

Panda Huggers and Dragon Slayers: Billy Graham, American Evangelicals, and Sino-American Relations

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My topic today is Rev. Billy Graham, American Evangelicals and Sino-American Relations, which based on my research here. Christianity is a very special issue in the past and present Sino-U.S. relations. Entering China with the help of unequal treaties, Christianity played a very important role in China's modernization and social transformation. Missionaries help the establishment of modern schools, hospitals, publishing houses, newspapers and social welfare institutes. Sun Yat-sen, The first president of the Republic of China who inaugurated in 1912, was baptized by an American missionary when he was young. I think few American know that he was also an American citizen during his lifetime. And very interesting thing is he and President Obama graduated from the same middle school in Hawaii. He was a part-time missionary before he became a professional revolutionary. Chiang Kai-shek, who had ruled China from 1927 to 1949 also a Christian. He married Song Meiling, the youngest daughter of a first generation Chinese Methodist missionary in 1927 and was baptized in Shanghai in 1930. Madame Chiang spent her younger years in America and built up extensive contacts with American Christian leaders and laypersons. To some extent, Madame Chiang's image as a pious Christian gained trust and support from American Christians for her husband's government.

Part I. Supporter and Comforter of KMT Regime

With the People's Republic of China (PRC) established in 1949, foreign missionaries were expelled as “running dogs of imperialism.” Soon after missionary schools, hospitals, orphanages, retreat center, publishing houses, newspapers, and other Christian institutions were forced to merge into state-controlled organizations. While some Protestant missionaries, especially some mainline missionaries, were sympathetic with the ideals and goals of the new Marxist government, many shared Graham's religious and political inclinations: an atheistic government would be no friend of the church. After these missionaries were expelled from China, some went on to serve in Taiwan or in other Asian countries. Most became strong opponents of Red China while many supported the KMT government in Taiwan that had been the patron of missionaries in mainland China until 1949. In contrast to the mainland, missionary work flourished in Taiwan after 1949.

Dr. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham's father-in-law, was a medical missionary who served in China from 1916 to 1941. He held sharp anti-communist views, kept close ties with missionary groups who had worked in China and had significant influence on Billy Graham, both with regard to Christianity in China and also the political character of the People's Republic. The written records are clear. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Billy Graham was an opponent of Red China and a supporter of the KMT government in Taiwan. As late as 1965 Graham called the People's Republic of China “the most dangerous enemy of freedom in the world.” Meanwhile, KMT regime got support from most American Christians. Both Chiang Kai-shek and his wife received honorary degrees from Bob Jones University in 1952.

Hollington Tong, Ambassador of Taiwan Regime to the United States from 1956-1958, also a pious Presbyterian who kept close tie with Dr. Nelson Bell. Only in 1956, there were 17 correspondence letters between them. (BGEA, Box 52, folder 17.) During his term in the US, he actively engaged in American Christian communities to facilitate the anti-China lobby with the Christian support.

In the 1950s Graham and other American evangelicals hoped and prayed that the KMT government might reassert control of the Mainland, once again opening China to missionary work. Madame Chiang became the friend of Ruth and the following year Madame Chiang was a member of a prayer group in Taiwan, joining with thousands of similar prayer groups all over the world in support of Graham's New York City crusade of 1957. At that time Billy Graham had not yet reached the peak of his fame, but the Chiangs were already loyal supporters. Billy Graham visited Taiwan four times and developed a personal friendship with Generalissimo and Madame Chiang.

In Dec 29, 1952, as a rising young evangelist Billy Graham saw Chiang Kai-shek in Taipei and he told an American correspondent that he was "very greatly impressed by Chiang Kai-shek's spiritual quality" and thought U.S. "should give him and the people of free China every help possible."

Billy Graham toured Southeast Asia after his crusade in India in 1956. He spoke to a large gathering of missionaries in Thailand and also went to Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea to preach. On Feb. 16, Generalissimo and Madame Chiang received him at their mansion.

