

# Establishing in Shandong: A Study on the Relationship Between the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Folk Secret Sects in Shandong

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In the northwest of Shandong Province during Late Qing Dynasty, the struggle for survival among the villagers became social norm due to the fragility of the natural ecology, which was not only an important cause of local social unrest, but also complicated social relations. The potential anti-government tendencies of folk secret sects made them the targets of Qing government's crackdown. In order to seek survival and development, the folk secret sects in northwest Shandong turned their eyes to Christian churches for political protect that was North China Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. With the help of secret sects, missionaries of the North China Mission gained a foothold in northwest Shandong. But they were not willing to provide political protect for secret sects. They only used the social ties of secret sects to wedge themselves into the rural society of northwest Shandong, hoping to establish Christian mission stations and develop Christian communities, not to integrate with secret sects.

*Keywords:* secret sect, Ligua sect, North China Mission, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

After the Second Opium War, Christian missions gradually moved from Chinese coast into the interior and penetrated into the vast rural society. How Christian missions wedged themselves into the interior and how they related to the local society and thus gained their initial footholds are important questions for the study on modern Christian history. This paper intends to take the North China Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions as an example, and then to explore its relationship with secret sects and its development strategies in rural society of northwest Shandong.

## **Ecological Vulnerability and Rural Social Unrest**

The fragility of the natural ecology and the instability of the social ecology in northwest Shandong became a trigger for social unrest and chaos, which in turn became a gap for Christianity to enter the region. On one hand, Shandong is the hometown of Confucius and Mencius, with a deep Confucian cultural tradition and a history of universal obedience. Even in modern times, there are still clear and strong traces of Confucian and Mencius thought among Shandong people. On the other hand, social unrest occurred from time to time in Shandong. During the reign of the Qing Dynasty, periodical unrest either originated in Shandong or spread into Shandong. As a result, the evaluation of Shandong people also shows two extremes. One view is that the people

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of Shandong have all the good qualities of the Chinese people, strong, proactive, and persistent, and are the descendants of great saints, writers, militarists, and statesmen. Another view is that the Shandong people are declining in power and in heart and mind.

R. G. Tiedemann thinks that these vast differences in perspective stemmed from the contradiction between the traditional Confucian ideal of a harmonious and orderly society and the social reality of a dysfunctional and violent society, which was generally caused by brutal living conditions, such as steady population growth, increasing shortage of arable land, and more and more natural disasters (Tiedemann, 2011, pp. 2-3). Enxian was the main town where the North China Mission started its work in northwest Shandong, and its natural ecological situation was a reflection of the natural ecology of northwest Shandong. At least 10 years between 1871 and 1900, there were disasters such as crop failures, river dykes, locusts, etc. Countless people died of the great famine from 1876 to 1879 in North China including the people in northwest Shandong.

Natural disasters such as droughts and floods caused great existential crises, resulting in conflicts over competition and adjustment of water resources. There were three main rivers in Enxian, Majia River, Canal and Sha River. The Sha River, part of the former Yellow River, has repeatedly been a nuisance to the local people, resulting in a long-standing conflict between the people of Enxian and Wucheng. In August 1871, eight people were killed and 20 injured in a conflict between the people of Enxian and Wucheng. In 1890, a dike broke somewhere in North Grand Canal in Linqing, and a conflict occurred at the junction of Wucheng, Xiajin, and Enxian over the construction of a ditch. In 1894, there was another violent conflict between the people of Enxian and Wucheng over the construction of a dike.

The fragile ecology not only triggered water conflicts in local community, but also bred local or cross-territory banditry. The territory of Enxian looked roughly like rectangular, about 64 li wide and 50 li wide. People could travel through the territory within a day, which was convenient for thieves and bandits to scamper into other counties through Enxian, or scamper into the territory of Enxian from surrounding counties.

From 1861 to 1868, horse thieves, bandits, rebels, salt lords, and other anti-government people acted frequently in Enxian, and both local government and people were affected. From the end of 1899 to the beginning of 1900, the Boxers plundered the border between Enxian and Pingyuan, and were only quelled by Yuan Shikai's suppression. This seems to confirm Tiedemann's view that there was a link between the brutal living environment and increasing number of natural disasters and the reality of social violence. The frequent unrest in Enxian was a side reflection of the social unrest in northwest Shandong.

