e. the dominance of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), the American Bible Society (ABS) and the National Bible Society of Scotland (NBSS). The China Bible House, a Sino-foreign Protestant establishment in Bible work in China, came into existence only shortly before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Although the China Bible House is historically significant in

1 The author would like to thank Kristin Hellmann (former Manager of Library Services, American Bible Society), Onesimus Ngundu (Assistant Librarian, Bible Society's Library, Cambridge University Library) and John Binnington (former Senior Information Co-ordinator, Scottish Bible Society) for their invaluable assistance in locating archival materials relevant to this research. The author also appreciates the generous help from Dr Daniel K.T. Choi, who was so kind as to show the author the annual reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society's China agency published in the 1930s. Last but not least, the author acknowledges financial support from Hong Kong Baptist University through its Faculty Research Grant (FRG1/13–14/033).

Chinese Protestantism as the first national Bible society in China, it has received little scholarly discussion beyond a few pages in monographs.²

This paper investigates the belated formation of the China Bible House as a result of the interplay between the politics of foreign Bible societies and the indigenizing Chinese church in relation to rising nationalism during the Republican era. The need to respond to the challenge to Christianity from Chinese nationalism drove foreign Bible societies and Chinese Protestants to work towards the indigenization of Bible work. This paper, however, illustrates how distrust and conflicts hindered foreign Bible societies' co-operation not only among themselves but also with Chinese Protestants. It argues that while Chinese church leaders saw the founding of a Chinese Bible society as a manifestation of the Chineseness of the Protestant church in China, they agreed with foreign Bible societies on the global identity of Bible work. This understanding, together with the need for foreign financial support and expertise, explains why Sino-foreign co-operation existed in Bible work. Providing manpower, advice, and managerial support to the China Bible House, foreign Bible societies continued to be involved in China's Bible work and were committed to promoting the worldwide circulation of the Bible.

1. The BFBS, the ABS and the NBSS as the “Big Three” in Chinese Protestant Bible translation, publication and circulation

Bible work in late Qing and Republican China was almost monopolized by the BFBS, the ABS and the NBSS. These can be regarded as the three largest players (the “Big Three”) in the enterprise of translating, publishing and circulating the Bible in China. The BFBS was the first Bible society to enter China: it began its work in 1811 by granting 500 pounds sterling to Robert Morrison for his Bible translation work and the printing of his literary Chinese version.³ Following in the BFBS's footsteps, the ABS made its first appropriation in

- 2 James Moulton Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1965), 344–6, 354–61; Daniel K.T. Choi (Cai Jintu 蔡錦圖), “Zhongwen Shengjing de liuchuan” 中文聖經的流傳 (The Dissemination of the Chinese Bible), in Marshall Broomhall, *Dao zai Shenzhou: Shengjing zai Zhongguo de fanyi yu liuchuan* 道在神州: 聖經在中國的翻譯與流傳 (The Word in China: The Translation and Dissemination of the Bible in China), translated by Daniel K.T. Choi (Hong Kong: International Bible Society, 2000), 251–2. The English original was first published in 1934; Marshall Broomhall, *The Bible in China* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1934).
- 3 Minutes of the Committee, 7 October 1811, the Archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS Archives) BSA/B1/5. Materials from the BFBS's archives are used with the permission of the Bible Society's Library, Cambridge University Library. Many secondary sources, including the BFBS's publications, show that 1812 was the year. For example, “Historical notes”, *British and Foreign Bible Society. Report of the China Agency for the Year Ending December 31st, 1932*, BFBS Archives. See also D. MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China (1807–1907) Being the Centenary Conference Historical Volume* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1907), 553.

1833 to aid in Bible distribution in China.⁴ The NBSS began its work in China in 1863 with the appointment of Alexander Williamson as its first agent.⁵

Relying on missionaries' linguistic expertise and giving them freedom to choose the form of Chinese they deemed appropriate, the Big Three sponsored the translation and publication of the Bible not only in literary Chinese but also in Mandarin, the *lingua franca* in late imperial China that later became the national language of China. The BFBS and ABS also aided missionaries in translating and publishing the Bible in Chinese spoken languages such as Cantonese, Hakka, Shanghainese and the dialects of Fuzhou 福州, Xiamen 廈門, Ningbo 寧波, Shantou 汕頭 and Suzhou 蘇州.⁶ Some Chinese Bible versions were sponsored by only one of the Big Three. For example, Griffith John's New Testament translations in simplified literary Chinese (1885) and Mandarin (1889) were published exclusively by the NBSS; however, some were products of joint patronage: the ABS and BFBS co-sponsored the translation and publication of the Mandarin New Testament known as the *Peking Version* (1872). The renowned Chinese *Union Versions* in literary Chinese, simplified literary Chinese and Mandarin (1919) were produced under the joint patronage of the Big Three.⁷

As for Chinese Bible distribution, the BFBS established its permanent agency in Shanghai and appointed Alexander Wylie as its full-time agent in China (1863–77), “who shall traverse the country, wherever accessible, with a view of organizing a system of extensive Colportage, and initiating such other practicable schemes, as shall conduce to the circulation of the Scriptures on a far larger scale than has hitherto been attained”.⁸ During the 1870s, the ABS and the NBSS expanded their work in China. In 1875 the ABS appointed L.H. Gulick as

- 4 Li Xuande 力宣德 (George Carleton Lacy), “Meiguo Shengjing Hui zai Hua bai nian shiye de dashi” 美國聖經會在華百年事業的大勢 (A Hundred Years of the American Bible Society's Work in China), in *Meihua Shengjing Hui bai nian jinian zhuankan* 美華聖經會百年紀念專刊 (The Centennial of the American Bible Society in China: A Commemorative Volume) (Shanghai: American Bible Society, 1933), 29, Shanghai Municipal Archives U125-0-15; MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 576.
- 5 William C. Somerville, *From Iona to Dunblane: Story of the National Bible Society of Scotland to 1948* (Edinburgh: National Bible Society of Scotland, 1948), 76.
- 6 MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 565; Henry Otis Dwight, *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 562, 566–7.
- 7 For an overview of the history of Chinese Protestant Bible translation, see Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version or The Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1999).
- 8 *The Fifty-Ninth Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (1863), 177, BFBS Archives BSA/G1/1. Colportage here refers to Bible distribution through a corps of travelling Bible sellers known as colporteurs. Wylie was not the first BFBS agent in China: the BFBS appointed George T. Lay as its agent to China in 1836 to distribute Chinese Bibles on coastal voyages. After three years of service with slim prospects, Lay returned to England in 1839 because the BFBS decided not to extend his appointment. *The Thirty-Second Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (1836), lxiii–lxiv, BFBS Archives BSA/G1/1; MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 555; William Canton, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1904), 391–3.

its first agent in China. The head office of its China agency was located in Shanghai.⁹ After a short term of service for the NBSS in north China, John Archibald was in 1877 appointed its agent in Hankow (Hankou 漢口), which then became the location of the organization's headquarters in China.¹⁰ In 1885, it set up its own printing establishment there, but this was sold in 1918. The Commercial Press (Shangwu Yinshuguan 商務印書館) then became the NBSS's printer and its headquarters in China transferred to Shanghai.¹¹ As more systematic colportage work was organized by the ABS and the NBSS, the number of Chinese Bibles distributed increased rapidly. Between 1863 and 1875 the ABS circulated on average about 100,000 Chinese Bibles annually; the number increased to over 250,000 by 1887. The NBSS issued just over 400,000 Chinese Bibles during the period 1864–83, but within the following decade it issued about two million copies.¹² After years of development the work of these Bible societies became comparable with that of the BFBS. In 1889, for instance, the BFBS, the ABS and the NBSS distributed respectively 224,807, 230,920 and 210,260 Chinese Bibles.¹³ By 1921, they had distributed in total more than 110 million copies of the Bible in China (most of them were portions of the Bible).¹⁴

