

Catholic Universities as Missionary Spaces

Wilhelm Schmidt, Chen Yuan, and the Catholic University in Beijing

Abstract: Catholic Universities as Missionary Spaces. Wilhelm Schmidt, Chen Yuan, and the Catholic University in Beijing. This article examines the ‘missionary space’ of the *Catholic University of Beijing (Furen University)*, particularly studying how the Catholic visions of the Western missionary society in charge of the university, the *Society of the Divine Word*, negotiated with, cooperated, and ultimately came in conflict with the ideas of the Chinese faculty, embodied in the Chinese President of the university, Chen Yuan. It focuses on the moral and intellectual claims by both sides. I argue that moral claims mattered, and ultimately the Western missionary society lost its legitimacy due to actions that it took during and after the Second World War.

Key Words: Christianity in China, Catholic missions, universities, Wilhelm Schmidt, Chen Yuan

Introduction

In September 1935, Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), the prominent Austrian anthropologist, ethnologist and *Society of the Divine Word* (*Societas Verbi Divini*, SVD) priest, travelled to China. The country was the main stop in a broader tour of East Asia, which began in Japan and ended in the Philippines.¹ During his two-month stay in China, Wilhelm Schmidt gave a series of public lectures at several universities, including the *Catholic University in Beijing* (also known as *Furen University* 輔仁大學) and the *National Central University* (中央大學). He used his talks to introduce basic concepts in ethnology and its importance in a Chinese context.²

Wilhelm Schmidt had another, more important, investigative mission. The *Societas Verbi Divini* (SVD) had taken over the *Catholic University of Beijing* in

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1933 from the *American Benedictines*, who had encountered financial difficulties as a result of the Great Depression. Pope Pius XI. (1857–1939), who was impressed by Schmidt’s vision for Catholic education, entrusted him with the task of preparing a *memorandum* for how the university could improve its educational mission.³ Schmidt thus came to China to evaluate the faculty and administration of the university, examine department curricula, and provide recommendations for reforms. By the end of his trip, he produced a report that detailed his visions for reforming the ‘missionary space’ that the SVD had inherited.

The strict Catholic ideas of moral and spiritual education that Wilhelm Schmidt proposed came in direct conflict with those envisioned by Chen Yuan (1880–1971), the Chinese President of *Furen University*. As a prominent scholar of Chinese religion, trained in the Chinese classical tradition, Chen resisted many reforms that Schmidt and the SVD tried to implement. These tensions – between a universalist Catholic vision and a more Chinese nationalist one – lasted until 1952, when the Communist government ‘liberated’ *Furen University*, transforming it into the secular *Beijing Normal University* (北京師範大學). Chen Yuan remained the President of the newly formed institution, after publicly renouncing his ties with his former missionary colleagues and denouncing them as “Western imperialists”.

This article examines how Schmidt and Chen’s divergent visions about the purpose of education met in the ‘missionary space’ of *Furen University*. There, different voices negotiated, compromised, and cooperated with one another. The university acted as a ‘missionary space’ that facilitated fruitful cooperation between different ideologies. Before agreeing to take-over *Furen*, the SVD in the 19th century was one of the most vehement and vocal opponents to traditional Chinese society and Confucianism. After they accepted the responsibility of administering *Furen University*, SVD missionaries began to soften their critiques. Pressured by the Chinese administration, they altered their stance towards traditional Chinese society.

Yet, the university was not just a space for cooperation. It also was an ideological ‘battleground’, a site filled with tension and conflict. Both sides tried to assert their control over the youth of China – over its moral and spiritual education, and by extension, its future. Western missionaries and Chinese faculty had to compete with broader external *stimuli*: the increasing radicalization of the Chinese political sphere, and the instabilities of the 1930s and 1940s. Both tried to insulate their students from these problems, but failed. This article shows how Catholic universities, and missionary universities in general, were internally fragmented, contested ‘spaces’.

The interplay between internal and external pressures on Western missionary colleges in China has been studied widely in the historiography.⁴ The general historical narrative of the rise and fall of the Western Christian institutions of education

in China follows these broad contours: Christian colleges enjoyed a brief moment of success from the 1920s to the 1930s, as staff and students still believed that Christian education could strengthen the Chinese nation. As disillusionment with the Nationalist government widened during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and Chinese nationalist claims intensified, it became increasingly impossible for Sino-Western universities to survive. The story that I tell here follows these contours and it confirms the findings of scholars such as Jesse Lutz, Philip West, and Wen-hsin Yeh, who have argued that Western missionary colleges fostered a mutual understanding between Christian universalism and Chinese nationalism throughout the 1920s and 1930s. This alliance eventually broke down in the 1940s, as the Chinese political scene destabilized. Christian colleges, once sheltered from politics and much more of an isolated unit, became an increasingly radicalized political space, and cosmopolitan ideals lost to a form of Chinese nationalism that defined Western cosmopolitanism as an enemy.⁵ The historiography has so far primarily studied American Protestant ventures; this article makes a contribution by focusing on a German Catholic case.

I want to examine another dimension: *Furen University* was also a ‘space’ where competing moral claims – claims of how to mold and guide the Chinese youth – co-existed. Scholars have viewed the moral strictures of the Christian college as politics in disguise. In this article, while I do recognize these claims as political at heart, I argue that moral legitimacy, and rhetoric, mattered. The ‘battle’ over how to shape and protect the students – the competition over who could provide the better form of paternalism – was as much a moral as it was a political one. The ‘missionary space’ of the university was one where ideologies and moral legitimacy were equally at stake. By examining these disputes, a slightly different narrative emerges from one that focuses solely on the political conflicts within the institution. In this story, the missionary control of the university unraveled because of the missionary leadership’s ever-diminishing moral legitimacy, as a result of specific actions that the missionaries took. They emerge, then, less as victims: the Western Catholic missionaries were expelled from China because of the moral vision they advanced, in turn shaping the political choices they made. In this narrative, even though the missionaries were no less swept up in the larger forces of history, they were architects of their own fate, responsible for their own demise.