### **Folk Secret Sects in Northwest Shandong**

Under the influence of ecological fragility and social turmoil, social relations in rural villages of northwest Shandong were very complex, and the secret sects were manifestation of such social relations. According to Qin Baoqi,

The secret society is nothing but a social mass body formed spontaneously by the lower class of feudal society. Because it has a secret organization, activities and contact code, mysterious and unique interests, strict rules, engaged in political, economic or religious activities forbidden by successive governments, only developed secretly among the grassroots class. Therefore, it is called secret society or secret association. (Qin, 2004, p. 1)

From the organizational form and content of activities, the Qing Dynasty secret societies could be divided into two major systems of secret sects and secret parties. They were also called "folk religions" or "secret religions"

because they had certain similarities with Buddhism and Taoism, such as fasting and reciting scriptures. The secret religions acted along the border between Shandong and Henan were often referred to as folk secret sects, mainly White Lotus, Bagua, Ligua, and Shengxian sect, who were often potential anti-government forces.

Folk secret sects have been both a reaction to and a factor in social unrest, but have not always been involved in anti-government actions. Organizationally speaking, the secret folk sect had the nature of community, but at the same time it transcended the limits of community and had a cross-regional character. It was this cross-regional activity and network that facilitated the missionaries' access to the northwest Shandong. More importantly, the folk secret sect organizations were not independent of the local society, but were integrated with geopolitical and blood relations of local rural society. In this way, what was involved behind the network of folk secret sects was the geopolitical and blood relations of rural society and the political ecology of northwest Shandong.

In fact, in the border area between Zhili and northwest Shandong, folk secret sects existed for a very long time. Early in the middle of the 17th century, folk secret sects began to appear in Shandong. During the reign of Shunzhi, Li Letian introduced the Hongyang sect into Shandong. The followers of this sect were different from believers of Buddhism; they ate five meat dishes: Those were chicken, duck, fish, pork, and egg, so they were also called "five meat sect". Later, they received followers according to eight diagrams, then called "Bagua sect". During the Yongzheng Period, Bagua sect expanded its influence into the provinces of Zhili, Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, and so on. In the late 19th century, there were Yizhuxiang sect, Bagua sect, Ligua sect, and Shengxian sect which were active in northwest Shandong.

Yizhuxiang sect had been under the watchful eye of the government authorities, and most of its busts occurred in northern Shandong, southern and southeastern parts of Zhili. Tianmen sect was the nickname of Yizhuxiang sect, which was second to the Bagua sect in influence. These two sects often mixed as "Yizhuxiang Ligua sect" group; they had begun to integrate with each other during the Qianlong times (Lu, 2000, pp. 158, 229, 231).

From the above history of the development of secret sects, it can be seen that the original social relations around the border between Zhili and Shandong gradually generated secret sects, an institutional religious organization with intertwined roots, which later gradually evolved into traditional rural social relations. The secret sects incorporated the blood and geopolitical ties of rural society, and then had three main characteristics: community, blood transmission, and cross-regional. According to C. K. Yang's study, institutional religion fulfilled the spiritual needs of the individual; when individuals were in grief, they sought spiritual salvation and physical liberation by converting to a faith that was very different from secular system. The fragile ecology and social turmoil of northwest Shandong led people to struggle with survival, and the growth of secret sects suggested that people wanted to find comfort and refuge in this institutional religion (Yang, 2007, pp. 274-275).

Folk secret sects attracted and absorbed mostly people of grassroots class, who were often a potential force against the government. The rebellions of secret sects all ended in failure, but they seemed to have their own way of surviving; they survived actually for centuries. In 1860s and 1870s, Christian missions in China provided a new way of survival for secret sects.

### **The Beginning of the North China Mission in Northwest Shandong**

With the treaty rights guaranteed by Convention of Tientsin and Convention of Peking, etc., Christian

missions grew from southeast coast to northern coast and inland of China. The North China Mission of American Board took lead in reaching out to northern China, while at the same time secret sects such as Ligua sect were being pursued and suppressed by the Qing Court. In this situation, missionaries of the North China Mission met in Tianjin with the followers of secret sects from Shandong, which led to a series of chain reactions.

### **The Introduction of the North China Mission Into Northwest Shandong**

In 1861, Henry Blodget, a missionary of the North China Mission, gained a second follower, who was a member of Pai Yi Tau. In Shandong, the North China Mission was also closely related to the secret sects. Wu Changtai, lived in Di Qitun of Shandong, “a believer of Bagua sect, had a reputation spreading far and wide” (Lu, 2000, p. 184); he actually was a leader of Bagua sect. When Wu Changtai encountered C. A. Stanley who was also a missionary of the North China Mission in Tianjin, the relationship between Bagua sect and Qing Court was under tension. Wu Changtai went to Tianjin in search of western guns and other supplies to fight with local government. He inadvertently came to the Church of the North China Mission and listened to preaching. After that, he invited C. A. Stanley to preach in his hometown. In December 1866, C. A. Stanley went to Di Qitun, which started the work of the North China Mission in Shandong. By the year of 1873, there were 16 believers in Di Qitun, coming from four families, one of whom was a widow and was the sister-in-law of Wu Changtai.

