

An Overview of The Shandong Revival of 1927-1937

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the Shandong Revival of 1927-1937 in China. In addition to discussing the political background of the revival, this study examines the fruit of both the Southern Baptist mission in China and the Norwegian Lutheran missionary, Marie Monsen. The article brings to the fore the waning memory of this important revival and serves as an encouraging reminder that God is still eager to bring revival again.

Key Words: China, missionaries, revival, Shandong, Southern Baptist

Introduction: Background of Shandong Province

Situated on the shores of the Yellow Sea in East China, the area that is now Shandong Province has made major contributions to Chinese history. Shandong ('east of the mountains') derives its name from its location: east of the Taihang Mountains. At the heart of Shandong Province lies the Yellow River, one of the world's longest rivers and China's second longest, running the entire breadth of Shandong from west to east as it empties into the Yellow Sea. Its mouth is located in the Dongying district of Shandong. The Yellow River basin has been the birthplace of various ancient civilizations (Little, 1905), and Shandong has long carried major economic, cultural, and religious influences in China.

Currently, Shandong's influence on China can be seen economically. The province is an economic powerhouse with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is similar to that of Mexico and Spain combined. According to the latest numbers, if the province were a country it would rank 17th in terms of GDP output (The World Bank, 2024; Huld, 2023). Culturally, Shandong's Lu cuisine is one of China's eight great culinary traditions and can be traced back to over two millennia ago (China Daily Shandong, 2021), laying claim to being the oldest Chinese culinary tradition.

But perhaps one could make the case that Shandong's most significant contribution to Chinese history is religion. For instance, Mount Tai (Taishan in Mandarin), located in the city of Tai'an in Shandong, has been "continuously worshipped throughout the last three millennia" (UNESCO, n.d.-a). It is the holiest of China's Five Sacred Mountains (Meng, 2023). Taishan and Dai Temple, also in Tai'an, are two of the most preeminent centres of Taoism.

Moreover, just under a two-hour drive south of Tai'an is Qufu, the birthplace of the widely influential philosopher Kong Qiu (Confucius), founder of Confucianism. The Temple and Cemetery of Confucius in Qufu are centres of Confucianism and are marked by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site (UNESCO, n.d.-b), as is Mount Tai in Tai'an (UNESCO, n.d.-a). Additionally, Buddhist temples just south of Jinan, the provincial capital, were once thought of as some of the foremost Buddhist centres in China (Kelly, 2007).

Digging further into this substantial religious heritage of Shandong, one will find several significant Christian movements. On multiple occasions, the Almighty God has poured out his Spirit on this province that currently has a population of more than 100 million people. God has moved in Shandong so significantly that Paul Hattaway (2018), who has served as a missionary in China for three decades, uses the phrase "the revival province" to refer to

Shandong. One of the most significant of these Christian movements was the Shandong Revival that started in the late 1920s and culminated in the 1930s.

This discussion will next summarize the political background that led up to the beginning of the Shandong Revival before offering an overview of the revival itself.

Political Background of China and Shandong Before the Revival

The 1920s were difficult years in China generally and Shandong specifically. These years were marked by “unprecedented upheaval... warfare, banditry, famine and political agitation” (Tiedemann, 2022, p. 229). During this time known as the Warlord Era, China had been divided into sections, and various sections were ruled by powerful militarized cliques. The natural consequence of this fragmentation was constant civil war along with banditry and general insecurity. In the midst of such an environment, the minds of many Chinese intellectuals were ripe for a nationalistic movement (Jordan, 1976).

One such intellectual was Hawaii-educated politician and revolutionary Sun Yat-sen. Sun’s experience of Hawaii and America influenced him to become a proponent of Chinese nationalism and modernisation (Gonschor, 2017). He therefore led a nationalistic movement against the warlords but died prematurely due to illness on March 12, 1925 (Jordan, 1976).

One of Sun’s closest accomplices, Chiang Kai-shek, took over the leadership of this movement and on July 9, 1926 launched the Northern Expedition (Jordan, 1976). The Northern Expedition was a military campaign aimed at eradicating the warlords and creating a unified China. This campaign was launched in Guangzhou (also known as Canton) in the south and, having moved northwards, arrived in Nanjing in the spring of 1927. Almost immediately mass anti-foreigner riots broke out (Worthing, 2018). It is this turmoil that caused consulates of Western missionaries serving in northern and eastern China to request them to “evacuate their interior posts and find safe haven on the coasts” (Hansen & Woodbridge, 2010, p. 148).

