

PREMILLENNIAL AND COUNTERCULTURAL FAITH AND ITS  
PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT\*

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*Abstract:*

*The goal of this essay is to reach a deeper understanding of the receptivity towards Pentecostal belief in the Chinese context. The essay uncovers cultural and historical factors that made Chinese people inclined to Pentecostal faith, particularly its premillennialist theology. For this purpose, it analyzes the presence of millenarian motives through several examples, the Back to Jerusalem Movement and the work of Yuan Zhi Ming as present-day examples, and the millenarianism of 19<sup>th</sup> century Taiping, the Buddhist White Lotus Movement that lasted from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and some Daoist movements of the late Han dynasty as historical examples. It shows how the Chinese context shaped premillennialist faith, and how this historical view has been appropriated and adapted to the Chinese self-understanding. All the examples show a specific pessimistic and countercultural view of history that shapes the political theology and the theology of history of Pentecostal and other revivalist Christians in China.*

When trying to understand what makes people turn to a specific faith, we may distinguish between *push and pull factors*: push factors explain what activities brought people to a specific faith, while pull factors explain why a certain faith attracted people. Regarding the

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former, we can tell the story about how the transmission of Pentecostal belief and spirituality in China happened through several partly independent, partly mutually related channels, through Pentecostal missionaries going to China, or through missionaries emerging from independent Pentecostal churches in China. Regarding the latter, we can ask why Pentecostal belief overall or parts thereof attracted people in China. The spread of Pentecostal belief lets us assume that a natural or indigenous inclination to Pentecostal spirituality can be found in China.

This paper focuses on the pull factors relating to one specific part of Pentecostal belief, namely the premillennialist belief. It asks in what way the cultural background and historical experiences made Chinese people inclined to receive the gospel in its Pentecostal form and in particular with a belief in the premillennial second coming of Christ. One of the background interests of this paper is that the author observed a common premillennial and countercultural faith among revivalist churches beyond the narrower Pentecostal constituency and an overall conservative political orientation of Chinese Christians that is often linked to such premillennial faith. This paper tries to outline how an inclination to a premillennial view of history has helped people in China receive the gospel, how the Chinese context shaped premillennial faith, and how this historical view has been appropriated and adapted to the Chinese self-understanding.

The essay starts with a short summary of premillennialist belief and the spread of Pentecostal faith and history in China. It then proceeds to present some recent examples of revivalist Christians' interpretations of history, in particular a) the *Back to Jerusalem Movement (BJM)*, a missionary movement that is linked to premillennial urgency and a covenantal role of Chinese Christians, and b) a book and DVD, *China's Confession*, produced by Yuan Zhi Ming, offering a profound Christian interpretation of the history of China. The view of history expressed in these two layouts has been popular among Christians in China and outside China. The purpose of discussing them is to offer two examples of critical and independent historical visions from the revivalist Chinese Christian context in order to understand Chinese receptivity to and how Chinese Christians appropriated millenarian belief. *Methodologically*, we obviously face the difficulty that both the people behind BJM and those behind *China's Confession* are not simply reflecting a 'pure' contextual expression of a historical mood, but may in their understanding of history be shaped by the teachings that they had received in interaction with a broader revivalist

Christian constituency beyond China, namely by Christians in the West. Nevertheless, the two visions of Chinese history also express a view about present-day Chinese Christians' self-understanding that responds to a specific time and social context. In the next step that should deepen our understanding of the pull factors, we will look into historical precedents of millenarian faith in the Chinese tradition, more specifically the *Taiiping Rebellion* of the late Qing dynasty, the *White Lotus Movement* of the Yuan dynasty, and some movements of *Daoist Messianism* of the late Han dynasty and ask how these contributed to a cultural context that is receptive to a premillennial view of history. The result of these and some further observations will allow us to recognize what factors made and still make premillennial belief appeal to Chinese Christians, how this specific element of Pentecostal belief is one factor among others to explain the spread of Pentecostalism in China and how they shape the political theology of revivalist Christians in China.

#### 1. Intro: Premillennial belief and the spread of Pentecostalism in China

Premillennial faith is widely seen as one of the core features of Pentecostalism. For the purpose of this essay, I describe premillennialism very broadly as a faith that sees history as a history of constant decline, that regards Christians as playing a critical role in the unfolding of God's history, and that expects some cataclysmic events to end the present time. It is a pessimistic view of history and sees the present culture doomed to perish. Premillennial Christians stand in opposition to mainstream culture. *Dayton* (1987) regards the expectation of the premillennial second coming of Christ as one of the five core themes of Pentecostals' 'full gospel', besides justification, sanctification, divine healing, and the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In his presentation of the *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, he dedicates a whole chapter to discuss the rise of premillennialism (Dayton, 1987:143-171). Traditionally, revivalist Christians emphasize the historical significance of faith more strongly than the broader Christian tradition. They express this through an activism in the transformation of society that can take on the form of millenarian urgency. Such activism can be observed throughout the modern history of revivalist Christianity, from Pietism through Methodism, the Evangelical Awakening in England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the Oberlin revivalism and the Holiness Movement towards the middle of