Wilhelm Schmidt and the *Kulturkreis*

In order to understand the moral vision that Wilhelm Schmidt and the SVD represented, let us first turn to a brief intellectual biography of the protagonist. Schmidt

was a leading member in what Suzanne Marchand has called “a counter-reformation in ethnology”, an attempt by German-speaking – and moreover, Austrian – anthropologists and ethnologists who embraced the lessons of modern science in order to “reorient it to the ends of the church” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁶ Schmidt, who was born in Germany in 1868 and joined the SVD at the age of fifteen, belonged to a ‘school’ of German-speaking anthropologists called the *Kulturkreislehre*.⁷ They challenged the idea of a single-track Darwinian evolutionary model. Instead, the anthropologists posited that several “cultural circles” (*Kulturkreise*) developed independently of one another and had their own “spiritual integrity”.⁸ Yet, Wilhelm Schmidt was by no means a cultural relativist. Drawing on the Scottish scholar Andrew Lang’s (1844–1912) concept of “primitive monotheism”, Wilhelm Schmidt sought to uncover how different cultures shared the idea of a single, monotheistic god.⁹ Schmidt promoted the findings of the *Kulturkreislehre* in the journal *Anthropos*, which became one of Central Europe’s most important publications of anthropology.¹⁰ His influence at the time should not be understated. Suzanne Marchand argues,

“In his ecosystem, Schmidt, who dominated Austrian ethnology until his death in 1954, was the equivalent of Franz Boas plus Father Coughlin, or Marcel Mauss plus Jacques Maritain. His modernist activism revived a dormant tradition of missionary ethnography and made *Kulturkreislehre* the cultural anthropology of choice in Catholic Central Europe.”¹¹

Wilhelm Schmidt rose in the Austrian academic ranks, eventually gaining control, along with his friend Wilhelm Koppers, of the Institute for Anthropology at the University of Vienna in 1927. Besides his academic work, he dedicated his energies to promoting his ideas beyond that of anthropological circles. As Marchand states, Wilhelm Schmidt was part of a generation of Austrian Catholic elites that emerged in the late 19th century as self-assertive, confident, and tried to penetrate all different arenas of political, social and religious life. Wilhelm Schmidt adopted the role of a public intellectual with *gusto*. In 1923, he was granted an audience with Pope Pius XI. Pius XI. was so impressed by Schmidt that he decided to subsidize *Anthropos* and appointed Schmidt director of the *Lateran Ethnology Museum* in 1926.¹² Schmidt also used his status, as well as his pulpit, to further the program and the ideas of the *Kulturkreislehre*.¹³ Moreover, by the early 1930s, he – a lifelong monarchist and Germanophile – became increasingly concerned with the broader rising threat of the Left in Europe and was convinced that liberalism had lost political and ideological legitimacy. He “blamed incipient Western degeneracy [...] chiefly on declining Catholicism and the advent of Bolshevism, whose way had been prepared by liberalism”.¹⁴ For Schmidt, liberalism and modern society had created an ato-

mized individual and left “thousands of young men broken both inwardly and outwardly by these dramatic shifts and unregulated freedom, and the German people as a whole have suffered greatly from these ideas”.¹⁵ On these grounds, he foresaw Catholic universities as playing a fundamental part in providing a moral, intellectual, and political unity to counteract this fragmented reality.¹⁶ Wilhelm Schmidt’s vision for a Catholic university was thus one of strict discipline, and hierarchical order, unifying knowledge and faith.

The Societas Verbi Divini and Furen University

Wilhelm Schmidt hoped to implement his vision not only in Germany, but throughout the world. The *Societas Verbi Divini*’s decision to run *Furen University* presented an opportunity to extend it abroad. In 1933, his missionary organization inherited this institution by chance. This first Pontifical University in China was established in 1924 by the Vatican *Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith*. The idea for this university dated back to 1912, when two influential Chinese Catholic intellectuals, Ying Lianzhi (1867–1926) and Ma Xiangbo (1840–1939), petitioned Pope Pius X. (1835–1914), asking him to establish a Catholic University in Beijing. In their letter, Ying and Ma argued that China needed institutions of Christian higher education, in order to help Catholicism spread further, since Catholics made up less than one percent of the total population.¹⁷ While waiting for a response, they founded a society, a book-reading club, named *Furen Society*, a society for “cultivating virtue.” Its first incarnation was a small coterie of intellectuals and pupils in the personal circles of Ying and Ma, with the explicit purpose of providing Catholics with a rigorous education in both modern science and the Chinese classics. Both Ying and Ma resisted the complete rejection of the Confucian tradition, believing that elements of traditional Chinese education could be synthesized with Western ideas. Ma and Ying’s reputations as respected Catholic reformers and scholars attracted bright young students, including non-Catholics such as Chen Yuan, and the society soon expanded.¹⁸ It took another thirteen years before the *Catholic University* in Beijing was established.¹⁹ Barry O’Toole, a seminary professor and oblate of the Archabby of St. Vincent, aggressively lobbied for responsibility of administering the university, and the Vatican entrusted the *American Benedictines* with running the institution.

From the beginning, the founders conceived of *Furen University* as a Sino-Western joint venture. Western and Chinese academics were both represented in the university administration. Even though the American missionary society controlled the purse-strings – and the personnel and curricular decisions as well – the Chinese Chen Yuan became president of the university.²⁰ The university’s bureaucratic divisi-

ons reveal its ideological divides. Chen was not a Catholic, but he provided the aura of intellectual legitimacy to Chinese academia and helped to attract other Chinese intellectuals to join the faculty. An American missionary, on the other hand, occupied the position of the rector, and was particularly responsible for overseeing the dormitories and student behavior. Western missionaries were thus in charge of the moral education and discipline of the students.

Because of *Furen University's* previous roots as an institution of classical learning and the influence of Chen Yuan, it had a strong faculty in classical Chinese. For the eight years that they ran the university, the *Benedictines* developed both the curriculum and school infrastructure. They expanded the number of course offerings, hoping to provide a complete training in Western and Chinese classical learning. Furthermore, they built new dormitories and facilities to accommodate more students. These efforts were largely successful, and the university grew from an institution that had 23 students in its first year of operation to more than 600 by the 1930s.²¹ This over-expansion, coupled with the financial devastation wreaked by the Great Depression, forced the *Benedictines* into financial insolvency. The Vatican and the *Propaganda Fide* turned to the SVD to alleviate their economic misfortune. The SVD therefore took over a university that was in the midst of major transformations.