In 1971 American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger secretly visited China and not long after the People's Republic took over the China seat in the United Nations Security Council. Nixon administration strategically shifted its policy toward People's Republic of China. Suddenly facing a profoundly uncertain future, KMT regime used secret diplomatic channels to communicate with the Nixon administration. Chiang Kai-shek was deeply frustrated by the situation and invited Billy Graham to visit Taiwan. Chiang hoped to leverage Graham's unique status in American politics, his close relationship with President Richard M. Nixon, and his strong ties with China to shore up Taiwan's credibility at this moment of crisis. Billy Graham discussed the proposed visit to Taiwan with Dr. Kissinger, asking background information and counsel from the Secretary of State. Kissinger provided Graham with highly sensitive background information and "key talking points." He also asked Graham to carry the President's greetings and an affirmation of the US-Taiwan alliance. President Nixon connected with Mr. Graham several times and met him once in the White House to make sure the Evangelist would strike just the right tone in his talks with the Generalissimo. Dr. Kissinger followed up with some talking points for Graham's conversations with Taiwan Christian leaders, emphasizing Washington's security guarantee for the Taiwan government. The promise Graham carried to President Chiang and the people of Taiwan on behalf of the American President carried the full weight of foreign policy along with the considerable force of American popular opinion. Billy Graham used his moral influence as a preacher and friend of presidents to reassure the Chiangs about the US-Taiwan alliance, and to restore confidence among Taiwanese people in to

America's commitment to Taiwan's future and security. The best-known American Evangelist became an envoy of affirmation and comfort to America's ally.

President Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972 was controversial in the U.S., also in the whole western campaign. The American President faced public hectoring and private resistance to his bold initiative. At Nixon's suggestion, Billy Graham convened a meeting of more than twenty of the most influential conservative Christian leaders to hear Kissinger's defense of the administration's new policy initiative toward China. It is not impossible this administration could open doors long closed to the gospel.

On April 16, 1975, Billy Graham gave the sermon at a memorial service for Chiang Kai-shek in Washington's National Cathedral. In October the same year, a five-day Billy Graham crusade was held in Taipei with strong official support and Madame Chiang seated in the chair of honor. Madame Chiang even commanded the prime minister's office to alter the date of a national game in order to place the largest open-air stadium unreservedly at the crusade's disposal. During his stay in Taiwan Graham visited the tomb of Chiang Kai-shek and reaffirmed his continuing friendship with the government and people of Taiwan.

Part II. Hong Kong: Mission Base for Greater China and Southeast Asia

As the key founder of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization (LCWE), Billy Graham recognized the significance of the missionary movement in various regions of the world and began encouraging the development of infrastructure to help indigenous churches evangelize more effectively. The International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland (1974) and its follow-up meetings, including the Chinese Congress on World Evangelization in Hong Kong in 1976, promoted the solidarity of Asian churches in various countries, each of which worked to develop evangelistic strategies and implementation methodologies before and after the Lausanne Movement conferences, "the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world." In 1977-78 a series of Lausanne follow-up meetings were held in Singapore with Billy Graham's full support. Chinese Christians were organized and trained in these meetings and Hong Kong became a key center for the Chinese missionary movement.

After China began to open in 1978, The Chinese Coordinating Center of World Evangelism (CCCOWE), a missionary organization headquartered in Hong Kong, investigated the religious situation in mainland and made careful plans for the evangelization of Mainland China. CCCOWE is an integral part of the LCWE. Many Chinese Christians devoted themselves to the planting of house churches, convinced that they are the normal and effective means to the evangelization of China. In the mid-1980s, there were more than 5,000 ethnic Chinese churches as member churches of the Lausanne Committee. Rev. Thomas Wang, the leader of the committee, became the executive director of LCWE in 1986, working with Chinese Christians to build a strong missionary movement for evangelizing ethnic Chinese throughout the world. After the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, the territory has continued to enjoy relative religious freedom. Evangelical organizations continue to be very active in Hong Kong.