This political and military situation is the setting that forms the background of the Shandong Revival. During this period, American Southern Baptist missionaries serving in Shandong fled to the coastal resort city of Yantai (then called Chefoo). Among them was Charles Lee Culpepper (1896-1986), a Texan Southern Baptist missionary. Norwegian missionary Marie Monsen (1878-1962), who at the time was serving in the Central China provinces of Henan and Hubei with the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (Tiedemann, 2022), also fled to Yantai. It was this seemingly serendipitous conglomeration of missionaries that became the catalyst of the revival.

The Beginnings of the Shandong Revival

Culpepper, often known as C. L. Culpepper (1971), notes that it was at this time in Yantai during the political upheaval that “missionaries and church leaders in China began to sense a great spiritual need” (p. 12). Monsen (1961) writes similarly regarding this time: “Political unrest had ploughed deep furrows across ancient traditions and prejudices, not least the mighty fortress of idolatry, and all that went with it. It was a thought hidden in the heart that all this was preparing for times of revival, which caused deep joy. And when revival came, we saw the word of promise wonderfully fulfilled” (p. 36).

The beginnings of the revival are typically understood to have occurred when the missionaries gathered involuntarily in Yantai. Culpepper, whose wife, Ola, had developed optic neuritis in one eye ten years prior and was now losing sight in that eye, made an appointment to visit with Monsen in her apartment. In this first encounter between the two missionaries, Culpepper (1971) writes that as Monsen met him at the door her first question was, “Brother

Culpepper, have you been filled with the Holy Spirit?” Despite the fact that the filling of the Holy Spirit and prayer for healing seemed unorthodox for Southern Baptists, during that first meeting Culpepper proceeded to invite Monsen to visit with them at their residence the following day to pray for healing for Ola’s eye (p. 13).

The following day, about 20 people gathered at the Culpepper’s residence. There they “felt an electric excitement, a feeling that God was preparing us for something we had never known before” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 13). After praying for hours, Culpepper anointed Ola with oil. Those present testified that it felt as though God had walked into the room. As they were praying while kneeling in a circle, some of the local Chinese workers present at the meeting started to converse among each other (Culpepper, 1971, p. 14; Monsen, 1961, p. 55). They were confessing their hatred of one another and seeking forgiveness. Convicted of their sin, they accepted Christ. Furthermore, Ola’s eye was healed. Culpepper notes that that “was the most wonderful experience in our lives. We had never known such spiritual joy” (1971, p. 14). Regarding this day, Monsen (1961) writes: “The Holy Spirit of God was so really present among us that we felt His presence.... That was the first small beginning of a revival which, a few years later, grew into the largest revival any one mission in China experienced” (p. 55).

As the inland tension began to subside, missionaries returned from Yantai and other coastal cities to their interior mission stations in the autumn of 1927. Culpepper and other Southern Baptists also returned to their mission stations in Shandong while Monsen continued with her ministry and itinerancy in North and Northeast China. After spending time in Beijing and Shanxi Province, Monsen longed to be reunited with her American friends whom she had met in Yantai. In April 1929, as she was on her way to Shandong, she was kidnapped and held captive by pirates for 23 days (Monsen, 1961, p. 55). This incident was perhaps a sign of the dangers and anti-foreign sentiment that still lurked. During her time in captivity, Monsen gained encouragement from reading Isaiah 41:10 (Crawford, 1933). Encouraged by these words of Scripture she saw the time in captivity as an opportunity to share the gospel with the pirates (Monsen, 1961; Hansen & Woodbridge, 2010). When she was released and eventually made it to Shandong, Monsen became the catalyst of the revival in that province and beyond.

The revival spread from its origins in Yantai to Southern Baptist mission stations in Shandong including the provincial capital, Jinan. Along with the filling of the Holy Spirit, one of the other prominent features of this revival was public confession of sin. In the honour-shame culture of China, such public confession was a strikingly counter-cultural event. Southern Baptist missionary Wiley Blount Glass (1874-1967) observes that “confession of sin was entirely out of character with the Chinese culture. The supreme importance of maintaining ‘face’ was bred into them from childhood” (Cauthen, 178, pp. 150-151).

