

Church and State in Japanese-Occupied Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

When an authoritarian government conquers an already colonized territory and attempts to subjugate its people, how do local Christians respond to such regime change? Conversely, how do the new imperial masters treat the religion of expatriate and indigenous Christian converts? In this paper, we examine these questions for Taiwan during the Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945. Following the lead of Anthony Gill, the essay tests rational-choice theory about how the presence or absence of political and religious competition affected the Japanese occupiers' treatment of Christianity. Next, the paper explores the attitudes of Taiwanese and expatriate Christians toward the new occupiers. Did

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they perceive the Japanese as potential allies who might open up new opportunities for evangelization of the island's population or as disliked foreigners whose actions might repel potential converts?

Keywords: Hong Kong, World War II, Japan, Christians, church-state relations

I. INTRODUCTION

When a colonizing power acquires new territory, how do local Christians respond to this new political reality? Conversely, how does the new regime treat Christian minorities? In this article, we examine these questions for Taiwan during the Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945. Part of a larger project on the history of church-state relations in Taiwan and Hong Kong, this essay explores how the apparent absence of political and religious competition led the Japanese occupiers to treat Christianity with benign neglect. Similarly, Taiwanese and expatriate Christians largely acquiesced in Japanese rule because they saw it as an improvement over Qing dominance and as part of a larger, beneficial modernization project.

Theoretically, our project tests the economic approach to religion-state interactions in an understudied cultural, political, and social setting: East Asia. Anthony Gill's two pioneering works¹ applying rational-choice models to religion and politics have together focused on the Americas and Eastern Europe rather than Asia or Africa. A

¹ Anthony Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Anthony Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

couple of later scholars have adopted this perspective when analyzing China,² yet even the PRC deserves much more academic attention. And no one appears to have used self-interest to explain church-state relations in East Asia over centuries of Christian presence in the region.³ Our research thus contributes to the political-science, religious-studies, and historical literatures by using this viewpoint for the culturally Chinese island of Taiwan since the arrival of Christianity. Theoretically, the small group of Christians in Taiwan faced considerable challenges harmonizing their nascent Taiwanese identity with their “foreign” faith. However, as the vast major of Taiwanese Christians originated in the lowest social classes, they hardly constituted a vanguard of opposition to colonial rule. And Western missionaries living in Taiwan often found it easier to reconcile (at least in their own minds) Christianity with the political aims of Japanese authorities.

II. THEORIES OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

According to Anthony Gill’s rational-choice theory of religious liberty,⁴ governments primarily treat religious minorities as well as devotees of the dominant religion in a way that will strengthen the rulers’ grip on political power and maximize tax revenues and

² Yang Fenggang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2006): 93-122; Xie Xiaheng, “Toward an Understanding of the Prosperity of Protestantism in Contemporary China,” Ph.D. dissertation (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2011).

³ Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: 1500 to 1900* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

⁴ Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, pp. 26-59.

national economic prosperity.⁵ In contrast to advocates of secularization theory, he claims that states restrict or “regulate the religious marketplace” based on the self-interest of the political leaders, not because society is inexorably becoming less religious. When repressing a religious minority poses more “opportunity costs” than benefits among these three criteria, governments will tend to allow freedom of conscience.

Conversely, if one looks at how a religious group decides to interact with the state, one key sociological theory belongs to Max Weber.⁶ In his terms, a religion may play a “prophetic” or “priestly” role. In the first, a church or other religious entity opposes and criticizes the state for its deviations from justice and appeals to the government to return to God’s laws. In the second, clergy give religiously based advice and comfort to the king or other political leaders, support the government’s policies, at least in public, and try to get the masses to obey the state by convincing them that God is on the side of the status quo.

Although Weber thoroughly describes believers’ two principal approaches to the government, he does not explicate in detail why groups follow one pattern or another (other than pointing to believers’ socio-economic background and fundamental theological beliefs). This article therefore turns once again to Gill’s economic model⁷ to

⁵ This theoretical section draws upon our previous work in Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, “Church and State in Spanish Formosa,” *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 1, no. 2 (2014): 236-248.