The Chinese professors were immediately skeptical of this takeover. Primarily, they were afraid that the university would lose its “American character” and thus decrease the amount of English instruction, which Chinese lecturers and students saw as having more global relevance. The new rector of the university, the SVD Father Joseph Murphy (1895–1935), reported to the leadership of its organization that

“the call for American Fathers is very persistent [...] the Chinese wasted no time in making it known to him that they thought that the number of American Fathers here was too small.”²²

Therefore, the Chinese faculty requested the SVD to recruit priests and other members from its American branch in order to continue to offer English classes. The Chinese members of the university were more concerned about the impact that this takeover would have on broader cultural and institutional shifts within the university. Rector Murphy noted that the Chinese faculty members were “afraid of the ‘German discipline’.”²³ Above all, they were concerned about the National Socialist party and its widening grips on all aspects of German society. The rector reported that the faculty and the administration “suspect that the situation in Germany is becoming darker all the time, for the reports that reach us from Swiss newspapers or from travellers are anything but encouraging.”²⁴ There was fear that the German government would make demands on the SVD administration, and force German to

be the official language of the school.²⁵ Meanwhile, the SVD Superior General Josef Grendel (1878–1951) tried to quell these concerns:

“We are and remain a Catholic university, where Americans and Germans work and try to bring honor to their Fatherlands. If one or the other country wants to support our work, they are of course more than welcome. But if they also seek certain commitments or obligations from us, or if they make demands, we must refuse them with politeness and with complete determination.”²⁶

Grendel had to contend with and mollify not only Chinese ambivalence and distrust; the same amount of skepticism towards the university administration spread throughout the SVD itself. Some members of the missionary leadership feared the “American character” of the institution, and were afraid that they would not be able to fundamentally change its culture.²⁷ They also hoped that their missionary society would remain and continue to be primarily German in constitution.

Agreeing to enter *Furen University* meant a radical shift in the missionary society’s tactics and outlook. In the 19th century, the SVD embraced the *Dominican* position in the *Rites Controversy* of ‘direct’ evangelization – where the primary missionary method came through church building and street preaching in poorer and rural areas – as opposed to the *Jesuit* method of ‘indirect’ mission, which meant a sustained engagement with the local *literati* and more educated, gentry classes.²⁸ After the First World War, influenced by the *Sacred Congregation of the Faith*, the SVD increasingly adopted a *Jesuit* line of accommodation. Its leadership’s decision to take over *Furen* marked a further embrace of this attempt, although some missionaries worried that the transition to academic administration would detract them from their true calling. One warned the SVD leadership that missionaries in Henan were

“sending reports back to the seminarians [...] that the university work is not as important as the mission work, that it is interfering with their work, etc. etc. From what I hear it is causing uneasiness among the seminarians [...] Personally I know they are quite justified in expressing their own likings and following their inclinations, but where this is done to injure another work enjoying the same approval of the Church and the recommendation of the Holy Father, that seems to go beyond the proper bounds.”²⁹

The decision to inhabit the ‘missionary space’ of *Furen University* was characterized by dissension, doubt, and skepticism. Even though some in the SVD were enthusiastic about the transition to a different type of missionary work, many questioned it. The conflicts over the ‘German’ or ‘American’ nature of the university persisted

throughout the SVD's tenure. Moreover, the missionary society internally was split on the question of whether to make this step into higher education. Thus, the takeover was marked with a "gloom that descends on everybody here in the first weeks and months, so much to be done, so few men to do it, so many features in the work that offend the Catholic viewpoint."³⁰ From the beginning, the SVD had to cope with a variety of dissenting opinions, distrust, and ambivalence, and the university as a 'missionary space' was a place of vigorous contestation, with a panoply of agendas and visions for the future work.

Schmidt's Memorandum

Wilhelm Schmidt's investigative trip to *Furen University* in Beijing was partly designed to counter this skepticism and to spark a commitment within the missionary society to its reorientation towards higher education. In his *memorandum*, Schmidt hoped to convince his missionary society that universities had an essential part to play for the future of a global Catholic revival. It was also a chance to further promote his *Kulturkreis* ideas. Schmidt started his *memorandum* by pointing to the different cultural origins of China and Japan. While both had to contend with the intrusion of the West, and the challenge of a modern "materialist-technical worldview", the two civilizations had formed different responses. The Chinese had much more of an 'ancient' civilization, and therefore continued to protect the "ideological-moral factors of real culture",³¹ while Japan did not possess a civilization that could defend against the encroachment of "European-American technical culture". Yet, according to Schmidt, Japan's unabashed embrace of Western economic and military insights helped to establish its geo-political dominance in Asia. From his perspective, China had much in common with the Catholic Church. They both shared an "old, conservative culture" that provided an alternative to an anti-religious "modern culture and consciousness".³² This type of anti-religious thinking posed not only a threat to worldwide Christendom, but to the survival of the ancient traditions of Confucianism as well. Schmidt commented that even many "highly-respected Chinese pagans" recognized that the Catholic Church could be an ally in this attempt to protect traditional culture from the seemingly unstoppable onslaught of Western materialism.³³ He argued that Catholicism had failed to defend its conservative intellectual brethren, due to the church's tactical misstep in its approach to missions in China. Catholic missionaries, like the SVD, had focused too much on preaching and spreading the gospel in poor, rural areas. Thus, they made few inroads with richer landholders, urban elites, the middle class, and intellectuals. Catholics also refused to reach out and make bridges with the "ancient richness of

Chinese culture”. As a result, there were “too few avenues and resources available, to further present Catholic belief, morality, and social teaching in all of its beauty, grandeur, and power in a Chinese garb”.³⁴