Renewal and Revival in the Southern Baptist Mission and all over Shandong

It is evident from Culpepper’s and Ola’s experience in Yantai that this revival took place not only among the Chinese but was a spiritual renewal for missionaries as well. In the 1920s, a decade of political and religious persecution as well as strong anti-foreign sentiment, both Culpepper and Monsen write of churches that were dead and missionaries that had become defeatist. During that time of revival, foreign missionaries as well as Chinese Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary Katherine Crawford (1888-1979), another Southern Baptist missionary serving in Shandong at that time, writes that “from September, 1931 to June, 1932, at least twenty-four missionaries and many Chinese leaders had had a definite experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit” (Crawford, 1933, p. 40). Crawford describes her own experience as such:

He (the Holy Spirit) took right hold of me and shook me (physically) as I would shake a rag, then He opened my mouth so wide that my jaw bones seemed like they would break, and the room was filled with wind and it literally rushed into me until I felt that I would burst. This happened four or five times. Then a great burst of joyous laughter that was different from any laughter that I had ever experienced, came right from deep down inside me. This happened over and over (pp. 47-48).

The revival brought new life to churches in the region. It literally “revived spiritually-dead churches” which had stopped holding services (Culpepper, 1971, p. 62). Culpepper observes that churches that previously only met when missionaries would visit them were now having regular worship services and prayer meetings. Lay people led services as church attendance “increased many times within a few months.” Those who attended were “serious workers for Christ” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 62).

So extensive was the transformation in Shandong that one missionary noted changes in Pingdu, a notoriously unsafe part of the province. Pingdu was an area that missionaries had previously declined nightlong stays in because of the risk of possible kidnapping by bandits for ransom. The revival, however, transformed this community, and missionaries could sleep with their doors wide open (Hansen & Woodbridge, 2010, p. 150). In the spring of 1932, about 40 new Christians were baptized in Pingdu (Crawford, 1933, p. 35).

Revival in Schools and Hospitals in Shandong

Foreign missionaries had established schools, hospitals, and other facilities for civic use. These facilities became primary centres for the outflowing of God’s Spirit. At the seminary in Huangxian, where Dr. Culpepper’s Southern Baptist mission was located, there was concern about the declining student enrolment. However, at beginning of the term in October 1931, enrolment increased from four students to 25. Enrollment kept increasing year by year, and “within five or six years it had increased to more than 150” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 61).

Moreover, at the Southern Baptist mission schools in Huangxian, at the beginning of a new school year in a girls school that had about 600 students, one teacher reported, “when we arrived at the school, we found the girls in groups of two or three in a room, all in deep conviction of cheating on examinations, stealing peaches from the school orchard, lying to their parents and to others, and stealing pencils, pens, and money” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 42). There was a similar experience in the adjoining boys school as well. On seeing this situation, the principal of the boys school responded by inviting a local Chinese pastor as well as Culpepper, and together they organised twice-a-day meetings at the school chapel for ten days. Students from the two schools joined together in these meetings and filled the 1500-seat chapel to capacity. By the end of this time, the wooden floor of the chapel was tear-stained and all 600 of the girls and 900 of the one thousand boys became Christians (Culpepper, 1971, p. 43).

Culpepper (1971) tells the story of a boy whom he found lying under a bench at the back of the chapel. The boy was so deeply convicted of sin that he could not face himself or anyone else and, consequently, stayed under the bench. The boy said:

Mr. Culpepper, you don’t know me. I’m a communist. We have a secret communist cell here at the school. I’ve threatened to kill you and all the missionaries, and I’ve sworn to wipe out Christianity and burn your churches. When I heard about this revival, I thought the missionaries were just hypnotizing the students and that the concept of God was foolishness... (p. 44).

After the boy ended his confession he became “completely limp,” but he was eventually able to return to “normal” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 45). He accepted Christ as did other members of the communist clique. Culpepper observes that the communist cell was destroyed and while “about half of the members were saved during the meeting, the others left the school” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 45).

The revival reached Southern Baptist mission hospitals in Shandong as well. There are reports of nurses and patients accepting Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit (Culpepper, 1971, p. 57). The missionary hospital at Pingdu had a doctor who had graduated from a renowned missionary hospital. However, he was a sceptic of Christianity and, as such, said that he would believe only if two of his paralytic patients were healed. The patients he was referring to were women who had been paralytics for 18 and 28 years, respectively (Crawford, 1933, p. 58; Culpepper, 1971, p. 66). Both these women were miraculously healed, and the doctor, “trembling with fear and conviction, repented and accepted Christ” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 66).

The Maddry Challenge

There are several documented accounts of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Shandong specifically as well as North and East China generally. In particular, Western missionaries who were participants in these events have compiled noteworthy works that offer descriptions of the Shandong Revival. These works are moving, eyewitness accounts of miraculous healings along with dramatic changes and restorations in individuals, families, and communities. Previously fragile churches were also reenergized and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Missionaries such as Monsen, a Norwegian Lutheran, as well as Culpepper, Crawford, and Glass, all American Southern Baptists, have written accounts of the events of the Shandong Revival.

