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Reconstructing Missionary History in China Today: Cultural Heritage, Local Politics and Christianity in Xiamen

Jifeng Liu

This article examines a memorial service held in Xiamen in 2010 for an American missionary who died and was buried there in 1910. The missionary, accused of association with imperialism under Mao, had been largely forgotten by the locals until this event. During the ceremony, all charges against the missionary were unofficially dropped and his service was highly commended. By attempting to explain what sociocultural mechanisms enabled Xiamen citizens to counter official amnesia and demolish the state's domination of discourse on missionaries, I argue that the official manipulation of missionary discourse is not always effective; the reconstruction of missionary history in today's China is an ongoing, dynamic process of negotiation in which all parties involved remake the past to suit their own interests.

Keywords: China; Christianity; Missionary History; State Narratives; Official Amnesia; Cultural Heritage

Introduction

In 2010 a memorial service was held in Xiamen for John Otte (1861–1910), an American missionary who died and was buried there in 1910. Accused of association with imperialism during the political campaigns of the early People's Republic of China (PRC), Otte had been largely forgotten by the local people but, for the purpose of this ceremony, his life in the Xiamen area was reconstructed. The event took place at the very moment that the municipal government initiated an application to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS). In the hope of bolstering its application and raising international recognition of the city, the government promoted the history of Christianity¹ in the region and accorded the church more space.

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As a significant theme running through its modern history, Christianity's inglorious role in China's 'national humiliation' helped redefine the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) historical role as the liberator of the long-suffering nation from imperialist forces. The association between Christianity and imperialism has predominated in the CCP-led history writing of modern China. Gu Changsheng's (1981) book *Missionaries and Modern China*, the result of an official project on Christian history, represents a mainstream view: Catholic and Protestant missionaries were instruments of imperialist aggression. In spite of the fact that Gu (2009) has revised his position in many of the arguments in this publication, particularly since becoming an American citizen, the book has run to four editions, the latest in 2013. At the turn of the century, the officially sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC) were still publishing volumes criticising the disgraceful role of Christianity in the imperialistic invasion of China (Luo 2003; TSPM & CCC 2006). Nevertheless, in the popular re-creation of Otte, negative discourse on this American missionary has been totally dropped. This begs the question of how, in Otte's case, a complete reversal of discourse was possible? This article attempts to pinpoint what sociocultural mechanisms enabled Xiamen citizens to counter official amnesia and demolish the state domination of discourse on missionaries.

The notion of 'social memory' frequently applied in the study of state-society relationships has two clearly defined approaches. Advocated by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the 'invention of tradition' perspective scrutinises how public notions of history are manipulated by the dominant sectors in society. Researchers adopting this paradigm have illustrated how traditions and histories are invented to legitimise political structures, solidify social orders and sustain national communities (Evans 1998; Goody 1986; Green 2015; Lane 1981; Nora 2012; Wertsch 2002). Many studies demonstrate that, as an official monopoly, under Chinese Communist rule well-designed history has been instrumental in shaping the populace's social memory (Béja 2007; Ci 1994, chapter 2; Unger 1993; Zhou 2013). The 'popular memory' approach, inspired by Foucault's (1977) notion of counter-memory, refers to other long silent voices and the Popular Memory Group's (1982) study of alternative memories. Unlike the former perspective, this framework emphasises that memories can also be constructed and contested from the bottom up. This has also been adopted by China scholars looking at contemporary unofficial narratives shared by members of certain social segments who do not necessarily adhere to the dominant or official representations of the past (Harrison 2013; Jing 1996; Watson 1994a; Zhang & Weatherley 2013).