2. Nationalism, the indigenization of the Protestant church in China during the 1920s and the South China Bible Society (1927)

During the early 1920s, under the influence of the New Culture Movement and Chinese nationalism, Protestantism came under intensifying attacks in Republican China. This required the Protestant church in China to review its over-emphasis on proselytization and to justify its presence by reaffirming itself as a useful participant in the nation-building of modern China. Regarding science and individual emancipation as vital to China's salvation, many Chinese intellectuals were determined to eliminate every form of superstition, in which civilized people in a modern society should not believe.¹⁵ The attack was at first directed towards Chinese religious traditions, but Protestantism too came

9 MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 579.

10 MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 568.

11 MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 568; Somerville, *From Iona to Dunblane*, 84–5. It was the NBSS's plan that Shanghai would "occupy much the same position as Hankow did prior to the sale of the Press". Minutes of Western Committee, 10 March 1919, the Archives of the National Bible Society of Scotland (NBSS Archives). Materials from the archives of the NBSS are used with permission of the Scottish Bible Society, Edinburgh.

12 MacGillivray (ed.), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China*, 573, 579.

13 "Bible distribution in China 1889", *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, May 7–20, 1890* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1890).

14 Choi, "Zhongwen Shengjing de liuchuan", 258.

15 Ka-Che Yip, "China and Christianity: perspectives on missions, nationalism, and the state in the Republican period, 1912–1949", in Brian Stanley (ed.), *Missions, Nationalism and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 133–4; Sumiko Yamamoto, *History of Protestantism in China: The Indigenization of Christianity* (Tokyo: Tōhō Gakkai, 2000), 116–21.

under attack. The main contention was that all religions were irrational and contrary to the laws of science.¹⁶ According to Winfried Glüer, people “rid themselves of Christianity because it was irrelevant and scientifically outdated” in modern society.¹⁷ Christianity was no longer seen as what John K. Fairbank called a major element “inspiring the regeneration of China”, even though “after 1900 missionary institutions began to nurture ‘Young China’, a new generation of patriots and reformers” and “contributed directly to the rise of China’s modern nationalism”.¹⁸

Protestantism was vulnerable to anti-imperialist attacks because of its links to Western imperial powers, which Latourette regarded as “a handicap to the missionary and to the Church”.¹⁹ The major point of attack was that the right of Protestant missionaries to propagate the Christian faith, and the missionaries’ claim to protection, originated from unequal treaties between China and foreign imperialist powers. The fact that some of the missionaries misused their favoured legal position to expand their work or protect native converts, together with the foreign domination of the Protestant church in China, reinforced in the minds of many Chinese the association between missions and imperialism.²⁰

All of these attacks led to the Church’s realization that the future of Protestant Christianity in China depended on aligning its efforts with Chinese nationalist aspirations.²¹ Not only missionaries but also Chinese Protestants, “sought to win converts to the Kingdom of God without risking the integrity of the nation”.²² Moreover, anti-Christian sentiments were translated into action by impatient student activists. The Anti-Christian Student Federation was formed in Shanghai in March 1922 to oppose the conference of the World Student Christian Federation to be held in April at Tsinghua College (now Tsinghua University in Beijing), which marked the beginning of the anti-Christian movement during 1922 and 1927.²³

The National Christian Conference held in May 1922 was thus a timely opportunity for the Church to discuss how to “face squarely the present situation both within and without the Church”.²⁴ “The Chinese Church” was chosen by

16 Yamamoto, *History of Protestantism in China*, 114.

17 Winfried Glüer, *Christliche Theologie in China: T.C. Chao 1918–1956* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979), 15.

18 John K. Fairbank, “Introduction”, in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 3.

19 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1929), 533.

20 Yip, “China and Christianity”, 135.

21 Paul Varg even argued that such a realization contributed to American missionaries’ decision to support treaty revision in the late 1920s (“The missionary response to the Nationalist Revolution”, in Fairbank (ed.), *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America*, 311).

22 John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 14.

23 Yip Ka-che, *Religion, Nationalism and Chinese Students: The Anti-Christian Movement of 1922–1927* (Bellingham, WA: Center for East Asian Studies, Western Washington University, 1980), 22–3.

24 F. Rawlinson, Helen Thoburn and D. MacGillivray (eds), *The Chinese Church as Revealed in the National Christian Conference* (Shanghai: Oriental Press, 1922), 30.

the conference as the central theme of its discussion,²⁵ which reflected the Church's determination to accelerate its indigenization as a response to the accusation that it was linked to imperialist powers. The goal of the indigenization of the Protestant church in China was to make it self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. The growth of the spirit of independence from foreign control in Protestant churches in China was barely evident in the nineteenth century but became a prominent theme after 1900.²⁶ The National Christian Conference in 1922 was a milestone for the indigenization movement, because it was the first time that Chinese Protestants and Western missionaries had equal representation in a general conference of Protestant churches in China.²⁷ It was an arena in which Chinese Protestant leaders expressed their visions and agendas for the indigenization movement. Moreover, two Sino-foreign organizations with a significant degree of Chinese leadership and responsibility emerged out of the conference: the National Christian Council of China (Zhonghua Quanguo Jidujiao Xiejinhui 中華全國基督教協進會, 1922), a national co-ordinating and liaison body covering most of the denominations and mission groups in China; and the Church of Christ in China (Zhonghua Jidujiaohui 中華基督教會, 1927), which eventually had a membership of about a quarter of the Protestant community in China.²⁸

The South China Bible Society (Huanan Shengshu Hui 華南聖書會), the first attempt by Chinese Protestants to run a Bible society, was established in Canton (Guangzhou 廣州) in 1927, when the city was in turmoil and experiencing periodic outbursts of violent strife. The anti-foreign feeling provoked by the Northern Expedition led many missionary organizations to warn their workers in the interior part of China to withdraw to the coast where evacuation could be more easily accomplished. Fearing that the presence of missionaries would serve only to provoke further anti-Christian attacks after the Nanjing incident in March 1927, foreign consuls insisted that missionaries should withdraw even if they wanted to remain in their positions. By June 1927, well over half of the foreign missionaries in China had left.²⁹

Under such circumstances, H.O.T. Burkwall, who was entrusted by both the ABS and the BFBS to oversee the work of their sub-agencies in Canton,³⁰

25 Ibid., 31.

26 Daniel H. Bays, "The growth of independent Christianity in China, 1900–1937", in Daniel H. Bays (ed.), *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 308.

27 Rawlinson has even stated that "actually the Chinese representatives of the Churches outnumbered their Western colleagues who represented the Missions" ("Interpretative introduction", Rawlinson et al. (eds), *The Chinese Church as Revealed in the National Christian Conference*, p. iv).