the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the previously rather optimistic postmillennialist and perfectionist mood turned into pessimistic premillennialism. This shift in historical outlook is part of the pre-history of Pentecostalism (Dayton, *ibid.*; Anderson, 2004:29). Premillennialism was originally more typically rooted in Presbyterian circles, but it began to influence the holiness movement through the Northfield Conferences organized by Moody (Sandeen, 1970:174ff.). It is a belief that links Pentecostals to fundamentalist Evangelicals despite their mutual rejection in other areas (Hollenweger, 1997:190ff.). Pentecostals share the notion of living in a perishing society with other countercultural groups such as fundamentalists, as George Marsden has pointed out (Marsden, 2006: 93ff; 1990:29ff). Fundamentalism should not so much be understood as a movement centered on the recognition of specific doctrines, but, at least partly, as one aspect of the broader history of millenarianism (Sandeen, 1970:xix). This is in very short form the story of how premillennialism became part of Pentecostalism and fundamentalist Evangelicalism. There will be more thought about the implications of premillennialist faith below. At this point, it is sufficient to say that premillennialism can be equated with a pessimist outlook and with a feeling of facing historical decay and standing in protest against a culture that is doomed to perish.

If we turn to China and summarize what we called the push factors, we can see how the earliest spread of (pre-)Pentecostal spirituality in China precedes the Azusa Street revival and roots in missionaries of Holiness and revivalist movements and ‘faith missions’ like the China Inland Mission of Hudson Taylor (Anderson, 2009:119; Winter, 1999:257ff.) who were already from 1865 on active in missions in China. A growing sense of urgency for an ‘Evangelization of the World in this Generation’ (so the title of John R. Mott’s book, published 1901 by the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Mission) before the imminent return of Christ gradually deepened and affected the belief of a growing number of emerging churches in the West. It shall be noted that the evangelization of the world in this generation meant exactly this: “It does not mean the conversion of the world within the generation. Our part consists in bringing the Gospel to bear on unsaved men” (Mott 1901:7).

Right after the Azusa Street revival, a wave of missionaries travelled to China (Anderson 2009:122f.; Robeck 2006:260ff.). Through the baptism in the Holy Spirit, they felt equipped to take up the task of foreign mission without time-consuming language studies. They believed that they had not only received the gift of glossolalia, but

also of *xenolalia*. This was particularly crucial in places like Asia where missionaries had to cope with radically different languages that were hard to learn by traditional way (Anderson 2009:121). In 1907, four American Pentecostal missionaries came to Hong Kong and Macao and built the first Pentecostal community. Others went to Northern China and to Shanghai. These early Pentecostal missionaries spread the Pentecostal faith partly among non-Christians, partly among already converted Christians of more traditional churches. This led to tensions with existing churches and denominations, so that by 1915 clear lines had been drawn between Pentecostal and the older missionary congregations. Pentecostal churches became just another denominational mission operation.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of indigenous churches in China independent from overseas missionaries. Among them were the *True Jesus Church*, emerging around 1920 and rapidly growing in the central provinces of Henan and Hunan. Between 1920 to 1950 was the largest of all independent churches in China (Bays, 1996:311; Deng, 2005: 441ff.), the *Little Flock*, famous through their leader, Watchman Nee, and the *Jesus Family*, founded 1928 in Shandong Province (Deng, 2005: 452ff.) and crucially inspiring the *Back to Jerusalem Movement*. All of these indigenous churches are characterized by a strongly millennial belief. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Christians from these churches were absorbed in the officially registered churches, or, more often, became part of the Christian *house church movement*. The spread of Pentecostal belief continued essentially under the surface of officially recognized religiosity and through the independent channels of their own missionary outreach.

## 2. A Premillennial-Covenantal Vision: The Back to Jerusalem Movement

One example of their missionary visions is the Back to Jerusalem Movement (BJM), a Christian movement with a distinct historical vision. This perspective is not simply influenced by the foreign Pentecostal mission to China, but reflective of a contextual mood and the questions arising from the historical context of China. A thorough analysis of this movement has been presented by this author in another context (Brandner, 2009). It thus suffices at this point to give a short summary.

BJM interprets the history of Christianity as a *westward* movement. It understands that the spread of the gospel started from the Mount of Olives, moving west and north to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and from there to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8-12). Through a history of suffering and persecution, the gospel spread into central, northern, and Western Europe and North Africa, and later to central and southern Africa, the Americas, the islands of the South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Asia, until finally reaching China (Brandner, 2009:319). That this historical narration simply ignores the equally important eastward movement of early Christian faith (see for this Moffett, 1998<sup>2</sup>) does not need to concern us here because our present purpose is only to understand what vision BJM communicates through its historical outline. BJM understands that the most important parts of the world still to become Christian are located west and south of China and deduces its specific historical mission from there: The task for Chinese Christians is to bring the gospel to this least evangelized area, the so-called 10/40 window, where the three main competitors of Christianity can be found – Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. By carrying the gospel back to its starting point in Jerusalem and thus fulfilling Christ's call to preach the gospel all over the world, the present era may come to its conclusion.