Pangzhuang was an important station of the North China Mission in Shandong; missionaries here also had a close relation with secret sects. Between late 1871 and early 1872, Hou Shengqing, head of Pangzhuang Ligua Sect, visited C. A. Stanley twice in Tianjin, hoping that he would go to his house to preach. In February 1872, C. A. Stanley visited Pangzhuang for the first time, when he knew that Hou was a member of a secret sect. However, instead of seeing conflicts with spreading the gospel, C. A. Stanley believed that gospel seemed to have found its way into the hearts of these people (ABCFM Archives, V. 5, No. 158). In April 1872, Hou Shengqing was baptized in Tianjin. By 1875, there were 10 women baptized, all of whom were relatives of Hou Shengqing. In the same year, Wu Deming, who taught in Pangzhuang, was baptized. In 1876, two relatives of Wu Deming and one of Hou Shengqing’s brothers were baptized. By 1881, believers in Pangzhuang were all from Hou family. Around 1880, Lu Guoshun from Di Santun was baptized into the church, and he was a member of Old Tianmen Sect.

From above, it can be seen that folk secret church was only the introduction of the North China Mission into northwest Shandong, and the social relationship behind the folk secret sects was the real reliance. It was with such kind of social relationship that the North China Mission gradually gained believers in Da Shizhuang, Zhang Guansi, and Lao Tangzhuang.

### **The Relationship Between the North China Mission and Secret Sects**

The relationship between secret sects and the North China Mission was multifaceted; the latter had been associated with political patronage from the moment when missionaries established a relationship with the followers of secret sects. When first entered Shandong, missionaries sensed strong political motives among inquirers. In 1870, C. A. Stanley felt that the three people from Shandong visited him for another purpose instead of teachings. When preaching in Di Qitun in June 1870, C. A. Stanley thought it was obvious that there were a variety of impure motives among the audience. Stanley judged that there were mutual hatred and fear between White Lotus sect and current dynasty, the former had thousands of followers in this part of China, and

there was a danger that they would establish relations with us for political purposes (ABCFM Archives, V. 1, No. 24, pp. 4-5). Actually, Christian church had some similar characteristics to secret sects, such as assemblies, and was introduced by foreigners; therefore, it was once suspected by the Qing government of having some political intentions similar to those of secret sects.

The network of secret sects in northwest Shandong was so extensive that missionaries could hardly avoid having relations with them. The increase and growth in the number of church members was an important indicator for church growth, so it would be difficult for the North China Mission to gain a foothold in Shandong if they shut secret sects out. According to Arthur H. Smith's observation, there were much more secret sects in Shandong than in Zhili, and everyone knew of secret sects, many of the inquirers had been important members of secret sects, some were even chiefs, and most of the adherents who were from former secret sects were the wisest and most influential people (ABCFM Archives, V. 5, No. 84).

Consequently, A. H. Smith favored people with positions in secret sects, such as leaders, who could recommend Christianity as a much more authoritative religion to the followers of the sects, and thus spread the influence of Christianity more quickly and effectively. He discovered that one of the believers was a "bright eye", who could see through a glass object what other people perceived but faintly, and people believed in his gift. If this kind of person joined church, it would be very helpful in attracting inquirers.

However, secret sects usually contain elements of native religious beliefs, such as burning incense, kowtowing and chanting, accompanied by assurances of blessings, elimination of disasters and avoidance of calamities, which were all idolatrous rituals and superstitious ideas in the view of the missionaries and were all in conflict with Christian faith. This created a paradox: For one thing, missionaries wanted to spread Christianity quickly and widely, using secret sect leaders as intermediaries; for another, they found it difficult to integrate them with Christianity. The leaders of secret sects who joined the church were involved in what the missionaries considered as dark and unprofitable acts (ABCFM Archives, V. 5, No. 86), thus provoking the indignation among the church members. But as long as they were willing to make a public confession, they were often forgiven by missionaries and remained in church or been readmitted to church; this even became a satisfactory way for missionaries to resolve similar cases.

### Conclusion

Secret sects provided people with spiritual support and organizational shelter; their networks were part of traditional social relations and integrated with local society in blood and geographical ties. The Qing government's suppression of secret sects forced them to survive in a difficult situation, and the latter saw light from missionaries in fighting for survival, which in turn became an opportunity for Christian church to spread into northwest Shandong. However, missionaries were not willing to provide direct political protection for secret sects. In a way, Christian church, like secret sects, provided a haven for people in turmoil, which was the reason it gained footholds and adherents. Hence, those who joined the church in the early days were mainly the underprivileged, such as poor followers of secret sects, which was a common phenomenon when Christianity developed in the interior of northern China.

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