28 Bays, "The growth of independent Christianity in China", 308.

29 Yip, *Religion, Nationalism and Chinese Students*, 72; Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, 820.

30 In 1923, the ABS's sub-agency secretary in Canton was seriously ill and leaving the field, which led the organization to request the BFBS's permission for Burkwall to superintend its business through his BFBS office in Canton. Starting in 1924, the sub-agencies of the ABS and the BFBS in Canton were administered by Burkwall. This arrangement continued until Burkwall's retirement in 1937. Minutes of China Sub-Committee, 22 October 1923 and 31 March 1924, BFBS Archives BSA/C21/2; Minutes of China

gathered a group of senior Chinese clergymen and laymen from local churches to fill the vacuum, drawing up plans to develop a Chinese Bible society for South China. On 10 December 1927, the South China Bible Society was formally established in Canton. Directed by a Chinese executive committee and funded by membership subscriptions, its work included the supervision and direction of colportage, and promoting Chinese interest in Bible work. It is noteworthy that the Chinese founders of the South China Bible Society regarded it as a non-independent, Sino-foreign collaborative enterprise. The South China Bible Society maintained a close relationship with the ABS-BFBS joint sub-agency in Canton, which under Burkwall's leadership supplied Chinese Bibles and provided guidance on Bible distribution work to the South China Bible Society. Donations collected on the South China Bible Society's annual Bible Sunday were contributed to the ABS and the BFBS for their worldwide Bible work.³¹

As G.W. Sheppard, the general secretary for China of the BFBS (1923–36), recalled, the proposal to form a China Bible Society “eminated [*sic*] from conditions and developments in South China”.³² The establishment of the South China Bible Society encouraged discussions among the Big Three about the

Sub-Committee, 29 October 1924, BFBS Archives BSA/C21/3; Janice E. Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VI-F-2. Distribution Abroad, 1901–1930: China, 1901–1930”, 88, 131, American Bible Society Archives (ABS Archives); *One Hundred and Twenty-Second Report of the American Bible Society* (1938), 211, ABS Archives. The archival materials of the ABS are used with permission of the American Bible Society Library and Archives, New York.

31 Minutes of China Sub-Committee, 29 June 1932, BFBS Archives BSA/C21/3; Luo Xiaochuan 羅嘯川, “Huanan Shengshu Hui baogao” 華南聖書會報告 (Report of the South China Bible Society), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 聖經公會報 (Bible Society Magazine) 14, 12.

32 Carleton Lacy, “Notes on November Meeting of Advisory Council”, BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1. Sheppard was the successor of G.H. Bondfield, who served as the BFBS's agent in China from 1895 to 1923. During his final years in the BFBS, the title of Bondfield's position was changed to “General Secretary for China”. In the BFBS's publications, Bondfield and his successors were sometimes simply called the BFBS's secretary in China. Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 337–38; *The One Hundred and Fifteenth Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (1919), 180, BFBS Archives BSA/G1/1; *The Bible in the World 1927*, 59, BFBS Archives BSA/G1/3/3. In 1918, the ABS approved that the people in charge of its foreign agents be designated “Agency Secretaries” instead of “Agents” – Minutes of Committee on Foreign Agencies, 1 November 1918, ABS Archives. The NBSS's foreign agents in China maintained a direct relationship with its Glasgow office and were expected to report directly to that office. However, the position “Secretary for China” or “China Secretary” was created by the NBSS in the early 1920s. One of the NBSS's agents in China was appointed to the position. Stationed in Shanghai, the Secretary for China was the *de facto* chief representative of the NBSS in China. In addition to overseeing the NBSS's East China agency, he was responsible for the making of contracts for purchasing and dispatching Bibles throughout China on behalf of the NBSS. He also handled grants from Glasgow and distributed them to other NBSS agencies in China. Janice E. Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2. Distribution Abroad, 1931–1966: China, 1931–1966”, 154–5, ABS Archives; Minutes of General Board of Directors, 3 March 1920 and 11 January 1937, NBSS Archives; Minutes of Western Committee, 14 July 1919 and 13 July 1925, NBSS Archives. For the sake of clarity, the holders of the aforementioned positions, who were the chief

possibility of uniting their agencies in China into one organization and handing over control of Bible work in China to Chinese Protestants. These were key issues in forming a national Bible society in China.

3. Distrust and differences as obstacles to unity

Ever since the Big Three agencies entered China, they had worked all over the country together without a clear division of territory. This became problematic when the Protestant church in China was making the transition from a mission to an indigenous church. Unlike foreign missionaries, who usually supported a particular Bible society according to their nationalities, Chinese Protestants “do not care whether their books come from an American office or a British office”. If the status quo remained, the Big Three would be “forever stepping on each other’s toes”.³³ Nevertheless, no satisfactory line of division could be worked out along geographical or any other lines.³⁴ It appeared that a united agency in China would be one way for the Big Three to accommodate the rise of native churches and to avoid the rivalry and competition that existed already.³⁵ Indeed, among Chinese Protestants, there was strong deprecation of the nationalistic division in Bible work.³⁶

While the South China Bible Society was an inspiring example to the Big Three of how a united agency could, with Chinese co-operation, succeed at a local level, achieving unity in Bible work on a national level was not an easy task, since the Big Three insisted on using their own very different practices of Bible distribution. In China, the BFBS maintained the employment of full-time colportage and 80 per cent of its circulation was through paid colporteurs. However, the ABS and the NBSS relied almost entirely on voluntary colportage, i.e. Bibles were supplied free to volunteers who kept the proceeds of sales in lieu of wages.³⁷ The BFBS “felt that where they had a paid worker, it was not the right of other societies to enter with volunteer workers”.³⁸

Certain Bible distribution practices introduced by the ABS and the BFBS were not accepted by the NBSS. For example, in 1930, the NBSS’s board of directors declined the suggestion of G. Carleton Lacy, the agency secretary of the ABS’s China agency (1921–37), that voluntary colporteurs be charged 20 per cent of the catalogue price for the portions they distributed. While the

representatives of the Big Three in China, are collectively called “China secretaries” in this paper.

33 Carleton Lacy, “China matters: a talk by Rev. Dr. G. Carleton Lacy, Agency Secretary of China Agency (now at home on furlough) before the Committee on Foreign Agencies, Meeting in the Bible House, Oct. 25, 1928”, RG#27 China Mission, ABS Archives.

34 Lacy, “China matters”.

35 After Carleton Lacy joined the ABS’s China agency, his very first survey of the field indicated that “there was much discontent” about the Big Three’s “apparent rivalry and competition” (Lacy, “China matters”).

36 Letter from Carleton Lacy to Eric M. North, 6 November 1931, in Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 105.

37 “Memorandum on reorganization of Bible Society work in China”, BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/4.

38 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VI-F-2”, 97.