Part III. Billy Graham and the People's Republic of China

Even though Billy Graham's first visit to China had been strongly opposed by both the Christian Rights and the political conservatives, Graham gained support from many sides of the political arena. As with his previous success in communist Eastern Europe, the Evangelist was the right person to communicate with the Mainland and Taiwan. He also was well equipped to help fill “the ideological vacuum” in China during its transition years to a new market-oriented socialism with Chinese characteristics.

With President Nixon's help, Ruth Graham and her three brothers and sisters returned to China in 1980. As the Bell Children and Billy Graham's wife or in-laws, they were semi-official guests of the government. It was unusual in China in the early 1980's. They have tea with Madame Soong Ching-ling, the widow of Sun Yat-sen, the older sister of Madame Chiang and then the vice-chairman of the standing committee of National People's Congress in their first afternoon in Beijing. Remarkably they were able to visit Qingjiangpu, their birthplace, where foreigners at that time were forbidden to travel. During her visit Mrs. Graham began building relationships with Chinese government officials and with church leaders, some of whom were instrumental in opening the way for Graham himself to visit China.

In 1985 Bishop K. H. Ting, head of the China Christian Council (CCC) sent a preliminary invitation to Billy Graham. After some negotiations, a firm invitation came from the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) and the CCC. Mr. Zhang Wenjin, former ambassador to the United States, was at that time the president of CPAFFC. Graham referred to Sidney Rittenberg repeatedly for his help. Rittenberg was a young idealist who decided to stay in China after 1949. His personal experience and thought convinced him that Christianity was useful for China. He assisted Billy Graham's visit in China by facilitating high-level conversations between China and the American Evangelist's delegation. Rittenberg had kept in touch with senior Chinese leaders and used these relationships to pave the way for Billy Graham's visit.

After several months' delay because of his rib fracture, Billy Graham and his team visited China in a seventeen-day, five-city trip in April 1988. Premier Li Peng met with Graham for fifty minutes in Zhongnanhai, the Communist Party's sealed enclave next to the Forbidden City in Beijing. It was the first time a foreign Christian leader was granted the honor of a reception as a state guest. Their meeting had an unexpected outcome as Billy Graham went public through Chinese mass media. In China no media is private enterprise and all media must speak for the “correct direction of public opinion.” So the evangelist's meeting with the top CPC officers on the mass media facilitated his journey in China. He admitted that “By going public on television, on radio, and in the press about our private conversation, the premier created visibility and credibility for us that we could never have gotten otherwise and opened many doors for us.” Billy Graham also visited other cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing and Ruth's birthplace, Huaiyin in coastal Jiangsu province. Graham was able to meet many local leaders, such as Shanghai Mayor Zhu Rongji, who later became the Premier in 1998. He met with many religious leaders and gave addresses in university settings as well as in research institutions such as Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). In every city Graham visited churches and seminaries and preached in crowded churches.

Billy Graham's ultimate aim in keeping good ties with the Chinese Government was to spread the gospel in China. The tricky situation that Billy Graham had to handle was the complicated triangle relations among the China government, the Three-Self Churches and the house churches. Though he received the invitation from the CCC, he never ignored the vigorous Chinese house church which Americans viewed as a persecuted church. Billy Graham had already been in contact with senior house church leaders long before his first visit in China. Owing to Nelson Bell's prestige in China, Ruth became the bridge between senior house church leaders and Billy Graham.