⁶ Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [1922]); Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952 [1921]).

⁷ Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar*, pp. 47-78.

explain why a church opts to oppose or support the political status quo.⁸ Based largely on Twentieth-Century Latin American cases, his first major work argued that national Catholic churches adopted a pro- or anti-government policy based on which would maximize their support from the largely poor populace. Before they faced competition from socialists, spiritists, or evangelical Protestants working among the economically marginalized, in contrast, the Catholic hierarchy had been content to ally with authoritarian leaders and their upper-class backers. In a broader context, then, Gill's theory suggests that a religious group would support or oppose the political authorities based on which option will maximize its number of adherents and amount of resources. Money and other "goodies" from the government are nice, he suggest. But a rational group of believers will not seek such political capital at the cost of popular rejection of their religion—at least when ideological competitors are also seeking converts among the same people.

Applied to Taiwan during Japanese occupation, Gill's first theory implies that the Japanese government would be wary of provoking widespread, active resistant to their rule and thereby undermining relative political stability and economic development. Any

⁸ Although this essay focusses on the political quiescence of Taiwanese missionaries and their relative lack of interest in political activism, a possible alternative theory for Christians' political behavior is Woodberry's claim that evangelical missionaries fostered democratization by teaching indigenous Christians skills useful for forming a civil society opposed to authoritarianism: Robert Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy" *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 244-274. Indeed, the case for Woodberry's assertion will become even stronger after World War II, when Taiwanese Presbyterians and even some foreign missionaries spearheaded the democratization and later independence movements.

particularly anti-Japanese Christian leaders might be disposed of, but such very small minority religion should remain more or less unmolested. Moreover, given the modest origins of most Taiwanese Christians, the Japanese might have even concluded that it was their self-interest to promote a religion whose followers posed not political threat to the regime. If Gills' state-related interpretation is false, however, one would expect the Japanese government to impose State Shinto on the entire population regardless of political and economic consequences.

For the church in Japanese-occupied Taiwan, rational-choice theory would posit that Christian leaders would try gain favor with the colonial authorities who had resources that could be useful for their religious work. This logic would, of course, only hold where the majority of the general population either favors or is neutral toward the government. Before the beginning of the hostilities that led to World War II, this condition generally prevailed.

III. CHRISTIANS IN JAPANESE-OCCUPIED TAIWAN

The Japanese gained control over Taiwan as a result of the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the first Sino-Japanese War. Under the terms of this treaty, Qing China ceded full sovereignty of Taiwan to Japan, thus ending two centuries of at least partial rule of the island.

Japanese colonization posed an interesting dilemma for the largely western Christian missionaries on Ilha Formosa. On the one hand, these missionaries identified with and ministered to local Taiwanese, who might have been expected to oppose the invasion of a foreign occupying force. However, Christian missionaries had experienced

limited numerical success among the native population, and the foreign believers attributed this outcome both to the “backward” attitudes of the local residents and to opposition from the local Confucian bureaucratic elite. Canadian George Leslie MacKay, the most famous Christian missionary in Taiwanese history, accused Qing functionaries of “universal official corruption,” “unmitigated lying, cheating, and oppression,” and “violence and injustice inflicted upon Christians in North Formosa.”⁹ Given this official hostility to Christianity, it is not surprising that another prominent missionary, the English Presbyterian Thomas Barclay, concluded about the impending Japanese occupation that “In the meantime, there seems to be some advantages to be hoped for. The destruction of the Mandarinate and perhaps still more than that of the literary class as a body, involving the discrediting of Confucianism, will remove more obstacles out of our way.”¹⁰

Moreover, the converts that missionaries had won over were not part of the local ruling class but instead concentrated in the lowest economic levels of Taiwanese society. Missionary accounts, moreover, suggests that their proselytizing was particularly successful among indigenous groups living in the western, “plains” region of Taiwan.¹¹ Ironically, then, most foreign Christian leaders and their Taiwanese converts were either indifferent or even sympathetic to Japanese control of Formosa.¹² As noted above, the Taiwanese Christian population was sparse; at the time of the Treaty’s signing, Taiwan was home to an estimated 2,000 Roman Catholics, 2,500 English Presbyterians (largely

⁹ George Leslie MacKay, *From Far Formosa: The Island, its People and Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895), pp. 105, 112 & [_____].