ABS and the BFBS, which agreed to follow Lacy's suggestion, argued that such a practice would help "prevent abuse and encourage the church to share the burden", the NBSS believed that it "would probably prejudice" the NBSS's circulation of Chinese Bibles by its unpaid colporteurs.³⁹ G.A. Frank Knight, the NBSS's general secretary, thought his society's decision was justified when he knew that an ABS voluntary colporteur turned to the NBSS for Chinese Bibles.⁴⁰

The most problematic issue among the Big Three with regard to Bible work practices in China was the inclusion of annotations in the Chinese Bible. The NBSS had printed annotated portions of the Chinese Bible since the 1890s: the annotations provided "some explanations of words, terms and place-names which were completely unfamiliar to the non-Christian reader".⁴¹ However, the ABS and the BFBS argued that the NBSS was distributing Bibles with annotations precluded by the "without note or comment" principle upheld by Bible societies constitutionally. According to this principle, Bibles published or distributed by Bible societies should not include any note or comment, particularly of a doctrinal or sectarian character. It was believed that in so doing, Bible societies would solicit interdenominational support by avoiding disputes among their supporters who adopted different theological positions and interpretations of the Bible.⁴²

Since the 1910s, the BFBS had also published annotated Chinese Gospels and Acts.⁴³ The BFBS claimed that, unlike the NBSS, it did not infringe the "without note or comment" principle, because the BFBS's annotations were neither notes nor comments provoking disputes. They were simply "translational helps" which "may be needed to overcome certain classes of difficulties in a translation".⁴⁴ The BFBS emphasized that "nothing in the nature of interpretation to which anyone could object" ought to be included in its translational helps.⁴⁵ The ABS insisted that its business was to "present the Scriptures, not an interpretation of them".⁴⁶ It did not publish any annotated Chinese Bibles under its own imprint. Nonetheless, to prepare for closer co-operation with the BFBS and the NBSS in China, in 1930 the ABS adopted the BFBS's rules concerning translational helps with certain amendments.⁴⁷ In 1932, the

39 Minutes of Committee on Foreign Agencies, 29 May 1930, ABS Archives; Letter from G.A. Frank Knight to David McGavin, 16 September 1930, NBSS Archives.

40 Letter from G.A. Frank Knight to Walter Milward, 23 April 1931, NBSS Archives.

41 Somerville, *From Iona to Dunblane*, 79.

42 For details about the "without note or comment" principle, see Roger Steer, "'Without note or comment': yesterday, today, and tomorrow", in Stephen K. Batalden, Kathleen Cann and John Dean (eds), *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1804–2004* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), 63–72.

43 Hubert W. Spillett, *A Catalogue of Scriptures in the Languages of China and the Republic of China* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1975), 46, 91, 93–5, 141.

44 Minutes of Editorial Sub-Committee, Special Meeting, 11 January 1911, BFBS Archives BSA/C17/1/37–38.

45 "Translational helps for gospel portions in Chinese issued by the B.F.B.S.", BFBS Archives BSA/E3/5/2/1.

46 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VI-F-2", 101.

47 Eric M. North, "ABS Historical Essay #16, V-A. Text and Translation: A. Principles and Problems, 1901–1930", 13–6, ABS Archives.

ABS's translations committee approved the translational helps published in an edition of the Cantonese Gospels and Acts under a joint imprint of the ABS and the BFBS.⁴⁸ In the early 1930s about 90 per cent of the Chinese Bibles circulated by the NBSS consisted of its annotated editions of the Gospels and the Acts.⁴⁹ It was unlikely that the NBSS would give up its bestsellers in order to form a united agency in China with the ABS and the BFBS.

Moreover, it was difficult for the Big Three to unite their operations in China when distrust existed. The friction among them concerning Bible work in Manchuria illustrates well how this distrust grew. Although the NBSS was the first Bible society working in Manchuria, the BFBS, which also established its presence there, accused the NBSS of being an interloper. For example, in 1931, having known that the Canadian Presbyterian Mission requested the NBSS to be the Bible supplier to the T'ung-liao (Tongliao 通遼) region of its mission field, the BFBS's provincial secretary in Mukden (Shenyang 瀋陽) wrote to David McGavin, who was in charge of the NBSS's North China agency. McGavin was told that for the sake of comity the NBSS was expected to reject such a request.⁵⁰ Knight described this as a "dog-in-the-manger policy" which he could not abide.⁵¹ The BFBS treated the ABS similarly when they knew that churches in Manchuria would like to have connections with the ABS. In the late 1920s, Frank K. Jowe (Zhou Fugeng 周扶耕), the ABS's Chinese field secretary stationed in Peiping (Beiping 北平, now Beijing 北京), was invited by pastors and missionaries to visit. Sheppard protested against the visit, suggesting that the ABS should stay out "in the interest of comity". Jowe did make the trip, but he met much opposition from some missionaries who dealt with the BFBS and who refused to allow him at their pulpits. After Jowe returned to Peiping following his disappointing trip, he found that steps were being taken to open a bookstore within half a mile of the ABS's sub-agency office: that bookstore would stock BFBS Chinese Bibles.⁵²

4. The London Conference 1932 and the Advisory Council of the Bible Societies in China

Facing the new situation arising from the indigenization movement of Chinese Protestants, leading officers in the headquarters of the Big Three understood that they needed to discuss seriously and plan for their future in China (their biggest field overseas). An opportunity arose when A.H. Wilkinson and J.R. Temple, two former missionaries to China, were appointed as the BFBS's joint general secretaries in 1929 and 1931 respectively.⁵³ Wilkinson was famous

48 Erroll Rhodes, "ABS Historical Essay #16, VI-G. Text and Translation: Asian Languages, 1931–66", 15, ABS Archives.

49 "Memorandum on reorganization of Bible Society work in China".

50 Letter from David McGavin to G.A. Frank Knight, 31 December 1931, NBSS Archives. McGavin succeeded Walter Milward as Secretary for China of the NBSS in 1937.

51 Letter from G.A. Frank Knight to David McGavin, 1 February 1932, NBSS Archives.

52 "Copy of letter written by Dr. Lacy of the China Agency to Dr. North under date of February, 23, 1931", RG#27 China Mission, ABS Archives.

53 Until 1945, the two senior executive officers of the BFBS were known simply as "The Secretaries". For the sake of clarity, the term "general secretaries", which then came into

for his diplomatic strength, while Temple was known for his capacity for tact and patient negotiation. Under their influence, the BFBS expressed a greater willingness to improve inter-Bible society relationships and recognize that a new strategy was required for the relationship between the Big Three and indigenous Chinese churches.⁵⁴

In July 1932, delegates of the Big Three met in London to discuss “how to reach fuller co-operation in view of the present position and problems in the world”.⁵⁵ This conference resolved that the Big Three should work together to encourage the formation of a China Bible Society, “which, having the same basic principles as the co-operating Societies, shall share with them in the world-wide work of the distribution of the Scriptures”.⁵⁶ This was agreed by their governing bodies, although the NBSS’s board of directors emphasized that they did not contemplate the “immediate formation” of such an organization.⁵⁷ Referring to themselves as “co-operating Societies”, the Big Three set a clear goal that the amalgamation of their agencies in China should result not only in their unity in China, but also in a China Bible Society with Chinese leadership.

As Lacy observed after his first few months at the ABS’s China agency, the indigenization movement of Chinese Protestants gave rise to “a strong, insistent demand for a larger participation in Christian work by Chinese leadership”. Lacy recognized the significance of responding to such demand to the survival of the Big Three in China, writing to the ABS’s headquarters in New York, “If we are not to be outlawed entirely as alien institutions, the Bible Societies must immediately enlist the co-operation of Chinese leadership in a much more adequate way”.⁵⁸

The Big Three took different attitudes to the issue. Thanks to Lacy’s vision, during 1925 and 1928 the ABS appointed several Chinese field secretaries, who were responsible for the “cultivation and direction of interest and participation in Scripture distribution by the Chinese Church”.⁵⁹ While the Western sub-agency secretaries managed their sub-agencies’ business affairs, they worked with the Chinese field secretaries in planning and promotion. As they retired, the Chinese field secretaries gradually assumed sole charge of the sub-agencies.⁶⁰ The BFBS hesitated to do the same and “found it difficult to face what was involved in a comprehensive delegation of authority”.⁶¹ By 1929 the BFBS had appointed only five Chinese superintendents of colporteurs,⁶² who were by no means “successors-elect” to their Western provincial secretaries (formerly known as sub-agents). To the BFBS, employing Chinese at managerial level

use, is employed in this paper. Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 477.