Memory studies has been boosted by the 'dynamic-of-memory' approach that treats social memory as a continuous exercise in dialogue and reveals the way actors refashion the past (in general or what might have happened to them personally) to suit what they want to achieve now (Olick & Levy 1997; Schudson 1992). Hence remembering is not reduced to an instrument of elite manipulation or mere popular resistance. As Myszal (2003, 73) states, this approach 'runs a lower risk of reifying

collective memory as it is aware of the flexibility and ambiguities of memory and because it incorporates conflict, contest and controversy as the hallmarks of memory’.

As a result of Chinese society becoming more liberal and plural over three decades of reform and opening-up policy, the state is experiencing difficulties in continuing to monopolise the social memory of Christianity. However, it would be overly optimistic to exaggerate the ability of the populace to contest state narratives. Negotiating mechanisms for dealing with this tension around the Christian past have been spontaneously formed in the societal fabric. Inspired by the ‘dynamic-of-memory’ approach, this article treats the reconstruction of missionary history in today’s China as an ongoing, dynamic process of negotiation.

Field Site and Research Methods

Xiamen, one of the best deep-water harbours in China, is located on the southeast coast of Fujian province. Defeated by the British in the First Opium War (1839–42), the Qing government was forced to open Xiamen to become one of five treaty ports. In 1903, Gulangyu (formerly known as Kulangsu), an islet less than two square kilometres off the coast of Xiamen, officially became an international settlement on which thirteen countries established their consulates. The Kulangsu Municipal Council (KMC), independent of the Qing government, was founded in 1903 to maintain public order. Because Gulangyu was managed as an international community unaffected by the instability in Xiamen and its environs, the islet rapidly prospered. As a treaty port, Xiamen was a region quite independent of the Chinese state and hence a comparatively relaxed space conducive to the acceptance and spread of Christianity.

Forty-four officially sanctioned churches and gathering points (*juhuidian*) plus dozens of unregistered churches (known as ‘house churches’) or congregations are currently located in Xiamen. There is no reliable figure for the present number of Christians, but a leading pastor of the Xiamen TSPM conservatively estimated 30 to 40,000 registered Christians; 1.5 to 2 per cent of the city’s two million registered inhabitants. Given that members of unregistered churches probably outnumber those in registered congregations, Christians in the Xiamen city probably account for 4 to 5 per cent of registered inhabitants.

Drawing on six months field research in Xiamen in 2014, this ethnographic reconstruction of the commemoration event for John Otte is based on interviews and documents. As local officials consider the study of Christianity to be still sensitive, I was denied access to the archives of Maoist-era Christianity. Therefore my principal sources comprise the official *Xiamen Historical Materials* (*Xiamen wenshi ziliao*, Volumes 1, 3 and 16); *Xiamen Daily* (*Xiamen ribao*), the official mouthpiece of the CCP Xiamen Committee; and the latest official narratives on Gulangyu’s historical and cultural legacy contained in the WHS application document. Taken together these sources enable analysis of state discourses on missionary and Christian histories. Pastors, lay church members, government officials and locals involved in the Otte

ceremony were interviewed. To explore how the event was organised, transcripts of online discussions and videotapes of preparatory meetings provided by the organisers were examined. To protect the respondents' identities, all names in this paper have been changed.

A Memorial Service Revisited

On the afternoon of 10 April 2010, a few days after the annual Grave Sweeping Festival (Qingming), people gathered in the square in front of the original site of the Hope Hospital on the islet of Gulangyu to commemorate the centenary of John Otte's death. Like many other celebrations in China today, the ceremony commenced with a speech by the convener on behalf of the organising committee. Several prominent local people also addressed the crowd gathered for the ceremony, before the organisers and honoured guests unveiled a specially commissioned bust of Otte. A procession of people laid flowers at the foot of the bust. The Xiamen Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) choir sang hymns to open and close the ceremony (Figure 1).