Also, there was a systemic problem in the training of Western Catholic missionaries. Wilhelm Schmidt noted that they could not read basic Chinese newspapers. The inability to read and write the common language isolated them from a broader realm of Chinese public intellectual discourses; they could not engage or rebut the ideas of prominent thinkers. Chinese clergy did not fare well: There were too few active Chinese clericalists, and the ordained priests received inadequate education in the missionary seminaries. Often, local Catholic clergy could not pass basic exams in Chinese, and were thus unable to participate in a broader intellectual culture. A Chinese Catholic University, Schmidt argued, could help remedy this situation, by providing language training for both Western missionaries and Chinese clergy; it would be a space where Western knowledge and expertise could be rooted in a Chinese context.³⁵ However, for him, imparting technical expertise and intellectual knowledge was not the most important mission of a Catholic University in China. Its more significant calling was “to effectively eradicate the state of evil” that threatened the country. Its responsibility was first and foremost to produce students with a moral and spiritual bedrock that defended against the advance of the ‘Red Revolution.’³⁶ By protecting the Chinese from “the disastrous damages that this new pagan culture has inflicted on it”, such a university would help to “strengthen the Catholic Church across the world.”³⁷ Schmidt envisioned that it would elevate the intellectual rigor of the already-Catholic students, in order to prepare them to engage with the arguments and attacks from the “new pagan” culture. The University could also attract a new generation of non Catholic Students. For him, this university should become an arm of the missions in China, a major player at the front of an unprecedented global battle for the “soul of modern society”. It was meant to be a cosmopolitan, modern space that could present a “unified Catholic worldview.”³⁸

Schmidt hoped to create this new Catholic culture through institutional and curricular reforms at *Furen University*. The most urgent institutional issue was the question of the religious faith of the staff. He noted that there were too few Catholic professors amongst the faculty and thought that the university would be better served if it had a higher rate of Catholic personnel.³⁹ The question of increasing the amount of Catholic lecturers became a heavily debated issue among the SVD. The Rector Joseph Murphy noted that too many of the Chinese Catholic professors lacked proper educational training. They were oftentimes poor scholars, uninspired teachers, or both. He complained that this under-qualified staff felt “entitled” to be employed at the university solely due to their religious faith.⁴⁰ Murphy reported:

“So it goes with so many of these Catholic Chinese scholars. They try to teach. They fail. The next move: they go over to the Apostolic Delegation or to the Commission Synodalis, and bring all sorts of complaints against [Furen University]. It’s the old story of creating discord by playing with both parties in a deal.”⁴¹

The SVD leadership feared that religious favoritism would foment a “rivalry” between Catholic and non-Catholic Chinese professors, as non-Catholic faculty members would be dissatisfied with the employment of Catholic professors with lesser academic credentials.⁴² The superior general Josef Grendel argued, “in certain subjects, the employment of pagans is not only understandable, but would actually further unite and bring out the Catholic character of our university.”⁴³ Nonetheless, he was still worried that the comparative brilliance of non-Catholic personnel would harm the mission of the university. So he suggested to curtail the working hours of a Protestant professor, who was “extremely popular” among the students, warning, “it would work unfavorably to our mission, if such a popular professor taught so regularly in front of them.”⁴⁴

Other than trying to control personnel decisions, the SVD also wanted to redefine the curricular direction of the university. While they recognized its historical roots as focusing predominantly on classical Chinese learning, they hoped to shed what they saw as an overemphasis on ancient Chinese teachings. In his *memorandum*, Wilhelm Schmidt commented that “even though it is understandable that a Chinese institute of higher learning should focus on the study of Chinese, the number of professors and instructors in the department of Chinese literature was too high.”⁴⁵ Instead, he believed that the university should push the Chinese faculty to branch out its teaching into other areas, such as music, art and architecture, and more historical avenues. As opposed to other Western-style colleges, which focused on educating students in science and engineering, he argued that the new Catholic university in Beijing should specialize in the “social and moral sciences, in order to produce moral and upstanding men, who can understand how to rule the country well,”⁴⁶ and he continued, “the specialty of the Catholic University is, in particular, the development of the philosophy and other humanistic disciplines. Even non-Catholics expect this from us.”⁴⁷

Above all, Wilhelm Schmidt and the SVD believed that *Furen University* should teach Western philosophy, which would provide the students with a solid moral foundation, and thus should lie at the heart of the academic training:

“Philosophy must occupy a central place in the worldview of our curriculum; all students in all disciplines should be required to take at least some elementary classes in philosophy.”⁴⁸

He believed that a theological department was urgently needed, and proposed the immediate establishment of a *Pontifical Faculty of Theology*. It could provide further theological training for indigenous Chinese clergy and would have the even more important goal of “cultivating deeper ties between Occidental and Chinese philosophy and culture, so that new points of view on Catholic theology can emerge.”⁴⁹ But ultimately, Schmidt argued that what lay at the center of the success of this training was “good discipline and strict moral education”. He believed that the dorms, as an important space of student life, would have to be tightly controlled and managed. Each dorm should have at least two prefects, in order to “have the students by their hand and under our supervision”. After a period of time the students could earn a greater degree of “self-government”.⁵⁰

Wilhelm Schmidt and the SVD hoped to mold *Furen University* into a space that the missionaries could tightly control and manage. The goal of the institution was to create upstanding moral Catholic youth, who were versed in disciplines other than those of science and technology. He wished to form a Catholic university that prioritized humanistic education, so that Chinese and Western could meet and create new syntheses from new and traditional forms of learning. Schmidt envisioned the university as a new ‘space’ to expand the SVD’s missionary work. It should be an international place, and a unique landing ground for the Catholic Church – whether it adopted a universalistic or a particular approach to education was a secondary question. Ultimately, he meant *Furen University* in Beijing to be a defensive space, a ‘bulwark’ against the encroachments of international communism in a global battle between atheism and Catholicism, materialism and religion.

Chen Yuan’s Vision for the University

Schmidt and the SVD’s attempts to extend its control over *Furen University* created tensions with the Chinese administration and leadership. In particular, the intended reforms came into conflict with the Chinese president Chen Yuan’s vision for higher education. Indeed, he shared Schmidt’s belief in the centrality of the university as a space that could provide moral guidance and spiritual rejuvenation for the Chinese youth. Chen, however, did not support the complete Westernization of the Chinese youth: he had spent much of his academic career criticizing Western attacks on traditional Chinese learning. To him, the SVD’s plans to diminish the amount of Chinese language instruction, its attempts to control faculty appointments, and its desire to circumscribe student morality embodied a persistent missionary chauvinism that was dismissive of Chinese cultures and traditions.