54 Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 239, 247, 251–2.

55 Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 252.

56 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 101.

57 Minutes of General Board of Directors, 13 February 1933, NBSS Archives.

58 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VI-F-2”, 87.

59 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VI-F-2”, 88–91, 131.

60 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 90.

61 Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 343.

62 Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 343

with foreign money might tend to postpone the realization of getting Chinese churches into Bible work.⁶³ By the mid-1930s the NBSS had not appointed any Chinese field secretaries or supervisors of colporteurs.⁶⁴

As a first step towards a China Bible Society with Chinese leadership, a joint advisory committee on the Big Three's work in China, which included Chinese Protestants, was deemed acceptable to all three Bible societies.⁶⁵ The Advisory Council of the Bible Societies in China (Shengjing Xiehui Guwen Weiyuanhui 聖經協會顧問委員會) was established as a Sino-foreign Protestant establishment in Shanghai in June 1933. In addition to the Big Three's China secretaries, the Advisory Council consisted of eighteen members, of whom one-third were appointed by each of the Big Three on the recommendation of its own China secretary. Chinese Protestants accounted for more than half of the council members excluding the Big Three's China secretaries. The appointment of Cheng Jingyi 誠靜怡 as the Advisory Council's chairman is not surprising, given his iconic status in the Chinese Protestant church as General Secretary of the National Christian Council of China and Moderator of the Church of Christ in China. Other Chinese council members were priests and laymen representing various denominations and organizations, including E.S. Yu (Yu Ensi 俞恩嗣) of the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (Zhonghua Shenggonghui 中華聖公會, i.e. the Anglican Church in China), Z.T. Kaung (Jiang Changchuan 江長川) of the Methodist Episcopal Church in China, Ting Shu-ching (Ding Shujing 丁淑靜) of the Young Women's Christian Association of China, Z.K. Zia (Xie Songgao 謝頌羔) of the Christian Literature Society, Fong Foo Sec (Kuang Fuzhuo 鄺富灼) and S.U. Zau (Zhao Jinqing 趙晉卿).⁶⁶

As its name indicates, the Advisory Council was not a decision-making body, since its functions "shall be to consider and advise as to any questions of policy, method, or procedure" relevant to Bible work in China.⁶⁷ Final decision making remained the remit of the Big Three's headquarters. This might suggest that the Big Three lacked confidence in their Chinese partners in the Advisory Council, fearing that the Advisory Council might "act upon those instructions in a way that may become embarrassing to the Home Boards".⁶⁸

A vivid example illustrating this point is the response of the ABS and the NBSS to the Advisory Council's sub-committee on annotated Chinese Bibles. It was understood that the ABS and the BFBS's disapproval of the NBSS's annotated Chinese Bibles was one of the major obstacles to the formation of a united China agency of the Big Three. After the London Conference, the NBSS expressed its willingness to negotiate with the BFBS in order to secure

63 Lacy, "China matters".

64 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 118.

65 Letter from Carleton Lacy to Eric M. North, 7 August 1931, in Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 95; Minutes of China Sub-Committee, 29 June 1932, BFBS Archives BSA/C21/3; Minutes of General Board of Directors, 13 February 1933, NBSS Archives.

66 "Members of first Council, June 1933", "Shanghai Advisory Council. Précis of Minutes of Meetings One to Eleven. June 1933–June 1935", BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1.

67 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 101.

68 Letter from Carleton Lacy to Eric M. North, 2 June 1934, in Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 114.

agreement in the matter,⁶⁹ which offered an opportunity for a breakthrough. In 1934 the Advisory Council appointed a sub-committee to draft a new set of explanatory readings for the Chinese Gospels and Acts which might satisfy all of the Big Three.⁷⁰ Fearing that the Advisory Council “might be getting ahead of the Home Committees”, Walter Milward of the NBSS suggested that the headquarters of the Big Three should appoint their own sub-committees to follow up the matter. Eric North, the ABS’s general secretary, shared Milward’s view. North expressed his frank opinion on the Advisory Council’s action in his letter to Lacy:

It seems to me that it would be very desirable for that Committee not to plunge into the matter until the Home Offices have made more progress with it and until the Committee itself has a very thorough understanding of the underlying principles ... the Committee may have loaded itself with heavier tasks than it can accomplish with wisdom.⁷¹

The Chinese members of the Advisory Council were discontent with some of their foreign colleagues. On 30 September 1936, E.S. Yu, in his capacity as the Advisory Council’s chairman, wrote a letter to Temple of the BFBS on the Advisory Council’s work of that year. Yu told Temple that the “dictatorial air” assumed by certain foreign members of the Advisory Council drove many other members away from attending meetings. Yu also expressed his disappointment that the Advisory Council had not been able to make greater progress because the China secretaries of the Big Three “put difficulties on our way and called us to halt whenever they fancy it will require a surrender of individual ways and preferences”.⁷²

However, within the framework of the Advisory Council, the Big Three were able to achieve an important goal: a number of regional Bible societies were organized and run by Chinese Protestants in support of Bible work in their areas, based on the model of the South China Bible Society. The anti-Christian movement in the 1920s prompted Chinese Protestants to accelerate the process of indigenizing the Protestant church in China. Given the importance of the Bible in the Protestant church, self-support in Bible work was regarded as essential for the completion of the indigenization process. For example, after attending the celebration of the centennial of the ABS’s work in China in Hankow, a Chinese Protestant wrote to *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 聖經公會報 (Bible Society Magazine, a Chinese magazine published jointly by the Big Three about their work in China), “The Bible is the food of the Church. The Church has become indigenous, but it still relies on foreigners

69 Minutes of General Board of Directors, 13 February 1933, NBSS Archives.

70 “Fifth Meeting-Shanghai-April 13.1934”, “Shanghai Advisory Council. Précis of Minutes of Meetings One to Eleven. June 1933–June 1935”, BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1.

71 Letter from Eric M. North to Carleton Lacy, 7 May 1934, in Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 113.

72 Letter from E.S. Yu to J.R. Temple, 30 September 1936, in Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 141.

for food. What kind of self-support are we talking about?”⁷³ Self-support was not only a matter of national esteem but also a way to prepare for uncertainty, because when “far-reaching international events take place”, the Big Three might be hindered from supporting Bible work in China.⁷⁴

When the Advisory Council convened its first meeting in June 1933, Chinese Protestant organizations supporting Bible work existed already in Canton and Hong Kong, i.e. the South China Bible Society and its Hong Kong branch.⁷⁵ A similar organization was formed in Wuhan 武漢 in December 1933.⁷⁶ Although the East China Bible Society (Huadong Shengshu Hui 華東聖書會) was formally established in Shanghai in February 1934, its preparatory committee was organized in February 1933. It was reported that it recruited 613 members during 1933.⁷⁷ In April 1934, the Advisory Council issued a circular letter to “Chinese Groups interested in Developing Bible Society Organizations” to encourage and welcome the formation of regional Bible societies, “with the hope that eventually they may all join to form the National Bible Society of China”.⁷⁸ A further five regional Bible societies, with their own constitutions and membership, had been established by the end of 1935. These were based in Jinan 濟南, Peiping, Suzhou 蘇州, Taiyuan 太原 and Tianjin 天津.⁷⁹

While the Chinese members of the Advisory Council were impressed by the development of regional Bible societies, they “felt the serious need of central correlation and a National Organization before these local groups get so strong that it will be impossible to bring them together”.⁸⁰ According to the Advisory Council’s plan, regional Bible societies should regard themselves as the constituent parts of the prospective national Bible society.⁸¹ Not all Chinese leaders of regional Bible societies had such an idea as their ultimate goal. For instance, according to Sheppard’s report to the Advisory Council at its meeting on 29 November 1935, when he and Temple visited the regional Bible society in Wuhan, its Chinese leaders were “taken [a]back” by the Advisory Council’s

73 Liulu Shaonian 六六少年, “Shengjing hui bai nian dahui huiyi yu ganxiang jianzheng” 聖經會百年大會回憶與感想見證 (An Eyewitness’s Report and Opinions on the Centennial Meeting of the Bible Society), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 2, 14.