Otte, born in the Netherlands in 1861, emigrated to the US with his family in 1867. He studied medicine at the University of Michigan, obtaining his MD. Later he was appointed a medical missionary of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Otte and his wife arrived in Xiamen in January 1888. After nearly a decade of service establishing and then operating a hospital in remote Pinghe county, Otte assumed responsibility for the construction and running of the Hope Hospital, Gulangyu, in April



Figure 1 The Memorial Service for John Otte. In the background is the newly repaired Hope Hospital complex. Photo provided by Chen Yongpeng.

1898. He served there until his death from pneumonic plague, contracted from one of his patients, on 14 April 1910. He was buried in the missionary cemetery near the hospital. In the twelve years that Otte worked at the Hope Hospital, more than 17,000 inpatients and 135,000 outpatients were treated, and over 7500 disparate surgical operations were performed (Warnshuis 1911, 23–24). As one of the founding fathers of modern medicine in Southern Fujian, Otte also trained the first group of local Western medical doctors and nurses. Moreover, he designed the renowned red-domed Eight-Trigram Building on Gulangyu, even today the most conspicuous landmark of the islet, indeed of the whole city.

Christianity in Xiamen dates from the arrival of the first American RCA missionary, David Abee, who brought the gospel on a British warship on 24 February 1842, six months before the Treaty of Nanjing was signed. The London Missionary Society and the Presbyterian Church of England followed shortly after the RCA in 1844 and 1850. Hundreds of Western missionaries served in Xiamen up to the 1950s. Their work was not confined to evangelisation; they also became involved in health care, education, newspapers and other public undertakings (Cheung 2004; De Jong 1992). Up to 1949, Christianity constantly affected secular life in Xiamen and became deeply embedded in the local cultural and social structure (White, *forthcoming*). At the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, US imperialism was the unifying rallying point for the young PRC and, as nationalist sentiments soared, the number of missionaries decreased sharply. By the mid-1950s, the few foreign missionaries who remained after the Communist takeover were either forced to leave or were expelled from Southern Fujian.

Although Otte had been dead for half a century, in the turmoil engendered by the extreme political movements that characterised the early PRC, it could be said that his soul found no peace. The first issue of *Xiamen Historical Materials* in 1963 published a critical article attacking Otte specifically. The authors accused Otte of bullying the weak, extorting patients' money and committing indecent assaults on women. Otte was denigrated as a 'hypocrite with an extremely ugly soul' and an 'imperialist rogue riding on the Chinese people's heads' (Zheng & Huang 1963). Even more sadly, his grave was destroyed and so far his remains have not been recovered.

During the 2010 memorial service for Otte, all charges against him were unofficially dropped; he was even highly praised as 'Xiamen's Bethune'. Norman Bethune was a Canadian physician and anti-fascist who served with the Eighth Route Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). He made a deep impression on the Communist leader Mao Zedong, whose article *In Memory of Norman Bethune*, was committed to memory by generations of Chinese students. The analogy of Otte as 'Bethune' signalled popular recognition of the missionary. The event reached its climax in the speech by Zhao Tianyi, a retired Communist cadre, the former director of the Xiamen Culture Bureau. Zhao's address, entitled 'Dare to Rehabilitate Those Who Were Blackened', impressed the audience deeply as he enumerated all accusations against Otte and refuted them one by one.

The Re-creation of a Historical Figure

The Reappearance of John Otte

A brief sketch of the grassroots group that organised the event is indispensable to a proper understanding of the celebration. Gulang Voice is an informal group founded in 2009, whose aim is to research and protect Gulangyu's cultural and historical heritage. Since its foundation, its membership has swelled rapidly to over 300 people from all walks of life including scholars, writers, businessmen, photographers and documentary filmmakers. This informal, fairly loose-knit group was convened by Cui Jiayu, an employee in a state-owned enterprise. Anxious to stress the group's mission to preserve Gulangyu's history and culture, its members had been waiting for a major opportunity to make their public debut.