The historical vision of BJM carries important psychological implications. A core question of many Christians in China is why they received the gospel so late and what their purpose within God's history of salvation is. BJM gives a reassuring answer: It all had a deeper purpose. China has a primordial role in the unfolding of God's history of salvation, the role of bringing the gospel back to its starting point and thus to contribute to the fulfillment of history. Such a historical narration is able to integrate a long history of political humiliation and suffering, both foreign and self-made. God has chosen China for this honorable task of contributing to the fulfillment of history exactly because Chinese Christians were well molded by their long persecution. The millenarian vision of carrying the gospel to its starting point and thus to usher in the end of time is linked to a belief in a special election of Chinese Christians. The covenantal relationship of God has equally shifted around the world. In the same way as Israel, the Church of Rome, and the Church of the Reformation in Wittenberg, Zurich or Geneva had previously lost their covenantal relationship with God, so has, more recently, also America lost its special blessing due to its moral decay and its history of colonialism and political aggression. This idea nurtures and strengthens an emerging Chinese

self-confidence that, parallel to China's rise in political power, seeks a meaningful role in the religious and spiritual realm for China.

The millennialism of BJM gives a vision of a historical purpose and comfort in a context where Christians continue to experience a government that is hostile to the exercise of religious belief outside the government-controlled channels. BJM acknowledges the wealth brought by thirty years of economic transformation, yet it equally understands that this economic growth has spiritually uprooted many, if not most people in China. Against this radically unsettling experience – the decay of traditional values, livelihood, and orientation – the millennialism of BJM offers a contrasting vision. It is a vision that is thoroughly different from the turmoil of the past century and from the values of the past 30 years of economic liberalization, a vision that gives meaning to Chinese Christians' historical experience, and a vision that encourages and comforts. That is, God has left a special and most difficult inheritance to the people in China, a mission to the people between China and Jerusalem.

Let us now look at another example of a modern Christian interpretation of Christian history, the one by Yuan Zhi Ming.

### 3. God's Intimate Connection with Chinese History: China's Confession

Yuan Zhi Ming first became known to a broader public through his script to a TV series 'The Yellow River Eulogy' that was broadcast and widely viewed during the liberal climate of spring 1989 as peaceful demonstrators started to gather at Tiananmen Square and called for political reforms. Under the guise of a story about corruption and intrigues at the imperial court, the Yellow River Eulogy told the story of present-day China, for everybody easily recognizable. After the massacre on June 4, 1989, Yuan Zhi Ming was labeled as inciter of the protests and was forced into exile in the U.S. While continuing to engage in the largely exiled political reform movement, he became a Christian and started to study theology at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. Highly trained in the thought of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, he had become disappointed by the Communist Party and its failure to overcome corruption and to bring political reform. Like several other exiled former party members and supporters of the Tiananmen movement, he turned to Christian faith.

China's Confession, first written as a book and published in 1998 (Yuan Zhi Ming, 1999), has subsequently been published as video and is easily accessible through the internet.<sup>1</sup> Further material is taken from an article on 'God and China', equally published and accessible on the Internet. The core question that Yuan Zhi Ming addresses is whether there is a relationship between the Christian God and the history of the Chinese people and where God was during the past 5000 years (Yuan, God and China, paragraph 1)<sup>2</sup>. His answer in *China's Confession* is that God was always and from the very beginnings present in the Chinese history. God's history with Israel has its parallel in God's history with China. Culture and history evolved in parallel along the banks of the Jordan and Yellow River, both histories rooted in one origin, the origin of humankind, God's creation and his covenant with Noah (A17).

Yuan discovers God's presence in China's earliest history by showing links between the biblical narration and the history of China, by showing the virtue of her ancient rulers and by exposing parallels in the biblical teaching and the teaching of the great Chinese philosophers. To give some examples:

- The Bible tells how God finished his creation in six days and rested on the seventh day (A9). The Chinese classic, Zhou Yi, states that 'the way of the heavens comes around in seven days' (A9).
- The story of the two trees in the garden, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil has a parallel in the Chinese text 'The Book of Mountains and Seas' that similarly speaks of a tree of immortality and a tree of wisdom (A11).
- The biblical story of the flood is remembered in the classical Chinese story of a person named Gong Gong whose revolt brought divine judgment and led the columns supporting heaven to collapse and bring water covering the entire earth (A13).

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<sup>1</sup> As video <http://www.prayerforallpeople.com/chinasconfession.html>; in text form providing a summary of the text of the video <http://www.chinasoul.org/e-wk.htm>. The notes in brackets refer to the video indicating the time or mostly, when marked with a letter of the alphabet, to this latter source.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.chinasoul.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3367%3A%20god-and-china&catid=32%3A2009-10-16-02-11-46&Itemid=105&lang=en-gb](http://www.chinasoul.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3367%3A%20god-and-china&catid=32%3A2009-10-16-02-11-46&Itemid=105&lang=en-gb) (access on June 16, 2010)

The memory of God's earliest encounters with humankind is kept not only in the myths of Chinese culture, but also similarly in the beautiful Chinese characters. They reveal a deep knowledge of God, be it in the character for 'greed', 婪, that shows a woman standing under two trees (A19), in the character for 'big boat', 船, showing a boat with 8 people (A20), or, more puzzling, in the character for 'justice' that depicts the symbol for 'I', 我, being put underneath the symbol for 'lamb', 羊, making it 義.