74 Li Zhiming 李志明, “Shengjing hui yu Zhongguo jiaohui” 聖經會與中國教會 (Bible Society and the Chinese Church), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 2, 10.

75 Carleton Lacy, “Relation of local or regional organizations to the older Bible societies”, BFA Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1; *British and Foreign Bible Society. Report of the China Agency for the Year Ending December 31st, 1932*, 20, 63.

76 Rao Zhian 饒志安, “Wuhan Zhonghua Shengjing Hui baogao” 武漢中華聖經會報告 (Report of the China Bible Society in Wuhan), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 14, 17.

77 Wu Xiaogu 吳筱谷, “Shanghai shi Huadong Shengshu Hui baogao” 上海市華東聖書會報告 (Report of the East China Bible Society in Shanghai), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 14, 16–7.

78 “Third Meeting-Shanghai-Nov.24.1933”, and “Fifth Meeting-Shanghai-April 13.1934”, “Shanghai Advisory Council. Précis of Minutes of Meetings One to Eleven. June 1933–June 1935”, BFA Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1.

79 “Gedi chuxi daibiao baogao shu” 各地出席代表報告書 (Reports of Delegates from Regional Bible Societies), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 14, 12–7.

80 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 120.

81 “Shengjing Xiehui Guwen Weiyuanhui zhi gedi xiezhu Shengshu hui shiye tuanti shu” 聖經協會顧問委員會致各地協助聖書會事業團體書 (Letter from the Advisory Council of the Bible Societies in China to the Local or Regional Bible Society Committees), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 6, 1–2, Shanghai Municipal Archives Y4-1-653.

circular letter presented to them, as they did not recognize the authority of the Advisory Council. They objected that their Bible Society was regarded as a branch society (*fenhui* 分會), as they perceived it as an independent organization serving Central China.⁸² Thus, it is not surprising that in his letter to Lacy of 4 November 1935, North stressed the need for frequent personal contact with regional Bible societies, “educating them in the direction of sound understanding of the ‘basic principles’ of Bible Society work”. Besides, “discrete and individualistic units” should be co-ordinated, so that they could be in harmony and share a “sound common policy”.⁸³

5. Integrating the Big Three and regional Bible societies into a single Bible society for China

Against such a background the Advisory Council convened the Conference on Unification of Bible Society Work in China on 3 and 4 January 1936. Delegates from Canton, Hong Kong, Jinan, Tianjin, Peiping, Taiyuan, Suzhou and Shanghai were invited to report the latest activities of their regional societies. They also discussed how to proceed to establish a national Bible Society in China with members of the Advisory Council, the Big Three’s China secretaries and Temple of the BFBS.

In his opening speech at the conference, E.S. Yu emphasized the need for China to have a united Bible society instead of independent regional Bible societies:

We must all agree that strength and harmony can come, not through the undertaking of independent enterprises, but through real co-ordination and co-operation under the direction of one organized body. We therefore hope, not that the number of Bible Societies in China shall be multiplied, but that there shall be one united Society for the whole country.

Yu also reassured the delegates representing regional Bible societies at the conference that:

The Advisory Council has not the least idea of wishing to dominate the Regional Organizations. We shall be working together for the interest of the Bible Society work. For this reason we are not going to present an agenda for you to follow.⁸⁴

82 “Notes on November Meeting of Advisory Council”.

83 Letter from Eric M. North to Carleton Lacy, 4 November 1935, BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1. According to Sheppard, “the ‘basic principles’ of Bible Society work” were not specified in the resolutions of the London Conference 1932, but the basic principle which would most be emphasized was that “the Bible Society exists solely for the publication and circulation of the Scriptures without note or comment”. G.W. Sheppard, “Relation of local or regional organizations to the older Bible societies”, in Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 242.

84 “Shengjing Xiehui Guwen Weiyuanhui zhuxi Yu Ensi Mushi kaihuici jilu” 聖經協會顧問委員會主席俞恩嗣牧師開會詞記錄, *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 14, 11. The English

Yu's speech seems to have succeeded in winning over the delegates from regional Bible societies, particularly those who were concerned to maintain local autonomy, because there would be room for negotiation. The conference recommended that regional Bible societies should be linked together in "one Bible Society in China" which shall include the Big Three's China agencies. To achieve this, the conference resolved that a further conference of members of the Advisory Council and delegates from regional Bible societies be held in autumn 1936 to determine the constitution of the prospective national Bible society and "to establish an Executive to direct the whole work in the country".⁸⁵

For practical reasons, Chinese Protestants did not seek the future national Bible society's complete independence from the Big Three immediately after its establishment. As the situation of regional Bible societies indicated, Chinese Protestants were not yet able to finance Bible work in China fully. For example, whereas the total contribution to the Big Three from Protestants in China for the year 1932 amounted to 5,143.31 Chinese *yuan* 元 (approximately 320 pounds sterling),⁸⁶ the NBSS's annual budgets for its work in China in 1931, 1932 and 1933 amounted to 9,500, 9,000, and 9,000 pounds sterling respectively.⁸⁷ In his survey of regional Bible societies submitted to the Advisory Council in 1935, Sheppard also claimed that:

Even the two Chinese Committees which have been in existence for six or seven years, and can be regarded as firmly established and operative (those of Canton and Hongkong) recognize frankly that they are not yet ready to take over responsibility for the work in their own area.⁸⁸

A lack of experience and expertise in organizing Bible work was another reason why Chinese Protestants felt the need to co-operate with the Big Three. As Mrs Zhang Zixiang 張子翔, who represented the regional Bible society in Tianjin, remarked at the January Conference 1936, Chinese Protestants looked to the Big Three as to "elder brothers" (*lao da ge* 老大哥) for help in Bible work. When they "face difficulties", the elder brothers "should encourage and comfort" them.⁸⁹

translation comes from "Statement by Rev. E.S. Yu, Chairman of Advisory Council of the Bible Societies in China", BFBS Archives, BSA/D8/4/5/2/1.

85 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 131.

86 "Yi jiu san er nian gedi xintu juanzhu san da Shengjing hui zhengxinlu" 一九三二年各地信徒捐助三大聖經會徵信錄 (List of Donations from Christians in China to the Three Major Bible Societies for the Year 1932), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 2, 1–22. In 1932, one Haikwan tael was equivalent to 1 shilling 11.25 pence. Hsiao Liang-lin, *China's Foreign Trade Statistics, 1864–1949* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1974), 192. The exchange rate between Haikwan tael and *yuan* was about 1.558, based on the rate given in Tomoko Shiroyama, *China During the Great Depression: Market, State, and the World Economy, 1929–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 30.