In August 2009, Gulang Voice members were enthusiastically discussing Gulangyu's historical celebrities in their online forum. One of them posted a scanned letter to the Xiamen Municipal Government from Otte's granddaughter.² This letter, describing Otte's life in China and mentioning the Hope Hospital and other major landmarks he designed, including the Eight-Trigram Building, immediately precipitated an intense discussion. Moved by comments posted online by forum members such as '[Otte's] professionalism in saving lives regardless of his personal safety' and '[his] dedication to the people of Xiamen', group members began referring to Otte as 'Xiamen's Bethune'. Cui Jiayu drew members' attention to the approaching centenary of Otte's death, planting the idea of celebrating this event. The notion resonated with other members and within a short time, a proposal was submitted for discussion at the next group meeting. A general consensus was reached in the meeting to hold a 'Three-in-One Program', namely: one photo exhibition; one memorial service; and one anthology of written works on Otte.

Re-creating John Otte

Of the hundreds of missionaries who served in the Xiamen area, over 150 were sent into the field by the RCA (De Jong 1992, 347–349). Many died there and were buried in the missionary cemetery on Gulangyu. However, besides some old buildings and a few tombstones, very few material remains survived the political campaigns unleashed in the Maoist era. How did Gulang Voice re-create such a historical figure with the limited materials available? To my surprise, nearly all of the people I talked to said they did not know about Otte or had been unaware of him before the 2010 memorial service. Even the key organisers of the ceremony admitted that, although they had been living in Xiamen for years and had often passed the Hope Hospital building, they were fairly ignorant about both Otte and missionary history.

Rather than commemorating a missionary, those group members with a self-declared social conscience wanted to participate in a broad spectrum social event. Educated members versed in the history of late imperial and Republican Xiamen insisted that this area was once the most prosperous place in South China. Comparatively

speaking, Xiamen has now been overtaken economically by other coastal cities. Since the new millennium, as some of my respondents said, Gulangyu has quickly 'deteriorated into a resort island crammed with seafood restaurants, barbecue stalls and souvenir shops'. To their regret, Gulangyu is no longer the beautiful, clean, civilised and romantic island of the past. The economic exploitation of Gulangyu has produced nostalgic sentiments, particularly in those who do not benefit from tourism and frequently sigh 'Gulangyu is dead'. To the members of Gulang Voice, Otte represents the glorious past of the Xiamen area.

The organisers were convinced that Otte needed to be re-created as a 'real' historical figure who had lived and served in the Xiamen region for decades. Qin Gaoyang, a documentary filmmaker, bought dozens of old photographs and postcards from abroad. Pastor Zhou shared a series of unpublished articles about the missionary that had been collected by Otte's descendants. The whole enterprise was boosted by one of Otte's used calling cards and the title deed to the hospital land. The most prestigious document was the title deed, purchased from abroad by a group member, comprising three documents: an 1887 survey of the hospital site by the Xiamen Coastal Defence Authorities; the 1889 official permission to lease land in perpetuity to build the Hope Hospital; and the 1905 land lease for the women's division of the hospital. This title deed, signed by Otte, bears the seals of the Qing government and the American and Dutch consulates. Its authenticity was confirmed by local history experts. People believed that this was sufficient proof that Otte had acquired the land through legitimate channels. This legality contradicted the accepted narratives that Western missionaries had seized the rights to lease or buy Chinese land by exerting imperialist force. These documents testify to Otte's innocence of any misdeed in the disgraceful history of imperialist aggression. The group members fervently hoped that Otte could be portrayed as a great man untarnished by any historical blemish. In short, it was expected that the organisation of such an event for a non-controversial figure would not cause political problems.