The virtue of the earliest rulers, the emperors Yan, Huang, Yao, or Shun provide examples for godly and moral rulers (A29) whose fear of God prevented them from turning their power into selfishness and corruption. Yuan Zhi Ming says: "Ancient China trusted in God and feared heaven. There was sin – but the Chinese fathers believed justice would prevail and the wicked would be punished because of an omniscient God. This belief was the driving force to choose good over evil and was the cornerstone of the utopia envisioned by Confucius" (A34).

Yet, the godliness of the early culture did not prevail and filial piety and ancestral worship usurped the role of God (A35). After 2500 years of ancient Chinese belief that they were the sons of God who personally tended to every detail of his creation (A46), a long history of decline began. The narrator of the movie sighs: "Oh, Chinese! You who hold high the principle of filial piety, do you know that your ancestors used to revere God piously? Do you really know? You travel thousands of miles to worship Emperor Huang, but you do not worship God whom Emperor Huang himself worshipped. Is this not faulty and sad?" (Video, 13:20ff) Only some of the rituals (A37ff) and the voices of the great philosophers preserved an idea of the early knowledge of God. The period of the warring states, lasting from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, changed China deeply. "Purity and simplicity vanished. Anarchy and bloodshed were encouraged" (A47). With Confucius we sigh: "The great Dao has now faded and man has fallen" (Video, 15:09ff.).

It is from this point on that the history of fallen humankind begins for the Chinese. The emperors usurped the throne of God. The Chinese were continuously fearful of the god who sits on the palace throne – the emperor (B42). It is a history of bloodshed and of millions of lives being sacrificed and families scattered all over China in order for one man, the emperor, to dominate the land (B49). History develops within a constant pattern of power and control: godless men regard themselves as God (B57).

Only a small number of righteous people tried to bring reform and to end the tragedy of the cycle of violence and man's self-worshipping, yet all came to tragic ends (B62).

However, underneath the tragedy of history, China was looking for salvation and a restoration of the early godliness. It is on this background that a Buddhist monk of the Tang dynasty traveled to India searching for scriptures and bringing them back to China (C1). It is on this background that early Roman Catholic missionaries were welcomed to teach their knowledge and their piety to the officials in Beijing (C3ff). Occasionally, even the great and powerful Emperor Kangxi came to praise Jesus and to express faith by saying: 'The heavenly gate was closed to our people, but now the path to blessing is open. I accept the Holy Son of God, that I may become His son and gain eternal life' (C16). Still, the tragedy of history was not broken. The Roman missionaries alienated Kangxi, who previously was so friendly and open to Christianity, because they banned the veneration of ancestors and of Confucius and refused to use the term *shangdi* for God, thus denying that God was known to China before the missionaries' coming (C21-22). This alienation endured and shaped the encounter between China and the Protestant missionaries. Their legacy is ambiguous – they brought new technology, schools, hospitals, and even concepts of equality and democracy, but also opium and unwanted foreign influence. Are they friend or foe? – It is a question China still asks today (C39). Whatever the answer, they were seeds from heaven (C55). When these seeds fall on the ground and die, they produce many seeds. When all the missionaries were expelled, these seeds began to sprout and Christianity grew. China is awake and entering a new era (C56-57)!

Episode 4 tells about subsequent attempts to transform Chinese society, some even introducing the laws of God to China. Yet, all of them ended unsuccessfully. Either they turned into a cult, like the Taiping rebellion (D3-6), or they only introduced superficial changes without changing the spiritual fabric of the Chinese society, like the Westernization movement (D11). Only with Sun Yatsen did China return to God (D32), who had first revealed himself in the earliest time of Chinese history. Similarly, Chen Duxiu, the founder of the Communist Party, although not a Christian, admired the teachings of Jesus and regarded them as superior to Confucius. These moments of opportunity for thorough change failed again when military strongmen took over with their own hidden agendas (D36). The history of Communist China appears like a fast replay of 2500 years of turmoil

(E2) and fits with a long history of autocrats, of atheism, of rebellion and violence (D42-44). Against all this gloom and underneath its surface, Yuan sees God at work in the history of China, for despite the tragedy of Chinese history, China has been climbing back step by step toward the values of Sun Yatsen. And each step leads to renewed reassurance that God waits with open arms (D52).