87 Minutes of General Board of Directors, 12 January 1931, 11 January 1932, and 9 January 1933, NBSS Archives.

88 Sheppard, "Relation of local or regional organizations to the older Bible societies", 240.

89 Zhang Zixiang Taitai 張子翔太太 (Mrs Zhang Zixiang), "Tianjin Shengjing fenhui baogao" 天津聖經分會報告 (Report of the Regional Bible Society in Tianjin), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 14, 14–5.

Moreover, the recognition of Bible work as a global enterprise drove Chinese Protestants to think that their national Bible society should work with the Big Three. Zhang Zushen 張祖紳 of the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui, for example, claimed that “even though our Chinese Bible society will be able to take full responsibility [for Bible work in China] someday, it will never declare independence from its parent societies. We shall always work together and be with them in a spiritual fellowship”.⁹⁰ Here, a dual identity of the future national Bible society was perceived: it would be not only a Bible society for the Chinese but also a member of the global network of Bible societies.

This understanding of Bible work in China was of course welcomed by the Big Three, particularly the BFBS. As J.H. Ritson, its former general secretary, said at a meeting of its China sub-committee in 1932, “We ought to rise above the whole national outlook. We have never yet succeeded with a National Bible Society anywhere, we do not want to nationalise our work”.⁹¹ The emphasis on the global character of Bible work served the purpose of justifying the Big Three’s continuing presence in China as foreign institutions. Indeed, it was the BFBS’s concern that Chinese Protestants wanted to have an indigenous Bible society not because of religious convictions but because of their national pride and anti-foreign sentiments. The following account of the founding of the South China Bible Society in the BFBS’s annual report is illustrative of the BFBS’s concern:

Mr. Lacy and Mr. Sheppard were both very deeply impressed by the spirit with which the Cantonese brethren discussed these matters with them. There was not the slightest indication of anything political or anti-foreign or nationalist in the movement, nothing in the least antagonistic to the existing Bible Societies, only gratitude for what these had already done, and a desire to share in the service.⁹²

Nevertheless, it was clear to Chinese Protestant leaders that their national Bible society would eventually become an autonomous organization run by Chinese Protestants. Their spirit of independence was expressed through, for instance, the open objection of T.C. Bau (Bao Zheqing 鮑哲慶), a Baptist member of the Advisory Council, against the designation of the Big Three as “three Parent Societies” at the January Conference 1936.⁹³ In fact, Y.Y. Tsu (Zhu Youyu 朱友漁), an Anglican member of the Advisory Council, had given a fair view on the issue. At the meeting of the Advisory Council on 29 November 1935, Temple, who attended the meeting as guest of honour, cited the example of the BFBS’s work in India and Australia to justify that the

90 Zhang Zushen 張祖紳, “Xuanjiaohui yu bendi jiaohui” 宣教會與本地教會 (Missions and Indigenous Churches), *Shengjing Gonghui Bao* 13, 5.

91 Minutes of China Sub-Committee, 29 June 1932, BFBS Archives BSA/C21/3.

92 *The One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (1929), 132, BFBS Archives BSA/G1/1.

93 Carleton Lacy, “Private and unedited notes on the Conference on Unification of Bible Society Work in China held in Shanghai, January 3 and 4, 1936”, BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/2/1.

BFBS should have a lasting presence in China in the future. Tsu did not think Temple's argument was convincing, pointing out that Temple's analogy to India and Australia "does not apply to China because of the close political relationship which Great Britain sustains to these other countries". Yet, while Tsu stressed that "eventually China may be independent of other Bible Societies", he admitted "that cannot be for several decades".⁹⁴

6. The birth of the China Bible House

After the January Conference 1936, the ABS and the BFBS proceeded to form a joint executive committee to administer their work in China for the year 1937 and prepare for the integration of their agencies in China into the prospective China Bible Society.⁹⁵ The NBSS at that moment decided not to join the union, mainly because it was unable to settle the issue of circulating annotated Bibles with the ABS and the BFBS.⁹⁶

Eventually, the "further conference" proposed at the January Conference 1936 was convened in April 1937 as the first national representative convention of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui (Zhonghua Shengjing Hui 中華聖經會, which literally means "China Bible Society" or "Chinese Bible Society"). This convention adopted a tentative constitution of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui, which was then promulgated for a trial period of three years and was to be confirmed by its next national representative convention. The tentative constitution was to come into effect on the endorsement of at least two of the Big Three.⁹⁷ The convention also adopted the by-laws (*guizhang xize* 規章細則) of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui.⁹⁸ As "the official Constitution of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui is recorded only in the Chinese language",⁹⁹ the organization had no official English title. In practice, the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui was known in English as the China Bible House.¹⁰⁰

According to its tentative constitution and by-laws, the China Bible House was a national, hierarchical organization overseeing Bible work in China.¹⁰¹

94 "Notes on November Meeting of Advisory Council".

95 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 141–6.

96 Minutes of General Board of Directors, 11 January 1937, NBSS Archives.

97 "Constitution and by-laws of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui", NBSS Archives. The official constitution of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui was "Zhonghua Shengjing Hui xianzhang" 中華聖經會憲章. "Constitution and by-laws of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui" is an English translation but not the official English version, and the organization's "Guizhang xize". The version of the constitution which the author consulted comes from the copy of "Zhonghua Shengjing Hui yuanqi ji xianzhang" 中華聖經會緣起及憲章 deposited in the archives of the NBSS.

98 "Bible Society Conference Shanghai, April 2–4, 1937", RG#27 China Mission, ABS Archives.

99 "Constitution and by-laws of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui".

100 The title "China Bible House" appeared in the organization's letterhead. For example, see letter from David McGavin to W.C. Somerville, 7 June 1947, NBSS Archives.

101 Minutes of Committee on Foreign Agencies, 30 September 1937, ABS Archives. Bible work in Manchuria was not integrated into the China Bible House when it was established in 1937, because Manchuria was controlled by the state of Manchukuo (Manzhouguo 滿洲國) at that time. Indeed, a separate agency for Manchuria under

Regional Bible societies were named “Branch Societies”, which implied their subordination to the headquarters in Shanghai. Their establishment and annual budgets had to be approved by the Board of Managers appointed by the National Representative Convention.¹⁰² Moreover, each Branch Society was to give at least 10 per cent of its regular income to the headquarters for the China Bible House’s general work.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the power of the Board of Managers in fact came from the Branch Societies themselves, because subject to its membership size, each Branch Society was entitled to send one to four representatives to the National Representative Convention. Such an arrangement fulfilled the vision of North that regional Bible societies should be “represented in the council of the whole”.¹⁰⁴ A certain autonomy was ensured, as officers and executive committees of Branch Societies were elected by their own annual meetings instead of either the Board of Managers or the National Representative Convention.

As “co-operating Bible societies”, the ABS and the BFBS were involved in the governance of the China Bible House, even though they were in the minority, as the Board of Managers consisted of one member nominated by each of the co-operating Bible societies and nine members elected by the National Representative Convention, together with the China secretaries of the co-operating Bible societies and the general secretary of the China Bible House as advisory members. Each co-operating Bible society was also entitled to appoint two representatives to attend the National Representative Convention. After the establishment of the China Bible House, the ABS and the BFBS continued to persuade the NBSS to integrate its work in China into the China Bible House. In 1942, the NBSS agreed to unite with the China Bible House to carry out Bible work

the supervision of the BFBS was established in 1936. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, Bible work in Manchuria was conducted through that separate agency. After the war it united with the China Bible House. Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 354; *One Hundred and Thirty-First Report of the American Bible Society* (1947), 220, ABS Archives; *One Hundred and Thirty-Second Report of the American Bible Society* (1948), 222, 235, ABS Archives.