¹⁰ William J. Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan Under Japanese Rule, 1895-1945*, dissertation (New York: St. John’s University, 1971), p. 42.

¹¹ MacKay, *From Far Formosa*, p. 103; Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun*, pp. 78-79.

¹² A. Hamish Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The Canadian Protestant Missionary Movement in the Japanese Empire, 1872-1931*. (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), p. 81.

in the south), and 2,600 Canadian Presbyterians (mainly in the north).¹³ Given an island-wide population of just over 3 million in 1905,¹⁴ the Christian proportion of all Taiwanese was minuscule. As a rational-choice interpretation of religious mobilization would predict, therefore, Taiwanese Christians had no incentive to defend the Qing political and social system that deeply disadvantaged them.

During a brief interlude between the formal acquisition of Taiwan by the Japanese and the arrival of their troops on the island, Taiwanese loyalists established the “Taiwan Democratic Republic [Taiwan minzhu guo].” This short-lived republic ended, however, once that the Japanese military took over from the Qing authorities. While the transition to Japanese control was relatively peaceful in the north, Taiwan Republic leader Liu Yongfu led violent resistance in the south to the new status quo.¹⁵ Despite this political turmoil, Christian on Formosa did not fervently support the Republic and so faced charges that they were actually Japanese collaborators. In one instance, pro-Republican activists killed over a dozen Christians whom they accused of sympathizing with the new colonial power. While not necessarily actively helping the Japanese conquer the island, Taiwanese Christians were generally optimistic about the results of Japanese rule. In fact, Presbyterian missionaries Thomas Barkley and Duncan Ferguson met with Japanese forces to negotiate an end to the conflict at the Taiwan Republic capital of Tainan. Their efforts ensured that the city was spared the devastation that would have resulted from

¹³ Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁴ Republic of China, *The Republic of China Yearbook 2009* (Taipei: Government Information Office, 2009), p. 37.

¹⁵ Hollington K. Tong, *Christianity in Taiwan: A History*, 2nd ed. (Taipei: *China Post*, 1972), pp. 53-54.

further Japanese bombardment. In recognition of their “contribution,” the missionaries received the “Order of the Rising Sun (Fifth Class)” from the Emperor of Japan.¹⁶

For a variety of reasons, therefore, Taiwanese missionaries and local Christians largely sympathized with the Japanese. Taiwanese Christians had been disadvantaged under the Qing regime, and missionaries saw the Japanese as more likely to permit or even encourage further evangelization of the island. Finally, the largely western proselytizers understood their own efforts as “bringing civilization” to a “backward land,” a project that seemed more compatible with Japanese control because of that country’s pro-western outlook.

IV. JAPANESE TREATMENT OF CHRISTIANS

Overall, these rosy expectations were fulfilled, at least before the beginning of World War II. Japanese officials generally did show more support for Christianity than had their Manchu predecessors.¹⁷ This new relationship with the regime does not seem to have hurt Christians’ effort to proselytize; in fact, the number of Christians grew dramatically over the next several decades. Presbyterians grew from 5,100 in 1895 to 31,000 by 1938. Catholic statistics similarly rose from 2,000 to 7,000 over the same period.¹⁸ Taiwan experienced parallel economic development, educational expansion, and infrastructure modernization under the Japanese. According to one analysis, the island had the fastest rate of economic growth among all of colonial Asia.¹⁹

¹⁶ Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan*, pp. 57-58.