However, the group soon realised that more than a few historical documents were required to restore honour to Otte. The celebration still lacked the support of acknowledged history experts. As a renowned expert on Xiamen history and a public figure through his exposure in the local media and participation in many local cultural events, Wang Yaode was regarded as an Otte expert principally because of his translation of A. L. Warnshuis's (1911) biographical sketch of Otte. Group members invited Wang Yaode to present an introduction to the doctor's life. While his knowledge of his subject was fairly restricted to what was in the biography he had translated, this limited information was considered sufficient, since the group sought Wang's reputation rather than his knowledge. A detailed chronology of Otte's life was finalised under Wang's guidance, and no time was lost adopting this as the standard version. The group members involved in the memorial event attended several lectures, presented by Wang, in which they were made aware of the historical 'truth' embodied in Otte's chronology. Although mistakes occurred in this chronology, people did not bother to seek clarification and quickly circulated it both within and outside the

group. Ordinary people thus managed to counter the official amnesia and reconstruct a collective memory.

The central figures on the organising committee understood that, were the event to be held, it was crucial to desensitise Otte as a man with multiple identities: missionary, doctor and architect. The group rapidly agreed that Otte's missionary background should be passed over and his identities as doctor and architect highlighted instead. Nobody denied his dedication as a doctor as the hospital building still stands there, even though it is no longer used. The Eight-Trigram Building, a landmark not just of Gulangyu but also of Xiamen, testifies to his great talent as an architect. Qin Gaoyang advocated that Otte also be celebrated as a photographer. Examining the signatures on the bottom of four sets of old postcards issued by the RCA to commemorate Otte, Qin was excited to find that some of the photographs had been taken by Otte himself. While some members were dubious about Otte's new-found identity as a photographer and believed that he was, at best, an enthusiastic amateur, Qin insisted that these beautiful pictures would not have been possible had he not acquired a high degree of technical proficiency. Moreover, he argued, as a doctor Otte must have learned about X-ray technology, requiring skills in both photography and film processing. However, the German scientist Wilhelm Röntgen (1845–1923) discovered X-rays in 1895, and only later were they applied to medicine; the Hope Hospital bought its first X-ray machine from the US in 1932. Otte could not have had any experience of radiology before his departure to China in 1887 and there is no evidence to indicate he learned anything about it during periods of sabbatical leave. Since Qin's 'discovery' enriched Otte's image and contributed to balancing his missionary background, his colleagues finally agreed to acknowledge Otte's identity as a photographer.

In the list of priorities established by Gulang Voice, Otte was primarily a doctor, then an architect and finally a photographer. Although Otte's missionary background was not mentioned publicly at the memorial service, no one denied Otte's position in the Christian history of Xiamen. To ensure the complete desensitisation of Otte's legacy, the organising committee decided that Gulang Voice should nominally take charge of the event; its grassroots group status underscoring the secular aspect of this event. It was understood that the Xiamen church and the Christian community could not adopt a high profile in such an uncertain political situation.

Former Rightists: Remembering the Dead, Grieving for the Living

Zhao Tianyi, a retired Communist cadre labelled a rightist (*youpai*), was rendered a non-person during the Anti-Rightist Movement of the 1950s. Later he was 'redressed' (*gaizheng*), becoming a government official and influential Party member. Given his Communist background and his courage in speaking up, the Gulang Voice group believed his speech would be extremely influential. Therefore Zhao was made prime keynote speaker. Although Zhao knew very little about Otte, he was delighted to accept the invitation to give a speech at the commemoration. He did know what the audience expected and his speech did not disappoint. He carefully read the

article targeting Otte in the first issue of *Xiamen Historical Materials* and analysed the accusations against him. Zhao then expanded his theme and advocated the rehabilitation of all once stigmatised people. In the late 1970s and early 80s, redressing those who had been deeply wronged in the Maoist period lay at the centre of politics in post-Mao China. Consequently, Zhao's speech was easily interpreted as political. As Pastor Zhou said to me, 'Zhao opened fire on the government'.