Born in 1880 in Guangdong, Chen Yuan belonged to a generation of intellectuals who came of age too late to participate in the trailblazing reform movements of Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Kang Youwei (1858–1927), but who were a decade too old to consider themselves fully encamped in the *May 4th radicalism* of Hu Shi (1891–1962) and Fu Sinian (1896–1950). His cohort “was transitional, and knew itself to be so”.⁵¹ Chen was educated in the waning days of the Qing empire, just as the traditional Chinese examination system was coming under attack and bureaucratic positions were diminishing. Early in his life, he went through several careers – first as a journalist, then as a medical doctor. After the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, he tried his hand in the political arena, when he was elected to the first Chinese parliament, representing Guangdong as a “revolutionary journalist”. But, like the early Republican parliament, his career as a politician was short lived. In 1914, General Yuan Shikai (1859–1916) dissolved the parliament, and one year later declared himself the new emperor of China. Chen’s short political career introduced him to the Catholic intellectuals Ma Xiangbo and Ying Lianzhi, as they formed an alliance that protested Yuan’s attempt to establish Confucianism as a state religion. They argued that the new Chinese Republic should be established on principles of religious freedom and tolerance.

The battle over the ‘soul of China’ was rooted in late Qing and early Republican anxieties about threats to China’s sovereignty. During the late Qing and early Republican period, Chinese intellectuals saw the decline of Qing geopolitical power and its humiliation on a global stage as a spiritual crisis. Thinkers, such as Kang Youwei, tried to revive Confucianism, calling for a return to its original ideas. Yuan Shikai picked up on this movement in the early 20th century, and tried to use this renewal of interest in Confucian ideas to legitimate his own rule. As patriotic Catholics, Ma and Ying believed that their religion would rescue the nation from its spiritual doldrums, but in order for Catholicism to thrive, a religiously tolerant Chinese state was needed. Their dreams of establishing a culturally tolerant nation soon evaporated. After witnessing Yuan Shikai’s attempt to re-establish an empire and the nation’s quick descent into warlordism, Chen left the political realm embittered and disillusioned. He instead turned to academia and public education in order to fulfill his aspirations of “saving the nation”. Almost single-handedly, he created the study of comparative religion in Chinese. Focusing mostly on the Yuan dynasty, he published a series of ground-breaking works on the entrance of various foreign religions, such as Christianity, Manicheism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam, into China.⁵² For him, the history of the Yuan dynasty provided an important political lesson to the young Republic. In his study of the entrance of Catholicism into China during that time, he argued that the dynasty flourished when it experienced a period of unprecedented religious toleration. His historical work served as a veiled critique of politicians and

warlords who wanted to institute an official state religion; he hoped for the development of a constitutional framework that would protect the right of religious freedom in the newly formed republic.⁵³

Yet, Chen Yuan's prescriptions regarding the need for religious freedom in the state were ancillary to a deeper occupation. His works were driven by a question of cultural adaptation: why had Buddhism, a foreign religion, succeeded in 'becoming Chinese' after the Tang dynasty, whereas religions like Christianity failed to indigenize? Like Schmidt, he explored the question of why Catholicism had, despite the initial success of the Jesuits, failed to gain a larger following in China. Chen lionized Matteo Ricci and the early Jesuit missions of the 16th century. For Chen, Ricci's mission had succeeded because he "was a devoted student of Chinese culture. Ricci loved the Chinese language, and he truly understood Chinese culture."⁵⁴ Ricci had admired Confucian scholars, and as a result Chinese intellectuals in a position of power tended to favor his teachings. Also, he brought Western science to China, which further enhanced his standing with educated Chinese.⁵⁵ Following Chen's interpretations, the popularity of Catholic missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasty for the most part stemmed from a mutual admiration between the Jesuits and court officials, which degenerated into missionary *hybris* after Ricci.⁵⁶

For Chen Ricci's successors denigrated the value of ancient Chinese traditions, this decline of an accommodationist stance began with the influx of *Dominican* missionaries, who "attacked the Jesuit method of evangelization and did not understand or respect Chinese culture."⁵⁷ The Vatican adopted the *Dominican* line of non-accommodation, which led to a ban on Christianity in China. To Chen, Western missionary attacks on Chinese culture never relented, but instead found new and virulent expressions in the mid-19th century, due to the rise of Western imperialist expansion:

"Because of China's weakening national power, it has become difficult for Westerners to be attracted to studying Chinese culture."⁵⁸

This form of missionary arrogance, for him, was particularly evident within the Protestant missionary enterprise that had spread rapidly throughout China. Protestant missionaries refused to engage with traditional Chinese ideas; they barely respected and spoke Chinese. Thus, Chen Yuan noted, "I still believe that Protestant culture has not yet been able to assimilate into Chinese culture."⁵⁹ If Christian missionaries did not stop dismissing Chinese traditions, he argued, Christianity would remain marginalized and rejected by a large swath of the Chinese society.

In their analysis of the failure of Christianity in China, Chen and Schmidt shared common ground. They agreed that the failure could mostly be blamed on

the Western missionary enterprise. Western missionaries were not able to appreciate the grand Confucian and literary traditions of China, leading to a total alienation from local elites. For both Chen and Schmidt, the onus for reforms lay with the missionaries themselves: they needed to reassess and re-think their tactics. But the assumptions that drove Chen Yuan's and Wilhelm Schmidt's critiques were different. Schmidt wanted to make Christianity more Chinese in order to serve the greater goal of converting the whole country to Catholicism. Chen shared his vision of creating *Furen University* as a 'missionary space' to mold Chinese youth into cosmopolitan citizens. However, for Chen, Catholicism was only one religion among others. He framed the history of Catholicism in China within a broader narrative of religious toleration, and sought to understand how Chinese culture could provide a broader umbrella for the co-existence of different beliefs. His ideal of an engaged Chinese citizen, working for a culturally pluralistic state, teetered along the line towards a form of religious and moral relativism that Wilhelm Schmidt rejected.