- 102 The English terms “Branch Societies”, “Board of Managers” and “National Representative Convention” occur in “Constitution and by-laws of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui”. The corresponding Chinese terms in “Zhonghua Shengjing Hui xianzhang” are *Fenhui* 分會, *Dongshihui* 董事會 and *Quanguo Daibiao Dahui* 全國代表大會.
- 103 While the term *jingchang shouru* 經常收入 (regular income) appears in the Chinese original of the tentative constitution, it was translated as “all funds raised” in “Constitution and by-laws of the Chung Hua Sheng Ching Hui”. Similarly, the term *jinkuan* 進款 (income) appears in the Chinese minutes of the first national representative convention of the China Bible House, whereas it was translated as “regular income” in the English minutes. The author opts for “regular income”, given the primacy of the Chinese original of the tentative constitution over other aforementioned documents. “Zhonghua Shengjing Hui di yi jie quanguo daibiao dahui jilu” 中華聖經會第一屆全國代表大會紀錄 (Minutes of the First National Representative Convention of the China Bible House), RG#27 China Mission, ABS Archives; “Bible Society Conference Shanghai, April 2–4, 1937”; “Zhonghua Shengjing Hui yuanqi ji xianzhang”.
- 104 Letter from Eric M. North to Carleton Lacy, 4 November 1935.

in Free China temporarily.¹⁰⁵ The NBSS officially became the third co-operating Bible society of the China Bible House in 1946.¹⁰⁶

It appears that, according to the tentative constitution and by-laws adopted in 1937, the China Bible House was a Chinese national Bible society assisted by co-operating foreign Bible societies. In reality, until 1951 the China Bible House was a Sino-foreign Protestant establishment through which foreign Bible societies maintained their presence in China, working with China and for China. The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and then the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party prevented the China Bible House from being a truly self-supporting and self-governing Chinese Protestant organization. The China Bible House relied heavily on funding from its co-operating foreign Bible societies.¹⁰⁷ Its executive leaders were foreigners representing the co-operating Bible societies, except during the period 1942–45, when the work of the China Bible House in Occupied China was directed first by E.S. Yu and later Chester S. Miao (Miao Qiusheng 繆秋笙). In 1942, Yu was appointed honorary general secretary of the China Bible House, since the Japanese authorities in Occupied China insisted that foreigners should not be appointed executive leaders of China Bible House. After Yu's death in 1944, Miao served as the acting executive secretary on a voluntary basis until the end of 1945. Nevertheless, during the same period, Bible work in Free China was under the supervision of the Big Three's foreign staff members in Chongqing 重慶 and Chengdu 成都.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, the aforesaid constitution and by-laws were not implemented as planned. Although the ABS endorsed the tentative constitution and by-laws in November 1937, the BFBS's China sub-committee concluded in 1938 that it was best not to proceed with the adoption of the constitution at the moment.¹⁰⁹ The BFBS eventually endorsed the tentative constitution in April 1939.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, as North told Lacy in January 1939, the wartime situation meant that "it would be very difficult to get your personnel all together. It would be very difficult to stimulate the interest of local communities all across

105 Minutes of General Board of Directors, 11 May 1942 and 13 July 1942, NBSS Archives; *One Hundred and Thirtieth Report of the American Bible Society* (1946), 222, ABS Archives. In addition, George Henderson of the NBSS in Japanese-occupied Shanghai accepted the invitation from the executive committee of the China Bible House there in 1942 to unite his work with the China Bible House. However, Henderson was interned as an "enemy national" in 1943. Minutes of Committee on Foreign Agencies, 24 November 1942, ABS Archives; George Henderson and David McGavin, *Bibles for China: An Account of Over 80 Years' Service by Two Bible Society Missionaries* (Edinburgh: National Bible Society of Scotland, 1969), 13.

106 *One Hundred and Thirty-First Report of the American Bible Society* (1947), 219, ABS Archives.

107 Letter from David McGavin to William C. Somerville, 23 December 1948, NBSS Archives.

108 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 166, 171–2; Minutes of Committee on Foreign Agencies, 24 September 1942, ABS Archives; Letter from C.S. Miao to J.C.F. Robertson, 12 May 1944, BFBS Archives BSA/D8/4/5/3/1.

109 Pearson, "ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2", 148, 155.

110 Minutes of China Sub-Committee, 27 April 1939, BFBS Archives BSA/C26/1.

the country”.¹¹¹ In 1948, plans were being made for the China Bible House’s second national representative convention, which was to be held in Shanghai in May 1950, so that the tentative constitution adopted in 1937 could be confirmed with necessary amendments.¹¹² However, it is uncertain whether that convention really took place.

Changes only happened after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Baen Lee (Li Peien 李培恩) was appointed the first full-time Chinese general secretary in December 1950, which ended a five-year search for a qualified Chinese to fill the position.¹¹³ Besides, the outbreak of the Korean War drove the Communist Government to accelerate the implementation of its policy aimed at purging foreign influences from within Christianity itself.¹¹⁴ The China Bible House was taken over by a Chinese Board of Directors (*Lishihui* 理事會) in early 1951. All foreign members of staff had been withdrawn by the spring of that year.¹¹⁵ Subsequently the China Bible House severed its relationship with the Big Three and no longer received foreign financial assistance.¹¹⁶

- 111 Letter from Eric M. North to Carleton Lacy, 6 January 1939, in Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 155.
- 112 Minutes of the Retreat of the Executive Committee of the China Bible House, 10 September 1948, NBSS Archives.
- 113 Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 177–8.
- 114 Liu Jianping’s 劉建平 recent monograph offers a well-documented study of the policy of the Communist Government on Christianity in the early years of the People’s Republic of China (Liu Jianping, *Hongqi xia de shizijia: Xin Zhongguo chengli chuqi Zhonggong dui Jidujiao Tianzhujiao de zhengce yanbian ji qi yingxiang (1949–1955)* 紅旗下的十字架：新中國成立初期中共對基督教、天主教的政策演變及其影響 (1949–1955) [The Cross under the Red Flag: The Policy Changes of the Chinese Communist Party towards Protestantism and Catholicism and Its Impacts in the Early PRC (1949–1955)]. Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2012).
- 115 *One Hundred and Thirty-Fifth Report of the American Bible Society* (1951), 268, ABS Archives. Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 178. Indeed, Ralph Mortensen, who represented the ABS on the staff of the China Bible House, remained in Shanghai until 1953. However, he was instructed not to enter the China Bible House’s headquarters again. Subsequently, he was openly accused of being an agent of American imperialism. Finally, he was able to get into Hong Kong in January 1953. Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 178–9; Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1905–1954*, 360. The use of the terms “Board of Directors” and “*Lishihui*” instead of “Board of Managers” and “*Dongshihui*” is attested in the China Bible House’s official records and correspondence. For example, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Board of Directors of the China Bible House, 14 March 1951, RG#27 China Mission, ABS Archives; Letter from Baen Lee to Ralph Mortensen, 12 October 1951, RG#7 Treasurers Papers, ABS Archives.
- 116 *One Hundred and Thirty-Sixth Report of the American Bible Society* (1952), 285–6, ABS Archives; Pearson, “ABS Historical Essay #15, VII-F-2”, 178–82.