The atmosphere turns darker as we enter the final episode 5 that recounts the history of Communist government and of Mao's brutal annihilation of all possible political rivals (E3ff) so that he could become China's undisputed God (E12). History repeats itself and remains caught in the tragic pattern of people seeking fulfillment in a counterfeit God, in worshipping a mere man, a sinner like themselves, worshipping their emperors, eventually worshipping a modern tyrant (E21-22). The economic reforms initiated by Deng and the subsequent economic boom could not solve the root problem (E32), not even introducing democracy could resolve it, for the root problem is a spiritual problem. Yuan Zhiming learnt this lesson when witnessing how the exiled Chinese dissidents who previously had jointly called for democracy became deeply split when in the West (E35). Yuan understands that democracy needs to grow out of a firm faith in God, a faith in the equality of mankind before God, in the equality of sinful human beings who all have fallen short of his glory. Only then is it founded upon equality between leaders and citizens, respect for both supporters and opponents (E36-41). What many present-day Chinese people witness as economic boom offering unimagined new opportunities is in fact a deep spiritual crisis where people put their faith in power, pleasure, and the pursuit of personal gain (E43). The economic development possibly causes deeper harm to China than the Cultural Revolution as it corrupts the hearts of men (E49). It is against this backdrop that Chinese turn increasingly to God and China, the land of God – Shen Zhou, 神州 – returns to its original destiny (E56-63).

Yuan Zhiming tells a history of Chinese rebellion against the God who had, at the earliest time, revealed himself to China, whose place, however, was subsequently usurped by sinful men who consistently suppressed the memory of this God. Throughout this history, there were several moments where China was coming very close to repenting and turning back to God; there were several people who, similar to the prophets of ancient Israel, tried to lead China back to God; and there was, underneath the surface, a deep yearning to fill the void and to find salvation. Yet, each attempt to change and repent failed and led to a

new person rising and claiming the place of God. Each reform failed because it did not address the root cause of China's tragedy. Yuan looks at the most recent reforms under Deng very critically as they lead China onto a path of material wealth that estranges them even more from God.

Several characteristics can be identified in this historical outline:

- a) History is overall described as a history of decline. The tragic nature of this history increases as history approaches the more recent past.
- b) The goal of history is the restoration of the past. The historical outline believes in God's original revelation in the Chinese context and claims a harmonious past of godly life that needs to be regained. This gives the historical account an overall conservative tone despite politically progressive elements and a deep understanding of the roots of democracy.
- c) Underneath the tragic history and in contrast to it, there appears a growing counter movement in form of the recent growth of Christianity in China.
- d) The present time is of decisive eschatological quality as the two contrasting movements, growing decline and growth of the Christian churches encounter each other.

It may further be mentioned that much of Yuan's historical concept is very close to the Roman Catholic theology of accommodation and in particular the method of *figurism* that the Jesuit missionaries used (von Collani 1996, especially 103ff.) and that is based on the idea of an original revelation of God in China.

The historical vision of BJM and the one of Yuan Zhi Ming are two recent examples that try to make sense of the profound transformation processes that China went through in the past century, the tremendous suffering and the more recent economic and spiritual growth. Both see history as in a process of decline and hope that a radical conversion would end the tragic history of the past. The contrasting developments give the present time its significance.

#### 4. A Millenarian Background

The purpose of this chapter is to show that these modern examples are not standing alone, but are part of a tradition of pessimist millenarianism that runs throughout the Chinese history. There are different definitions of millenarianism. Within a Christian and

theological framework, one usually distinguishes between pre-, post-, and a- or realized millennialism. The former two refer to the belief that Christ will come again before or after a millennium. Amillennialism or realized millennialism rejects the belief in the millennium; the millennium is symbolically understood as the present time of the church. In the emergence of amillennialism, one can observe how the institution supporting the establishment and the status quo sees itself as fulfillment of God's promise and drives millenarianism out of the institutionalized religion to be taken up by social movements. Since Norman Cohn's publication of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), the term has moved beyond its origin and is widely used to describe social and political movements and non-Christian groups.<sup>3</sup> In the process of applying millenarian terminology to social movements, new terms have been introduced that more accurately express the changed use (Wessinger, in Robbins and Palmer, 1997:49). Cohn describes millenarianism as a movement seeking salvation that is (1) collective, (2) terrestrial, or inner-worldly, (3) imminent, meaning coming soon and suddenly, (4) total, meaning to bring a radical and complete transformation of life and society, and (5) miraculous, or linked to supernatural powers (Cohn, 2004:13). Although Cohn essentially interprets these religious movements from a sociological perspective and plays down the independent causal significance of religious belief, his description is still helpful for our context. One may add as further typical characteristics millenarianism's militancy and messianic savior figures. In the following, I use the term 'pessimist millenarianism' for what is usually called premillennialism in order to affirm its distinctiveness and indigenous nature that is not simply an import of traditional Christian millenarian concepts from the West. This kind of pessimist millenarianism does not necessarily include a clear sequential order of the events of the end time. It shares, however, the characteristics of millenarian sects as introduced by Cohn and regards the present as in radical decline and on the verge of fundamental change.

In the following examples, we can discover characteristics of millenarianism in historical social movements in China. Several more examples could have been added, not least the most recent one, the

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the essays in Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, eds. (1997) *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem. Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, Routledge.