A Fragile Unity

Despite a fundamental clash between ideas, the Chinese faculty and the Western missionaries attempted – at least on the surface – to reconcile these two visions during the first several years of the SVD's administration of *Furen University*. The missionaries were eager to demonstrate that they were willing to cede control to Chen Yuan and the Chinese faculty. Their leadership assured Chen that they were committed to make “wholly a Chinese university”, and the administration was prepared to transfer the control completely to “the hands of learned Catholic Chinese”.⁶⁰ Despite tensions over curricular reforms and personnel decisions, the missionaries and the faculty worked together in an alliance. Yet, these fragile relations were tested as the Sino-Japanese War escalated. After the *Mukden incident* of 1937, Japanese troops occupied Beijing and established the *Chinese Provisional Government*. The occupation posed a difficult problem for the Christian university. All Chinese colleges faced the options of accepting Japanese rule and closing their doors or moving away from the occupied eastern areas of China. For the most part, they chose to migrate to the interior of the country.⁶¹ Christian colleges, on the other hand, had more leverage. They wanted to obtain immunity from occupation with their foreign status, and as a consequence hoped to remain open and independent from the Japanese Occupiers.⁶² The SVD leadership decided to keep its doors open, and *Furen University*, along with the American-run *Yenching University*, remained free of Japanese control.⁶³ *Furen University* even expanded its enrollment to female students and became a safe haven for professors who could not move south to continue their teaching.⁶⁴

In order to keep its operations afloat, the missionary society had to appease and cooperate with the Japanese. The SVD leadership tried to maintain friendly ties throughout the war, and the new rector Rudolf Rahmann invited Japanese officials to dinner on multiple occasions.⁶⁵ In 1938, he signed an agreement with the Japanese embassy, promising to outlaw the anti-Japanese and anti-Chinese provisional government student movements from the university. The missionaries also pledged to accept Japanese students, to treat them “equally”, and eventually expand their faculty to include Japanese scholars.⁶⁶ These agreements with the Japanese government were justified as service the best interests of the university. Chen Yuan, reminiscing of the time, wrote proudly that *Furen University* was one of the only institutions of higher education that continued to operate during the wartime period.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this decision was a fatal miscalculation. By deciding to stay open and appease the Japanese authorities, the institution was forever tainted with the stain of ‘collaboration.’⁶⁸ After the war, Chinese nationalist movements did not forget and launched assaults on the university for its wartime behavior. The first group to attack the institution was the Nationalist (*Guomindang*) government. In 1946, the *Ministry of Education* and local courts initiated an investigation, accusing a number of faculty members and students at *Furen University* of collaborating with the Japanese. They charged the university with helping the Japanese and harboring “Japanese spies”.⁶⁹ Chen Yuan and the SVD missionaries united against these external threats, issuing various statements and providing documentation that tried to prove that the institution and its members had “valiantly resisted the Japanese during the eight years of war”.⁷⁰ Together with the administration the president signed statements guaranteeing that the accused were not “traitors to the Han Chinese.”⁷¹

The Union Breaks

While the Western missionaries and the Chinese administrators created a united front against external attacks, this unity broke down when it came to internal school matters of disciplining the students, especially when they were suspected of having Communist sympathies. The extent of discipline to which students should be subjected caused enduring tensions. Often, conflicts arose over juvenile issues of personal hygiene and sanitation. In 1946, the new rector, Harold Rigney, chastised the Chinese students, noting,

“nowhere on the five continents I had visited have I seen such a dirty dormitory, where university students not only totally disregard cleanliness but spit on the wall and in some instances urinate in the cuspidors and against

the wall in the corridors. I told the president that such offenses should not be tolerated, but rather be punished by dismissal⁷²

For the SVD missionaries, slovenliness symbolized a deficiency in moral discipline and the increasingly loose hold that the missionary leaders had on the university. Rigney lamented,

“the SVD has lost a great deal of control over the university, especially during the last years. As a result, much inefficiency has crept in, and a lack of Catholic spirit prevails.”⁷³

Chen Yuan defended the students, arguing that the rector and his priests were “being too harsh and dictatorial.”⁷⁴ In various instances, the president was pushed to mediate between the students and the missionaries. He felt that the Western missionaries failed to grasp the rapidly changing Chinese political and cultural landscape. He criticized them for acting in a draconian manner, which in turn offended the rector and the other missionaries.⁷⁵

Most troubling to the SVD missionaries was the increasing amount of leftist radicalism on the campus. The four short years between the end of the Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent Communist takeover of *Furen University* was a period of intense radicalization and politicization of the student population. Demonstrations and strikes were frequent throughout Beijing and Shanghai, as the students increasingly lost faith in the Nationalist government’s efficacy.⁷⁶ Neither was the *Catholic university in Beijing* immune to the rising tide of student unrest. *Furen* witnessed a series of demonstrations, criticizing their university as a “poisonous environment that mixes classical fascism and feudalism.”⁷⁷ On the 19th of August, 1948, the nationalist police surrounded the university and the student dormitories to arrest ten “professional Communist agitators” and fourteen other students who allegedly harbored them. This was part of larger governmental actions aimed at arresting suspected Communists throughout the country.⁷⁸ This crackdown forced hundreds of students from multiple universities to flee Shanghai and Beijing.

The differences in response between the Chinese faculty and the Western missionaries reveal their different political allegiances. Furious about the police raid, Chen Yuan and other Chinese members of the staff vocally “objected to the police entering the dormitories in order to arrest the students.”⁷⁹ As a result, the president evinced an increasing amount of sympathy for the Communists and leftist students.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the rector Harold Rigney, along with other SVD missionaries, encouraged the Nationalist authorities to enter the university. He later reported that the schools were “cursed by such students”, and argued that to ban the nationalist autho-

rities from entering would be akin to foreign missionaries claiming extraterritorial powers; all territories on the school should be subject to state inspection.⁸¹

It was precisely the over-reach by the Nationalist government that incensed the Chinese faculty and snapped the fragile alliance between the president Chen Yuan and the Western missionaries. The cooperation between the Chinese faculty and the SVD collapsed. For the missionaries, the threat of Communist revolution was real and serious. Wilhelm Schmidt had already warned about this political ideology in 1933. On the other hand, Chen Yuan and the Chinese members of the institution had always envisioned the formation of a pluralistic, tolerant state. To them, the Nationalist government did not provide the type of leadership that they wanted. Ultimately, the Communist victory destroyed any hopes of a continued alliance between the Western missionaries and the Chinese faculty. In January 1949, as Nationalists helped other intellectuals evacuate from China, Chen Yuan refused to leave. Instead, he sided with the student protestors, and welcomed the Communist *People's Liberation Army* entrance into Beijing in February of 1949.⁸² In his public “self-criticism” released in the *Guangming Daily Newspaper* he disassociated himself in 1952 with the SVD missionaries, calling them “foreign imperialists” who “told me nothing, and I was only a president in name.”⁸³