In my conversations with those accused of being rightists, they often lamented that although they had been redressed, they had not been completely rehabilitated (*pingfan*). These two corrective actions differ significantly. In the late 1970s, the Chinese leadership launched its work of righting past wrongs under the slogan 'extracting order from chaos and returning to rectitude' (*boluan fanzheng*). Then, in the early 1980s, those wronged were allowed to resume their former positions, but neither a public apology nor national compensation has ever been extended to them. Nor have steps been taken to rehabilitate the denigrated missionaries.

Although the political atmosphere had been liberalised, no official re-evaluation of missionaries had occurred. Discussing his speech, Zhao Tianyi smiled at me proudly and said:

Now was the time for a tactical move. I spoke from the Marxist perspective of historical stages. Specifically, they [the Party's Marxist theorists] said the late Qing was [an era of] feudalism. Undeniably, Western capitalism represented by missionaries was an advanced stage [of the process]; their arrival in China was [therefore part of] a historic progress.

Zhao even quoted the Party's former leader Liu Shaoqi's remark—'History is written by the people'—to affirm grassroots efforts towards a reappraisal of Otte. Zhao's speech certainly resonated with the audience. Some grassroots officials even praised him privately for his courage. However, in the newspaper the next day, nothing of the content of his speech was mentioned (although his name was included in the report).

In China and elsewhere, mourning ceremonies offer a special arena within which individual suffering can be accorded public or cultural significance (Johnson 1988; Watson 1994a). The memorial service for Otte gave former rightists an opportunity to air their grievances about their decades of suffering and the absence of acknowledgement by the Party of the traumas it inflicted on ordinary people.

World Heritage and Local Politics

Pragmatism and the Principled Stand of the Local State

As China grows, the government is striving to enhance its 'soft power' (*ruanshili*), and WHS status is one avenue of projecting Chinese culture and history to the rest of the world. Recently, the Chinese government has actively promoted cultural and religious sites both to earn tourist revenue and to express nationalistic pride in China's past

(Oakes & Sutton 2010). The entry of scenic sites on the UNESCO list has become a coveted classification for local governments.

In this context, Gulangyu, an officially recognised national 5A scenic area, was formally placed on the agenda of a WHS status application in 2009. This aspiration was not universally popular and, for a variety of reasons, it immediately incurred opposition, both silent and public. Gulangyu officials were reluctant to take responsibility for making the application, because they knew the process would be arduous. Some university scholars were opposed as a 'matter of principle' (*yuanze wenti*): Gulangyu was once a colony forcibly occupied by foreign powers, therefore to commemorate this heritage would be tantamount to celebrating imperialism. Scholars of this persuasion argued that Xiamen people should not be 'doubly humiliated'. However, their objections went unheard as prominent municipal leaders had already pledged their commitment to their provincial superiors; consultation with the experts had been a mere formality. Subsequently, the university professors were not consulted, and were completely marginalised in the decision-making process. The municipal government then lost no time in preparing the formal application for WHS status.

The Gulangyu Management Committee (GMC) officials understood that Gulangyu's past had to be redefined, a tactic essential for two reasons: to fulfil WHS criteria and to convince opponents. In its quest to distinguish Gulangyu from competitors around the world, the application committee conducted a comparative study and determined that Gulangyu's superiority lay in its architectural and cultural diversity. Xu Mingde, one such official, said: 'The most outstanding feature of Gulangyu was that of the KMC. It was composed of representatives of different countries and was established to govern the island. Hence these Westerners [and Chinese] lived together in peace and harmony'. Tactically the officials were stressing that Western countries represented diverse cultures rather than colonial powers. When a design team affiliated with Tsinghua University, among the most prestigious universities in China, was invited to draft the application documents, the officials specifically instructed that the island's colonial background be omitted; the description must be 'neutral' and avoid such words as 'imperialist aggression'.³ The true semantics of 'neutral description' as used by local cadres was actually a positive reinterpretation of the past. A quotation from the original application documents submitted to the World Heritage Centre (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5807>) on 19 January 2013 reads as follows:

With the approval of the Qing government, Gulangyu was officially carved up as an international concession in 1903, so as to balance the powers of the Western countries and to collectively protect the port trade in Xiamen. Hence there emerged an autonomous system commonly run by several countries on the island [...] Thanks to the influx, clash and integration of multiple cultures in the nearly 100 years, the sea-island landscape of Gulangyu, its free-style urban fabric, various matched community functions, diverse architectural styles and technology with strong stamps of the age, and graceful and delicate design of home gardens as a whole, created a unique community environment of Gulangyu, which exhibited its global multicultural background and its subsequent developments and re-creations. All of these made

Gulangyu a unique example of a modernized international community in the beginning of the 20th century.

Historically the Gulangyu International Settlement had long been denounced as a base of imperialist aggression against China's southeast coast. The KMC was also criticised for extraterritorial imperialism as it permitted unauthorised seizure, trampling on China's sovereignty and degrading the Chinese people. The third (1980) and sixteenth (1990) volumes of *Xiamen Historical Materials*, about the International Settlement, discuss the darkness enshrouding the island under imperialist occupation and praise the anti-imperialist struggle of local people. Now times have changed. In the new official narrative of Gulangyu, the International Settlement has been reinterpreted as 'a modern, international, public community, home to multiple cultures'. The KMC is even described as 'a self-administered agency with modern attributes' (GMC 2012, 2–3). The history of the island reproduced by the authorities whitewashes the historical shame so that the WHS application would be acceptable.

Church Legacies and World Cultural Heritage

One thorny issue confronting the GMC officials was the haemorrhaging of cultural elements. The presenters of the WHS application faced a dilemma: since the departure of the foreigners in the late 1940s no traces of intangible culture remained on the island, only tangible buildings. Only a very small number of foreigners still lived there but no longer influenced the island's cultural landscape.

Theoretically, instead of following a policy of sporadically trying to eradicate all religions, the post-Mao government acquiesces in a trade-off permitting limited freedom of religious belief in exchange for continued political loyalty (Potter 2003). However, in his analysis of the New Street Church in Xiamen, White (2010) reveals that bearing tourism and historical importance in mind the local authorities have indeed attempted to co-opt the church. In the WHS application, fifty-three core heritage sites were identified on Gulangyu, eleven related to Christianity, including the Christian cemetery and a church-run hospital and schools. In fact, the authorities had ignored Christian sites before Gulangyu was placed on the WHS application agenda. In 1992, they had even initially toyed with the idea of expropriating the Christian cemetery to expand the large botanical garden on the island.

After the decision to proceed with the WHS application, the religious issue, namely Gulangyu's connection to Christianity, could no longer be overlooked. As Xu Mingde told me:

Christianity constitutes an indispensable part of Gulangyu's cultural heritage; therefore we must pay attention to it and include it in our WHS application. Had there been no Christian culture, no modern Gulangyu civilisation would have existed and hence no possibility to submit the present WHS application. Were Christianity excluded few things would be left, since these core sites—hospital, schools and churches—all had a connection to it. Christianity led the way for the modern civilisation of Gulangyu. Following the introduction of Christianity, Western thought, culture, music and lifestyles arrived. As the number of foreigners increased, more

Western cultures were introduced and interacted with Chinese culture. Gulangyu prospered soon after.

Hu Weikang, deputy head of the GMC, also noted:

Christianity exerted a great influence both on Gulangyu, on Southern Fujian and the whole of China, in medicine, the arts and sports. It changed the mindset of the Xiamen people and their lifestyle; even now it continues to affect the way people live. Gulangyu people have unique personalities precisely because of Christianity. They love music and sports because of Christianity.

The value of Otte's legacy emerges distinctly in Hu's description: 'When the world heritage experts come, we shall take them to see Otte's bust. Hopefully Chinese people will have laid flowers in his memory, even if the flowers have withered. It will show that Chinese people still remember Otte'.