Maoist movement. These examples support our thesis that millenarianism is not something that entered China through the premillennialist theology of Pentecostalism, but that it was already there as a form of millenarian expectation and made people in China receptive to Pentecostal premillennialism.

a) Taiping (1836-1864)

The most famous of such millenarian movements is the Taiping movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Taiping has been a popular field of research. One finds various scholarly interpretations of this movement. Marxist and official Chinese historiography sees Taiping in the framework of conflicting social interests and as a forerunner to the Communist revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Others focus on the psychology, the religious visions or the political struggle for power of its leader, Hong Xiuquan, (P.M. Yap, "The Mental Illness of Hung Hsiu-ch'uan, Leader of the Taiping Rebellion," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 13 (1953-1954): 287-304; R.G. Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion*; J.D. Spence, *The Taiping Vision of a Christian China 1836-1864*, and *God's Chinese Son*). Some see him more influenced by his encounter with Christian missionaries from the West; again, others see him influenced by indigenous Asian, more particular Korean millenarianism and as parallel development to the Tonghak Millenarian Rebellion of the Korea in the 1890's (Hong Beom Rhee, 2007:7).

It is not our aim to enter into an extensive scholarly discussion about the right interpretation of Taiping or Hong Xiuquan. Neither am I able to provide an independent analysis of the details of Taiping. What interests us at this point is simply to show some elements of Taiping's own millenarianism. Hong Xiuquan came into contact with Christianity through a set of booklets written by Morrison and consisting of biblical quotations and a short explanation of the life and death of Jesus Christ that was handed to him in Guangzhou when attending the government examination (Spence, 1996:16ff). Hong Xiuquan's apparently only direct contact with a missionary was with a Southern Baptist, Isachar Roberts, from Tennessee (Spence, 1998:26). If it was a fundamentalist Christian, as Spence (*ibid.*) states, I do not know how strongly he taught a premillennialist belief. At that time, the first wave of the mission movement was predominantly rather of optimist and postmillennialist mood. Besides this direct contact, Hong may have

been receiving Christian thought through Christians among the Hakka. There is evidence of contacts between people close to Hong and the missionaries from Basel Mission (Schlatter, 1916; 297f.). Important knowledge about Hong Xiuquan stems from an essay written by Theodore Hamberg, one of the two first missionaries of Basel Mission, under the title *The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen, and Oriign of the Kwang-si Insurrection* (Rinehart, 1997:106, note 54).

Taiping was driven by a belief in a new world order and the expectation of some sudden event that would transform the world, some final battle between the hosts of Christ and the hosts of Anti-Christ. The Taiping government was theocratic and saw itself as leading a new dispensation, as an early observer, an American missionary wrote: “Their government is a theocracy, the development, apparently, of what is believed, by them, to be a new dispensation. As in the case of the Israelites, under Moses, they regard themselves as directed by one who has been raised up, by the almighty, to be the executor of his will on earth.” (Letter from Rev. E.C. Bridgman to the Editor of the North China Herald, 22 July 1854, quoted from Rinehart, 1997:75) Their organization showed strongly counter-cultural characteristics, with equality among men and women and strict moral prescriptions like banning of tobacco and opium, gambling, idolatry, prostitution, and idolatry. They widely rejected Chinese traditions and, in particular, the symbols of Manchu government and perceived them as demonic (Rinehart, 1997:76).

In the Taiping movement, we see several factors at work that are typical for a pessimist millenarian and counter-cultural movement:

- Hong’s authority was built on his visions that set him apart and gave him special power: Hong found guidance through his identification and supernatural interaction with his divine family, among them his brother Jesus and others.
- A strategy of renaming expressed radical discontinuity with the past: Hong changed not only his own name, but also the name of the capital Nanjing into Tianjing, Heavenly Capital (Spence, 1998:25).
- The movement was led by an initially small, later growing, but always minority group, the members of the Society of God Worshipers.
- The movement is clearly counter-cultural and providing a radically alternative ideology to the one of the then ruling

Qing dynasty. However, it is not restorationist as it is not driven by the vision of returning to past perfection.

b) The White Lotus Movement

White Lotus is a religious movement that emerged in the context of Pure Land Buddhism and was influenced by several folk religious movements, among them Taoist and Manichean groups and Maitreya Buddhism (Overmyer, 1976: 73-89). The history of the White Lotus can be traced back to the middle Sung dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (ibid, 90), a period of rapid urban growth. Towards the end of the Yuan dynasty, 1280-1368, in 1351, it turned under Han Shan Tong into a violent rebellion (ibid, 98) that combined peasant-based nationalism with a hope for an imminent return of the Maitreya Buddha (彌勒佛轉生) who would return as a Chinese savior in a time of social, physical, or economic catastrophe (Rinehart, 1997:70).