Conclusion

Of course, Chen Yuan was revising his historical record for politically expedient purposes: He was far from the disengaged, uninterested scholar he later presented himself. His disassociation with the SVD was an effort to save his own political skin. By calling himself a ‘puppet’ of the “missionary imperialists”, he converted, publicly at least, to the new faith of Communism Period here. *Furen University* transformed from a religious ‘missionary space’ to its new secular guise as *Beijing Normal University*, and Chen Yuan remained president, tasked with guiding the next generation of educators into a new moral universe. Regardless of his actual administrative and intellectual record, he was able to point to his consistency in one area: his nationalism. Chen could claim that at heart he had always been committed to strengthening the Chinese state. His early twentieth century belief held that Catholicism and religious pluralism could save the nation – but now he knew that he was misguided, and that he had seen the ‘light of Communist salvation.’⁸⁴

The missionaries, on the other hand, did not have the same luxury of the Chinese nationalist’s malleability. Their goal all along was to make China Catholic. Now that Catholicism was, according to the Communist regime, antithetical to strengthening the nation, the missionary’s previous claims were nothing but hollow rhetoric. In the

1920s and 1930s, despite criticisms from the anti-Christian left, the dream of a vibrant Catholic community in service of the Chinese nation still seemed viable. Many intellectuals had believed that it was possible to educate students to work towards the creation of a democratic, religiously tolerant Chinese state. And the Western missionaries had been sure that they could establish a Chinese Catholic institution educating students who were morally upstanding and intellectually trained. Before the Sino-Japanese war, the University was a vibrant ‘missionary space’, a space where competing ideologies negotiated, argued, and ultimately coexisted.

The case of *Furen University* shows that while there were divergent political and ideological interpretations of how a Christian university in China should operate, the issue that inspired most disagreements between Western missionaries and the Chinese faculty was the legislation of student morality. While the missionaries, believed in strict moral discipline cleanliness, order, and submission to hierarchy, the Chinese staff and students saw this as missionary arrogance. The Catholic form of religious discipline lost its legitimacy when it ‘collaborated’ with the Japanese occupation. Communists pointed to the missionary society’s various political missteps as proof of their threat to Chinese Sovereignty. The Chinese persons in charge and students at *Furen University* turned to the new Communist regime with the hopes of finally fulfilling their long-held idea of a strong, religious pluralistic state. This government proved to be fatal to those ideals. The pluralistic and religiously tolerant nation that Chen Yuan once dreamed of disappeared into oblivion, and with it, the ‘missionary space’ that Wilhelm Schmidt and the SVD once hoped to create with the Catholic university in Beijing faded into a fleeting illusion.

Notes

- 1 Archivum Generalatus SVD (AG), Rome, 641/1934–1936: Letter from Josef Grendel to Joseph Murphy, March 9, 1935. Hereafter referred to as AG. Some of the pages in the archives are not numbered, I have provided page numbers when they are available.
- 2 AG 641/1935–1937: Drafts of Schmidt’s lectures: Kirche, Mission, katholische Aktion und die katholischen Gebildeten Chinas; Two introductory lectures held at the Catholic University Peking, China, September 1935.
- 3 See: Suzanne Marchand, Priest Among Pygmies: Wilhelm Schmidt and the Counter-Reformation in Austrian Ethnology, in: H. Glenn Penny/Matti Bunzl, eds., Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire, Ann Arbor 2003, 283-316.
- 4 The seminal study is Jessie Lutz, Gregory, China and the Christian Colleges, 1850–1950, Ithaca 1971. For individual studies see: Philip West, Yenching University and Sino-Western relations, 1916–1952, Cambridge 1976. See also Wen-Hsin Yeh, The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919–1937, Cambridge 1990.
- 5 See: West, Yenching University, 247-48.
- 6 The best work that provides a context and overview is Marchand, Priest Among Pygmies. Biographies of Schmidt: Ernest Brandewie, Wilhelm Schmidt and the Origin of the Idea of God, Lanham