In 1988 Graham visited famous house church leaders such as Rev. Lin Xian'gao (better known in English as Samuel Lamb) in Guangzhou and Rev. Wang Mingdao in Shanghai. Billy Graham gave an unplanned sermon at Pastor Lin's house church. In 1994, Billy Graham visited Yuan Xiangchen in Beijing and preached in his house church. The best known house church leaders did not publicly oppose Billy Graham's visit, in spite of the fact that the invitation came from the China Christian Council. Indeed Billy Graham's visit to China seemed afterwards to provide a measure of status and protection for Pastors Lin and Wang, improving their living conditions, and in the case of Pastor Lin, enhancing his missionary endeavors, though they did not share Billy Graham's aim to promote more open and cordial relationships between the Three-Self Church and house churches. A new generation of house church leaders (who are largely unknown to the American public) hoped Billy Graham could advocate their interests both with the Chinese Government and in Western countries. To avoid damaging the fragile relationship with the Chinese government and the Chinese Christian Council, Billy Graham never overtly declared his support for these younger house church leaders, even in his autobiography, though BGEA has continued to maintain connections with some of these leaders and support their ministries.

Part IV: Billy Graham, American Evangelicals, and Sino-US Relations

China's foreign policy, formerly driven by ideology, was now shaped by a robust commitment to economic development. This change was accompanied by a strong desire by China to improve its international image, not only in 1980's but also after the Tian'anman Affair in 1989. As an important representative of American religious life who has maintained intimate relationships with political, economic and civic leaders, Billy Graham has always been respected by the Chinese Government. High-ranking governmental officials met him in Zhongnanhai during his every visit in China. Billy Graham returned to China twice, in 1992 three years after the Tiananmen Affair, and again in 1994. In spite of widespread Western hostility toward the Chinese government in the post-Tiananmen period, Graham met in 1992 with Vice Premier Zhu Rongji and Vice Chairman Wu Xueqian of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). In 1997, President Jiang Zemin visited the U.S. that was the first time the China President had received the official invitation to visit the U.S. after 1989. Billy Graham was the only religious leader who met Jiang individually. Ruth Graham also was treated as a distinguished guest in China when she came back to China. In 1997, Ruth Graham visited China as the leader of an American Christian delegation and expressed her concern about religious freedom in China.

When Premier Li Peng met Billy Graham, he conceded, “With regard to religious issues China's constitution protects religious freedom. In some areas in the past we did not protect religious freedom well enough. We have now rectified this situation.” And he commented on the common ground between Christianity and communism: “Though we have different beliefs, both of us agree that the Chinese people appreciate high moral standards.”(Wu, 1988) Premier Li played down ideological differences between the two countries by lifting up morality as a common aspiration so as to minimize disparity and shape a new consensus.

In 1997, President Jiang told Billy Graham, “When speaking about religion, we seek mutual understanding. It is natural to have different opinions, but it is important that we not distort the facts.”(Chen: 1997) The Chinese government had great expectation as to Graham's ability to promote constructive communication between China and the US and to reshape the image of the Chinese government held by many in the West. Graham's rapprochement with China encouraged many evangelicals and evangelical organizations to cultivate religious contact with Chinese Christians and engage in the relief and development work in China.

In this effort to bridge the gap on religion and religious freedom, the starting points and expectations of Chinese and American churches were vastly different. Some American churches hoped that Billy Graham's visit to China would allow an immediate resumption of missionary activity on the Mainland. Of course Americans were well aware of governmental restrictions on the practice of religion in China. Even while recognizing that the situation in the 1980s had become better than any time since 1949, American Churches were not satisfied with the progress made. They expected more.

Though frustrated by the international influence several house church leaders triggered, the China Christian Council (CCC) strengthened the cooperation with American churches with the help of Billy Graham Centered network. Billy Graham has been an important mediator between religious leaders and organization in China and the US, encouraging more frequent and more positive communication. For example, the Bible exhibition of the Chinese church in America received strong support from Billy Graham. Both Franklin and Nelson Graham had extensive cooperation with The Three Self Protestant Church and the China Christian Council, and also maintain close relationships with the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA or Religious Affairs Bureau, RAB). In 1997 just before Jiang's visit to America, East Gates invited a delegation of China Christian leaders to visit the US and participate in the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington. On this occasion, Ye Xiaowen, the head of the RAB, met with President Bill Clinton and made a brief presentation on the religious situation in China to President Clinton.