The belief in the Maitreya savior Buddha can be traced back to Indian Mahayana Buddhism. Maitreya is the Buddha of the future who waits in heaven until his time comes (Overmyer, 81). The belief in a messianic savior became part of a salvation-historical vision that distinguished three successive stages, the past, controlled by the Lamplighter Buddha, the present, dominated by Sakyamuni, and the future, to be ushered in by Maitreya (ibid, 83). Such belief had the potential to turn militant when a specific historical period was identified with the decline of the period of Sakyamuni, as happening in Maitreya uprisings in the Sung dynasty, 1037, and in the Yuan dynasty, 1337 (ibid., 83f.). It is on this background that the White Lotus leader Han Shan Tong could proclaim: "The empire is in great disorder, Maitreya Buddha has descended to be reborn and the King of light has appeared in the world" (quoted from Overmyer, 100).

The movement inspired several millenarian secret societies and remained alive for several centuries during the Ming and the Qing dynasty. It built a counter-cultural underground history that eventually led to the White Lotus Rebellion at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and to later offshoots like the sect of the Eight Trigrams in North China, 1813, the Nien, the Great Knife, or the Boxer, 1898-1901 (Rinehart, 1997: 70).

The Lotus tradition, as also other sectarian religious movements, necessarily assumed a countercultural role by challenging the ultimately religious claim of the state. In traditional China, the emperor is meant to represent the traditional cosmic order and to rule by a

mandate of heaven. This religious status of the state can be observed up to the present when the state persecutes dissent with religious fervor. White Lotus developed a countercultural perspective in an eschatological hope for a savior who would introduce a radically new era. They built a separate community with their own distinctive practices like a radical vegetarianism. We can identify several further elements of pessimist millenarianism in the history and eschatological belief of White Lotus:

- White Lotus emphasized, as part of its heritage of Pure Land Buddhism, collective salvation
- In its militant forms, it understood the present as a crucial period in history, as a moment of decline and the dawn of a radically new time period.
- The imminent new era was expected to be radically different from the present era, including a change of the order of time, with the year expected to have eighteen months and the day 18 hours instead of the present twelve (from a government report in 1813, quoted from Overmyer, 104).
- Although several figures of the movement took on a charismatic leadership position, real salvation was expected to come from Maitreya.
- The salvation-historical understanding of different time periods – one may think of ‘dispensations’ – makes White Lotus’ millenarianism not restorationist, but progressive teleological.

c) The Yellow Turbans, the Heavenly Master and late Han Daoist Messianism (around A.D. 200)

The Heavenly Master sect (or Celestial Master, 天师道), also known under the name ‘Five Pecks of Rice sect’ and emerging in Western China, around Sichuan, and the Yellow Turbans, also known as Taiping Dao (太平道) and emerging in Eastern China, were Daoist movements that appeared towards the end of the Han dynasty, at the end of the second century A.D. They expected a period of peace to be brought by a supernatural messianic ruler.

The first rebellion of the Yellow Turbans in 184 was still within the framework of political power struggles and the hope for a shift of the mandate of heaven to the leader of the Yellow Turbans, Zhang Jiao,

张角. He expected the Yellow Heaven to be installed and the Blue Heaven, meaning the Han, to be abolished. The color yellow referred to the idea of a restoration of the mythic rule of the primordial perfect Yellow Emperor (Seidel, 1969: 220f). Zhang Jiao is also described as Great Sage and Good Master, thus claiming the authority of religious chief and saintly teacher (*ibid.*, 221). The hope for a perfect ruler fused with the image of the Sage.

Similarly, the Celestial Master movement in Western China venerated a deified Laozi as Tai Shang Lao Jun, 太上老君. They believed that this senior deity had anointed their leader, Zhang Dao Ling, 张道陵, and his successors.<sup>4</sup> Laozi transmitted special spiritual powers to Zhang Dao Ling that freed him from sickness and allowed him to save people from demonic possession. The movement was not deeply critical against the established political power and later leaders, descendants of Zhang Dao Ling, even assumed political authority bestowed by the central government (*ibid.*, 227). Receiving official protection and seen as non-rebellious, the Celestial Master movement broadened its influence and turned into the Taoist church.

However, the Celestial Master movement seemed not to have been a very unified movement, for Seidel distinguishes a further and parallel Daoist movement, equally centered around Sichuan, that stood in partial contrast to the Celestial Master (and also the Yellow Turbans in the East). This movement of Taoist messianism can be identified through a religious text called ‘The Sutra of the Transformations of Lao-Tzu’ (老子变化经). The text gives strong evidence of the deification of Laozi. What makes the text so significant is that this deified Laozi now appears in a precise historical context (*ibid.*, 224f). The political rule appears to be about to change and Laozi himself is expected to take over. This movement claimed its leader to be a kind of *Lao-tzu redivivus* (*ibid.*, 228). While the Yellow Turbans fought for a new dynasty under the authority of a perfect emperor and the Celestial Master for a sage ruler anointed by Laozi, this latter movement “appealed directly to the master of all good emperors; discarding imperial rule they wanted to be ruled by the deified Sage come down to earth.” (Seidel, 229f)

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<sup>4</sup> For further information, in Chinese, on the Celestial Master movement see Guo Shusen (1990) *Tian shi dao* 天师道 [Celestial Master Sect] Shanghai she hui ke xue yuan chu ban she : Xin hua shu dian Shanghai fa xing suo fa xing.