It is interesting to note that these missionaries came from Christian denominational backgrounds that typically eschewed emotionalism in Christian expression. With that in mind, perhaps the one of the most fascinating accounts of this revival comes from Dr. Charles Edward Maddry (1876-1962). In 1935, Maddry became the newly-elected secretary of the Southern Baptist’s Foreign Mission Board. When the accounts of what was happening in China reached the United States, there was suspicion and criticism. Culpepper (1971) writes that “some people began questioning the orthodoxy of our mission” (p. 77). Consequently, Maddry was sent to China and tasked with the responsibility of investigating the practices of the Southern Baptist mission in Shandong for perhaps what seemed to be unorthodox excesses of emotion. In a meeting held after his arrival in Yantai, Dr. Maddry set a challenge to his colleagues by saying, “Reports have come to America that the North China Mission has gone to extremes in this revival. My board has asked me to investigate. What do you have to say for yourselves?” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 77).

During this meeting, missionary after missionary came forward with testimony after testimony of what they had experienced during this time. At the end of the meeting, Maddry, who was in tears, said, “Brethren and sisters, I am going back home and tell my board that God has been walking in the midst of the North China Mission, and we had better go slow in criticizing them!” (Culpepper, 1971, p. 78). As a result of his trip to China, Maddry (1935) published an article in the Southern Baptist periodical *Home and Foreign Fields*. In this article, he writes:

A glorious revival is sweeping (the Southern Baptist missions of) Northern and Interior China, such as we have not seen in America in a hundred years. We have seen it and felt its power. It is a revival of fire and burning. Sin is being burned out of broken lives and men and women are being absolutely made over. The power of Christ has come to

grips with the power of Satan and it is a fearful conflict. Satan has held sway and dominion over China for unnumbered and weary centuries. His kingdom is suddenly being challenged and broken by the power of a risen and enthroned Christ (p. 6).

Conclusion

The modern story of Shandong is one of economic might in a new age of ‘Chinese capitalism’ (Peck & Zhang, 2018; Bello, 2019). The story of the Shandong Revival seems to be increasingly fading in memory. Perhaps one reason for this fading memory was the gruesome years of war that seemed to halt the revival. In 1937, in one of the key events leading up to the Second World War, Japanese Emperor Hirohito’s Imperial Army launched a full-scale and bloody invasion of Chiang Kai-shek’s China in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Japanese communists launched a war against Chinese nationalists, and Shandong Province along with its war-strategic Yellow River were at the heart of the conflict. The brutal scale of the war crimes against Chinese civilians in this war has led some to refer to it as the “Asian Holocaust” (Todd, 2016) or the “Forgotten Holocaust” (Kang, 1995). Sadly, what followed in the aftermath of the revival was decades of war and persecution of the Church in Shandong and elsewhere in China (Hattaway, 2022). After spending much of his life as a missionary in China, Hattaway (2022) writes, “as seems the case with many revivals throughout history, the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Shandong in the 1930s appears to have been part of God’s plan to strengthen His children before coming persecution” (pp. 98-99).

Despite wave after wave of religious persecution, it is a well-documented fact that Christianity has defied odds and grown unprecedentedly in China. Following the 1976 death of Mao Zedong and his Cultural Revolution, which was in part a brutal purge against Christianity and other ‘foreign’ religions, former British diplomat to China, Tony Lambert, writes, “No other church in the world has experienced between thirty-to-fifty-fold growth on such a scale in the short space of thirty years” (Lambert, 2006, p. 201). However, this growth of the Church has continued to be met with antagonism from the Chinese Communist Party. China’s current paramount leader, Xi Jinping, who is now president for life after the 2018 removal of presidential term-limits (BBC, 2018), is overtly critical of ‘foreign’ religions such as Christianity (The Guardian, 2015; Shellnutt, 2017). As President Xi continues to consolidate power, there has been an increasing persecution of the Church (ChinaAid Association, 2023).

Given this fact of increased persecution of the Church and what seems to be an uncertain future of ‘foreign’ religions in China, it is essential for us as contemporary Christians to jog our collective memory and encourage ourselves by remembering how our infinitely generous God lavishly poured out his Spirit powerfully in the Shandong Revival of 1927 to 1937. It ought to be encouraging to us that, just as God has poured out his Spirit and brought revival in the past, his extravagantly generous nature means that he is eager to pour out his Spirit and bring revival again. We Christians should therefore equip ourselves, just as Marie Monsen did a century ago, with unceasing prayer for revival.

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