Leaders of house churches in China had an ambivalent attitude towards Billy Graham's visit in response to the invitation from the China Christian Council. On the one hand they opposed Graham's coming to China through the CCC. On the other hand Graham's visit brought them increased visibility and encouragement from abroad. To some extent Graham helped accelerate a long, slow process of amelioration and compromise between the registered churches and some of the house churches.

Billy Graham encouraged the Three-Self Church and the house church to reach the reconciliation in the past decades. Owing to the historical and theological gap, his effort was not fruitful. Billy Graham helped to reshape the perceptions of China and its churches among a vast network of Christians around the world. East Gates has continued and deepened the dialogue between Christians in North America and Christians in China. In the past two decades the organization invited the Chinese Christian delegations and the delegation of the SARA to visit America several times. Billy Graham and his associations have enlarged Western understandings of China's complexity. Instead of urging sanctions on China as some right-wing Christians have advocated, Graham and like-minded Christian leaders worked vigorously to help ordinary Americans understand the challenges faced by the Chinese people, and the value of constructive engagement with China on both political, religious and economic levels.

Nelson Graham, who had visited China near 50 times since 1988, gave testimony before the US Senate Finance Committee on March 23, 2003, advocating for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with China. He said, "I look forward to the US granting PNTR to China and China's accession into WTO because it will: 1) Encourage China's adherence to international law and a rules based trading system; 2) facilitate China's civil society in developing its internal rule of law; and 3) expand personal freedoms for its population. I believe that these continued changes will have a positive impact on China's religious policies and stimulate China's overall growth and development." East Gates Ministries has developed strong connections with Christian and other organizations both in China and the US. It received official permission to print more than 3 million Bibles at the Amity Printing Press in Nanjing and to distribute them to house churches throughout China—churches which often in the past have had no reliable legal source for Bibles. East Gates publications have been distributed to many local churches throughout North America reporting on their work in East Asia and raising awareness about the church in China. Nelson and his wife, Christina Kuo Graham, regularly address religious and social audiences on topics related to contemporary Christianity in China, expanding Americans' awareness with regard to religious issues in the People's Republic.

Franklin Graham has also fostered the close relationship with SARA and China Christian Council in recent years. He visited mainland China in 2008, 2009 and 2011, and preached to thousands of people in different cities, including his mother's birth place. Both Samaritan's Purse and BGEA have actively engaged China. Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008 caused an extremely large number of deaths and injuries while Franklin Graham was visiting China. Samaritan's Purse sent relief goods by plane from North Carolina to Sichuan directly. Many Chinese knew it by CCTV News Broadcast, the most influential official news program in China. It is also a breakthrough that the news about American faith-based organizations was included in this TV new program.

Last year Will Graham, the oldest son of Franklin Graham, also preached first time in a state-recognized church in Shenzhen, one of the major metropolitan China city near Hong Kong. This Billy Graham-style approach to China that fosters relationships with high-ranking Chinese officials, avoiding harsh criticism in order to change China gradually, is also exemplified by other evangelical organizations such as Advocates International. Professor Allen Hertzke notes, "There is a need for workable relations with non-democratic governments to keep avenues of

ministry open. Thus Billy Graham supported the normalization of trade relations with China because he believes it will foster channels for religious contact and evangelizing.”

Billy Graham has been part of that religious change in the United States, and has both shaped that change and has been shaped by those changes. Throughout his career Graham has sought to bring religious change to people and institutions as he called people to “make a decision for Christ” and to bring Christian values to bear on the lives of people and societies. He believed that gospel was as relevant for the people of China as it was for the people of the United States. Because of his influence on opinion shapers as well as churches, organizations, social networks and ordinary people, both the U.S. and the Chinese governments wanted to use Billy Graham for their own particular political purposes in the unpredictable drama of Sino-U.S. relations. Nixon needed Billy Graham as a mediator between the KMT regime and his administration. After 1978 the Chinese government regarded Billy Graham's visits as a way providing the world with a golden symbol of religious freedom in China. From his side, Graham never deviated from his goal of giving the message of Jesus to all people everywhere and to call them to radical religious change through their own encounter with Christ.