The three movements, Celestial Master (Tianshi Dao), the movement behind the *Transformation Sutra* and the Yellow Turbans (Taiping Dao) are millenarian, but more importantly messianic (ibid., 216). Their first question is not about the new age that is imminent, but the question of the legitimate ruler. The Sutra of the Transformation shows a more countercultural vision than the other two movements. Laozi is expected to rule according to the Daoist teaching of non-intervention (无为) – a truly alternative political vision.

## 5. Conclusion

We have seen how pessimist millenarianism emerged as a faith standing in opposition to mainstream culture. We have exemplified this on one 20<sup>th</sup> century movement, the BJM, and one more recent theological-historical vision, the book and movie *China's Confession*. We have seen through historical examples how countercultural movements repeatedly emerged in Chinese sectarian movements that prepared the ground for the reception of a pessimist millenarian faith in China. Obviously, millenarianism, millenarian revolutions and millenarian expectations can be found in many traditional cultures and contexts, not only in China. However, the historic experiences of people in China made them particularly receptive to millenarianism. We have seen a recurring pattern of a hope in an inner-worldly radical change that would end the historical decline. This pattern reflects a widely held belief that history is indeed in a continuous decline and that the ancient time was the best. This view is typically reflected in the Confucian sayings 人心不古 – ‘the heart of man is not like in old times’ – or 世风日下 – the world is going downwards day by day, history is a history of decay. This pessimism is nurtured by a past century of continuous turmoil and uncertainty. Decades of civil war, the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and the unsettling experiences of economic liberalization all contributed to an overall feeling of deep alienation. Despite the tremendous economic growth of the past 30 years, the past century brought a whole string of several paradigm shifts to the people in China: 100 years ago from a centuries-old imperial system to a republican system; 60 years ago from a long and devastating war to the strict government of the Communist Party; then, 40 years ago, a decade of political and social turmoil during the Cultural Revolution, an attempt to eradicate all traditional values by

condemning them as feudal; and finally, the introduction of economic liberalization in the past 30 years. This last shift is arguably the most thorough of all and has probably had the deepest impact on people's livelihoods and experiences and it stands in starkest contrast to all the previously cherished values.

Today, people still experience living in a highly unstable economic and political environment. They feel that the wider economic and political context is out of their control – subject to decision-making powers in a far-away center or of economically powerful people out of common people's reach. These feelings equally apply to people in China, who regard their government as a remote power center without connection to their actual needs, as to people in Hong Kong during the colonial time and also since its return under Chinese sovereignty. Loss of control, a feeling of heteronomy, being like a pawn in the hands of the powerful, a dependence of one's livelihood on some aloof economic and political powers and a simultaneous experience of social injustice are deeply disempowering experiences. They foster a pessimism that makes people receptive to millenarian movements that can make sense of these experiences. Millenarianism turns the order of disempowerment upside down and turns the alienated individual apparently into a subject of history that stands at the forefront of social change. The lack of a proper civil society that allows a discourse independent from the government's total claim to the loyalty of its subjects and the aloofness of the dominant powers make countercultural religiosity a necessary alternative to the religious claim of the state.

Despite an obvious understanding for the spiritual and psychological role of such pessimist millenarian and countercultural belief, four points of criticism shall conclude this reflection:

- Salvation history is continuously tricky. It has the tendency to suppress whatever does not fit into its salvation-historical scheme, as e.g. seen in the construction of a historical vision by BJM that completely ignores the early Christian development towards the East.
- Millenarianism is not only tricky, but can easily be misused, particularly if linked to a leader with messianic aspirations, as easily happens. The history of China (and elsewhere) shows ample evidence of such abuse. Emperors or would-be emperors repeatedly appealed to the millenarian hopes of the people and presented themselves as messianic savior, as most recently shown in the messianism surrounding Mao Zedong.

When a secular leader assumes a messianic role, his political power is reinforced by his religious charisma and his supernatural quality. The strength of Yuan Zhiming's historical view is exactly his sensitivity for the tragic human claim of salvific power.

- The radicalism of Pentecostals' countercultural faith expression is a meaningful expression of Christians' human condition, but it misses the point – it is not really addressing the root causes of the deep alienation that people experience, but only the feeling of alienation. We may use the comparison that Hollenweger recounts from a discussion with a group of political activists in Chile: Such faith is like Moses who leads out of oppression and misery on the basis of a hope for a promised land. However, what is needed after Moses is Joshua who effectively leads into the Promised Land (Hollenweger, *Pentecostals*, 466f.).
- Pentecostalism as countercultural movement is deeply inconsistent with the forces and conditions that actually created it, when it turns into a conservative force supporting the government, as e.g. in the Love Singapore Campaign, or similar movements in HK backing the government in its policies of simply executing the will of the central government of Beijing and the business establishment. When forsaking the link to the alienating conditions that were at the ground of this counter-cultural and counter-political hope, it turns into mainstream culture without any added value.

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