- 1983; Ernest Brandewie, *When Giants Walked the Earth: The Life and Times of Wilhelm Schmidt*, SVD, Fribourg 1990.
- 7 The group loosely included the work of Bernhard Ankermann, Fritz Graebner, who inherited ideas from Friedrich Ratzel and Leo Froebenius.
 - 8 Marchand, *Priest Among Pygmies*, 287.
 - 9 Andrew Lang argued for the existence of monotheism „even within primitive“ societies, rebutting the prevailing assumption in the anthropological literature that monotheism was a more advanced form of religious belief, and primitive societies evolved from polytheistic societies into monotheistic ones. See: Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion*, London 1898.
 - 10 Marchand, *Priest Among Pygmies*, 297.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 308.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 307.
 - 13 Marchand also vividly portrays Schmidt’s tyrannical and dictatorial nature when it came to academic disputes, as he prevented dissenting opinions from gaining position in the various anthropological institutes that he headed. See: *Ibid.*, 309.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 311.
 - 15 Wilhelm Schmidt, *Die Grundgedanken der katholischen Universität für die Länder deutscher Zunge*. II, in: *Schönere Zukunft* 52 (1934), 1374.
 - 16 *Ibid.*
 - 17 The best book in English on Ma Xiangbo is Ruth Hayhoe/Yungling Lu, ed. *Ma Xiangbo and the Mind of Modern China, 1840–1939*, Armonk 1996.
 - 18 The religious faith of Chen Yuan has been subject to a large amount of speculation and debate within the scholarly literature, due to his later renunciation of his previous religious faith. The general scholarly consensus is that he was baptized Protestant by John Leighton Stuart in 1919. See: Liu Xian, *On Chen Yuan’s Study of Religions*, dissertation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005.
 - 19 For a fuller account of the various decisions and arguments that stymied the development of the University, see: John Shujie Chen, *The Rise and Fall of Fu Ren University*, Beijing: Catholic Higher Education in China, New York 2004.
 - 20 Chen Yuan became a close friend of both Ma Xiangbo and Ying Lianzhi in the early years of the Republic, when they joined forces in resisting Yuan Shikai’s attempts to make Confucianism into a state religion. For the battle over Confucianism and attempts to make it a state religion, see: Hsi-yuan Chen, *Confucianism Encounters Religion: The Formation of Religious Discourse and the Confucian movement in Modern China*, dissertation, Harvard University, 1999.
 - 21 Chen, *Rise and Fall of Fu Ren*, 113. By 1947, the university would have more than 2300 students, and would be the second largest university in Beijing after Beijing University.
 - 22 AG 641/ 1934–1935, 7217: Letter from Joseph Murphy to Joseph Grendel, May 18, 1934.
 - 23 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Joseph Murphy to Grendel, February 15, 1935.
 - 24 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Joseph Murphy to Grendel, March 17, 1935.
 - 25 *Ibid.*
 - 26 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Joseph Grendel to Joseph Murphy, April 8, 1935.
 - 27 AG 641/1933–1934, 7021: *Kurze Zusammenstellung der Verhandlungen betr. die Uebernahme der Kath. Universität in Peking durch die SVD.*
 - 28 The Rites Controversy has an extensive and long bibliography, for some of the best overviews, see: George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From its Beginning to Modern Times*, Chicago 1985; David E. Mungello, *The Chinese Rites controversy: Its history and Meaning*, Nettetal 1994; David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, Honolulu 1989.
 - 29 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Joseph Murphy to Josef Grendel, March 17, 1935.
 - 30 *Ibid.*
 - 31 AG 641/1935–1937, 7377: Wilhelm Schmidt, *Denkschrift zur Ausgestaltung der Katholischen Fu-Yen-Universität in Peking.*
 - 32 *Ibid.*
 - 33 *Ibid.*
 - 34 *Ibid.*, 7378.

- 35 Ibid., 7378-7379.
- 36 Ibid., 7377.
- 37 Ibid., 7385.
- 38 Ibid., 7381.
- 39 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Josef Grendel to Wilhelm Schmidt, January 2, 1935.
- 40 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Josef Grendel to Wilhelm Schmidt, January 2, 1935.
- 41 AG 641/1934–1935: Joseph Murphy to Joseph Grendel, July 28, 1934.
- 42 AG 641/1938–1939, 7731: Letter from Grendel to Rudolf Rahmann, July 11, 1938.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 AG 641/1935–1937: Wilhelm Schmidt, Bemerkungen zu dem Vorlesungsverzeichnis.
- 46 Schmidt, Denkschrift, 7402-7403.
- 47 Schmidt, Denkschrift, 7403.
- 48 AG 641/1934–1935: Letter from Joseph Goertz to Grendel, September 23, 1934.
- 49 Schmidt, Denkschrift, 7382-7383.
- 50 Schmidt, Denkschrift, 7389-7390.
- 51 Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*, Berkeley 1986, 28.
- 52 For a complete collection of his writings and publications on religion, see: Chen Zhichao, ed., *Chen Yuan quanji*, volume 2, Hefei City, 2009.
- 53 See: Chen Yuan, *Yuan yelikewenkao*, in Chen Zhichao, ed., *Chen Yuan quanji*, volume 2, Hefei City, 2009, 1-60.
- 54 Chen Yuan, *Jidujiaoruhuashi*, in: Chen Zhichao, ed., *Chen Yuan Quanji*, volume 2, Hefei City, 2009, 477.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid., 461.
- 57 Ibid., 462.
- 58 Ibid., 465.
- 59 Ibid., 463.
- 60 AG 641/1933–1934, 7087-7088: Letter from Grendel to Chen Yuan, May 20, 1933.
- 61 Lutz, *China and the Christian Colleges, 1850–1950*, 363.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid., 366.
- 64 Liu Naihe, *Chen Yuan xiaozhangyongyuanshi women de shibiao*, in Liu Naihe, ed., *Ligengchengxuelu*, Beijing 1992, 64.
- 65 For a list of various events that show the Japanese officials visiting and coming to Furen for various events. See: AG 641/1938–1939: *Chronik der Katholischen Universität Peking*.
- 66 AG 641/1938–1939, 7800: Understanding between Dr. Rudolph Rahmann of the Catholic University and Mr. RokuzoYaguchi of the Japanese Embassy, July 12, 1938.
- 67 One example is Chen Yuan, *Ziwojiantao*, in Chen Zhichao, ed., *Chen Yuan Quanji*, volume 22, Hefei City, 2009, 616.
- 68 The best book on wartime collaboration is Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, Cambridge, Mass. 2005.
- 69 For examples of these cases, see: files in University Archives of Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, Politics Files 657. Hereafter cited as FPF.
- 70 See: files in FPF 646.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 AG 641/ 1943–1947, 8141: Harold Rigney, Monthly Report for August 1946.
- 73 Ibid., 8138
- 74 Ibid., 8141.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Lutz, *China and the Christian Colleges, 1850–1950*. See: especially chapter eleven, “Civil Conflict and the politicizing of College Youth.”
- 77 Liu Naihe, *Chen Yuan nianpupeituchangbian*, Shenyang City, 2000, 517.

- 78 Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945–1949*, Lanham 1999, 76-77.
- 79 AG 641/1948, 8422: Letter from Harold Rigney to Aloysius Kappenberg, August 30, 1948.
- 80 Liu Naihe, *Chen Yuan xiaozhangyongyuanshi women de shibiao*, 64.
- 81 AG 641/1948, 8422: Letter from Harold Rigney to Aloysius Kappenberg, August 30, 1948.
- 82 Liu Naihe, *Chen Yuan nianpupeituchangbian*, 534–535.
- 83 Chen Yuan, *Ziwojiantao*, 613.
- 84 The 'hagiographic' literature on Chen Yuan present him as a Chinese nationalist *par excellence*. See for example, Sun Banghua, *ShendengguobaozhicunFuren: FurenDaxuexiaozhang Chen Yuan*, Jinan City, 2004.