¹⁷ A. Hamish Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The British Protestant Missionary Movement in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, 1865-1945*, “Vol. II” (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993), p. 80.

¹⁸ Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁹ Anne Booth and Kent Deng, “Japanese Colonialism in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of World History*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017): pp. 61-98.

The above is not to suggest that Taiwanese Christians and the new government never came into conflict. Efforts to nipponize, or culturally assimilate Taiwanese, at times, posed a potential threat to Christians on the island. The most notable example centered around schoolchildren's compulsory attendance and participation in Shinto ceremonies at shrines on national holidays and at the beginning and end of each school year. This edict also held for institutions run by Christian missionaries.²⁰ Because they were run by foreigners, mission schools appeared suspect in the eyes of some Japanese officials. Nevertheless, absence of large-scale opposition to colonial rule meant that the Japanese did not resort to the heavy-handed tactics used in such other colonies as Korea. Instead, the new authorities tried to work with religious leaders to find ways around such conflicts as the shrine dispute. Negotiations between government officials and Presbyterian representatives, for example, led to a compromise position where mission schools followed the policy in a way that both parties claimed was acceptable.²¹ Japanese officials assured Christian leaders that the shrines were not religious and that shrine priests were government officials, not religious authorities. The Presbyterian Church eventually abandoned its opposition to these ceremonies.²² The Catholic Church similarly ruled that shrine rites were "purely civil and patriotic and thus did not in any way conflict with the religious practices of Roman Catholics."²³

Of course, the beginning of World War II marked a turning point in Japanese policy in Taiwan and throughout Asia. Some individual Christians who were outspoken

²⁰ Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan*, pp. 170-171; Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The British Protestant Missionary Movement in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, 1865-1945*, p. 243.

²¹ Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The British Protestant Missionary Movement in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, 1865-1945*, p. 212.

²² Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan*, p. 176.

²³ Richardson, *Christianity in Taiwan*, p. 173.

in their opposition to Japanese treatment of co-religionists or fellow Asians in Korea or China found themselves in prison for their views. For example, Pastor Kami Yojirō, a Japanese Christian who served in Taiwan from 1918 to 1947²⁴ and later directed the Taiwan Theological Seminary in Taipei,²⁵ strenuously objected to the Japanese army's take-over of Manchuria in 1931. For their troubles, he and a small number of similarly minded Taiwanese Presbyterian ministers were arrested and interrogated by the Kempei, the Japanese secret police. Even so, the authorities spared Kami's life, and a number of other Taiwanese clergy criticized his "subversive actions."²⁶ The situation for Aboriginal Christians was more dire, however, arguably because they represented both converts to a "foreign," western religion and the ethnic group that had most strongly resisted Japanese rule. Among the "mountain tribes" of indigenous Taiwanese, for instance, police were constantly on the lookout for "suspect" pastors or church leaders.²⁷ By 1940, conditions for all Christians had deteriorated to such an extent that the English Presbyterian Mission in southern Taiwan closed, and virtually all foreign missionaries left the island. Police supervision of native Christian likewise intensified. Pastors were required to preach only in Japanese, and an ethnic Japanese needed to direct any religious schools or hospitals.²⁸

V. CHRISTIANS' SUPPORT FOR OR OPPOSITION TO JAPANESE OCCUPATION

²⁴ Lee Chia-song, *Yi bai nian lai: shifeng yu fuwu de rensheng* (Taipei: Youta jiapu xuehui, 1979), pp. 121-123; available at <http://www.laijohn.com/archives/pj/Kami,Y/impression/Li,Ksiong.htm> (accessed September 17, 2018).

²⁵ Thoân-tō Pò-kok, *The Study of "Den-doo Hoo-koku" Identity of Taiwan Christians during Japanese Colonial Period, 1937-1945* [in Chinese] (Taipei: Taiwan Normal University, History Department, 2017), p. 127.