Billy Graham never wasted any opportunity provided by a political or media platforms to spread the gospel. As a special messenger between the KMT regime and the U.S. government, Billy Graham was not distracted by a seismic political landscape. He used official endorsement and high level political connections to carry out a crusade in Taiwan with the same evangelistic intention of every other crusade. Billy Graham welcomed China's open door policy as a harbinger of greater religious freedom and an opportunity for the gospel rather than merely an overture for free trade or academic exchange or as the launch of a new foreign policy. Building on his unique status in the U.S. and internationally and on his close ties with American political leaders such as former President Nixon and State Secretary Kissinger, Billy Graham opened conversations with the Chinese government and built friendships with leaders in the Three-Self Church, even before his first visit in China. Billy Graham chose Hong Kong as a bridge to spread the gospel to mainland China, encouraging the missionary work of overseas Chinese churches since it was not possible for his own organization to support missionary work in China publicly. Since 1980 Billy Graham has promoted communication between Chinese churches—both Three-Self and house churches—and churches around the world.

In spite of opposition and persecution, the church in China has experienced rapid growth during the past three decades. Billy Graham's approach to evangelism helped create space for Christian witness in China. Graham himself made a unique contribution to Sino-US relations. By the end of Cold War, the world's remaining superpower had a diminished need to be concerned about China's place in the geopolitical situation. In the meantime American political and civic leaders rediscovered the contribution of Christianity to global democracy which corresponded to the vision of Christianity to let the world hear His voice. To some extent, the movement for religious freedom became one of the American government's tools to promote American-style democracy all over the world. Many hardline American Christian organizations are very active in the international arena and aim to use American global supremacy to promote religious freedom while limiting religious persecution. Only a handful of American Christian organizations have initiated work in China because of strict regulations and bureaucratic obstacles. Few Christian

organizations have the patience to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complex religious situation and uniqueness of Chinese society.

American Evangelicals and Sino-U.S. Relations in Post-missionary Era

American missions in China had already gone into the post-missionary era. American Protestant churches which lacked systematic and direct organizational mechanism in China helped to shape the Chinese protestant evangelical movement in the terms of theology, structure and activities in the post-missionary era.

With the new trend of globalization and the special situation in China, American churches' China missions transformed from the missionaries oriented to missions oriented in 1970's. Missionaries are not the key hubs between two countries, and to send missionaries is no longer the main approach to evangelize China. American missions with diverse ways of involvement and engagement in China instead of American missionaries, became visionary and influential in China. Based on the leading role of American churches in the world, facilitated with the new ways of transforming mission, American churches have been exerting powerful influence on the resurgence of Christianity in China. With the rapid growth of Christian churches, especially underground churches in China, American Protestantism even became an ideal model for many Chinese Christians. To some extent, American Protestants help shape some views among not only many Christians, but also many Chinese, for examples, church-state relations, religious freedom, civil societies, and many others.

In the post-missionary era, the separation wall was not higher than before both in the United State and in China. The US government increasingly involves in religious affairs abroad. Religious freedom is still a sensitive issue in Sino-U.S. relations, and underground church, religious freedom in China and some other related issues are very popular among American Christians, human rights advocates and many politicians. Something changed when the balance of power between two countries is shifting so rapidly.

In the post-missionary era, China became a country with Christian prominence in numbers. Now China is the biggest exporter country in terms of Bibles, Christmas decorations, Christian sculptures and many goods related with Christianity. Also China is not only a missionary-receiving country, but also a big missionary-sending country with large number missionaries in the other countries.

Conclusion

What is to be the role of Evangelical Christians in Sino-US relations? Although your voice may be limited in the broader context of Sino-US relations, it is crucial to future evangelistic work in and beyond China. And as Billy Graham's life and witness have demonstrated, even a preacher's voice may be heard and heeded in places of power when it is offered with courage, candor and humility.