²⁶ Otabe Sanpei et al., *Kami no kazoku Taihoku Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai no omoide*, vol. II (Tōkyō : Kami Itsuki, 1989), pp. 75-76.

²⁷ Edward Band, ed., *He Brought Them Out: The Story of the Christian Movement among the Mount Tribes of Formosa* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1956), pp. 5-6.

²⁸ Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The British Protestant Missionary Movement in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, 1865-1945*, p. 245; Tong, *Christianity in Taiwan: A History*, p. 76-80.

Given the relatively benign treatment of Taiwanese Christians before the Second World War and the rapid economic and social modernization on the island, it is hardly surprising that Christians largely acquiesced in Japanese occupation. As we noted above, the Church grew quickly during this period, suggesting that this alliance with the new rulers did not hinder Christians' efforts at evangelization. This situation contrasts markedly with that in occupied Hong Kong and Korea, where Japanese actions were so loathsome that any appearance of sympathy with the hated occupiers would have damned Christian proselytizing.

As we documented earlier, Christian missionaries helped negotiate a truce between the Japanese army and Taiwanese Republicans. In gratitude, the Japanese awarded them official honors. Shortly thereafter, Taiwanese Christians established close working relations with their counterparts in Japan proper. Christians in Taiwan even found a sympathetic ear among Japanese elites, some of whom embraced the new faith.²⁹ A few ministers were troubled by worship at Shinto shrines, but given the relatively friendly relations already established between Christians and the authorities, local believers persuaded themselves that the matter did not represent an insurmountable theological barrier to cooperation with the government.

VI. DISCUSSION

Overall, this examination of Taiwan during Japanese occupation generally confirms Gill's theory about the roots of religious freedom and Christian opposition to the state. For the Japanese government, the opportunity costs of suppressing Christianity were higher than any economic or political benefits from doing so. The Christian population in

²⁹ Tong, pp. 60-61.

Taiwan was minuscule, and those few Christian leaders that did live on the island tended to prefer the Japanese to the Qing.

From the local Christian perspective, amicable relations with the Japanese authorities was both rational and beneficial. Christian leaders saw Japanese occupation through the prism of the advantages of “western civilization.” An island that many missionaries saw as “backward” would in their view benefit from colonization by a more “modern” country. For this reason, they were cautiously optimistic about Japanese rule. Since the Japanese in Taiwan were not hostile to Christianity before World War II, Christians perceived the regime as relatively benign and largely played a priestly rather than prophetic role on the island. Further reinforcing this perception were the rapid economic modernization of Formosa and the dramatic growth of churches in the early decades of Japanese colonization. Given these conditions, Christians did not stand to lose potential converts by allying with the new government.

This situation contrasts dramatically with the plight of Christians in both Hong Kong and Korea.³⁰ In those areas, the Japanese occupiers acted much more brutally. The vast majority residents of both Hong Kong and Korea loathed the Japanese occupiers. Any friends of the Japanese would therefore have immediately become the enemies of ordinary Hong Kongers or Koreans, and devotees of traditional Asian religions would have been much less likely to convert to Christianity. In Christians’ minds, a government callously causing the deaths of thousands of ordinary citizens was not likely ever to “win the hearts and minds” of the people. Another important contrast with Taiwan was that the population of both Korea and Hong Kong identified much more with a non-Japanese

³⁰ Chengpang Lee, “State Building and Religion: Explaining the Diverged Path of Religious Change in Taiwan and South Korea, 1950-1980,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 123, issue 2 (2017), pp. 465-509.

nation than did ordinary Taiwanese. The development of both Korean and Chinese nationalism affect the churches in these regions, thus problematizing any alliance between Christians and the Japanese. The relative absence of specifically Taiwanese nationalism at this juncture meant that churches did not have to consider the nationalist sentiments of potential followers. Ironically, Taiwanese Presbyterian leaders would later ally themselves with nascent Taiwanese nationalism as it developed during and following democratization.