The Invisible Presence of the State

'We Did Serious Things in a Non-Serious [Informal] Way'

The members of Gulang Voice knew that the memorial service had to be officially sanctioned. The Hope Hospital building and the square in front of it are government property. Without government consent, the group would have had difficulty in finding a spot on the islet to hold the event. Importantly, its members were also highly aware of the political sensitivity of the event, even though they believed they had re-created an unflawed image of Otte.

When Cui Jiayu and his colleagues visited them and spoke of John Otte, the officials were interested. Hu Weikang received them privately, not as an official GMC representative, and was happy to give permission for the event. Although the problem of the venue was solved, the officials' concern about the political sensitivity of the exercise had not been totally eliminated. As the event drew closer, Cui perceived slight changes in Hu Weikang's attitude. Initially, Hu was strongly supportive, but later became quite circumspect. In our interview, I also sensed Hu's caution when I mentioned that the GMC's involvement in the restoration and preservation of church heritage had 'made its mark on the WHS application, and had indirectly helped the church'. He immediately responded cautiously, correcting my wording:

This is not about help. You should not put it in those terms [...] If church [buildings] are restored, it might seem like a superficial protection of the church. However, the actual reason is to ensure that tourists can experience religious culture and this will enhance the quality of their tourism.

Given the risk to his or her political future, no official was willing to become involved in the Otte event. Hu Weikang explained to me:

The [municipal] government has not carried out any research on John Otte's character; there is no unit to undertake such a professional study. Consequently, no historical evaluation has been formulated. The government is not permitted to sponsor

foreigners, certainly not their systemic glorification, until it has been supplied with a scientific appraisal based on studies conducted by relevant departments.

With this understood by both sides, all connections between the authorities and Gulang Voice took place through informal channels. Speaking of the negotiations with the government, Cui Jiayu said: 'We did serious things in a non-serious [informal] way'. What Cui meant was that the group was deeply committed to holding the commemorative event; they recognised its value and were willing to devote their time and talents to organising the celebration. However, they did so utilising unofficial, informal methods. He continued: 'Government officials, particularly those who are natives, supported us privately. However, they were all aware of potential trouble and dared not acknowledge their endorsement publicly. All negotiations occurred privately; publicly they turned a blind eye to our activities'. Therefore, no written documents were used in their communications, and private meetings were preferred. The GMC did not report this event to its superior authorities. Should any senior government officials have apportioned blame, the Gulangyu leaders could have easily evaded responsibility with a plausible denial.

The first priority was that Otte's memorial service should be packaged as a cultural event, not a religious activity. This decision gave the Gulangyu officials and the group some common ground: the service was to be presented as a secular activity; as an embodiment of folk wisdom.

Incorporated State Authority

Although superficially it might have appeared the state was absent during the Otte event, a deeper analysis reveals that its tentacles did penetrate this civic activity. Although the memorial service was ultimately a great success, contentions had inevitably arisen during the process. The greatest hurdle was that not all the Gulang Voice members agreed with the program for Otte, arguing that such a high-profile memorial event for a historical missionary would probably be banned by the government. Nevertheless, the concerns of a few did not dissuade the majority. In fact, opponents of the plan were disparaged as 'the left' (*zuo de*). In a self-proclaimed non-governmental group, this was tantamount to negative labelling; a deprecation levelled at those willing to accept the authoritative rule of the single party. The dissenting voices were quickly silenced by the clamour of the majority.

More trouble emerged when, using a network of personal relations, Qin Gaoyang contacted the US Consul General in Guangzhou who appreciated their efforts to commemorate an American citizen and promised to attend the ceremony. When Qin submitted the plan to the organising committee, to his surprise he faced strong opposition. His opponents argued that, if an American diplomat were present at the memorial service, it would be turned into a diplomatic affair. It was reasonable to presume that, if the US Consul General in Guangzhou were to attend, the municipal or even the provincial governments would be obliged to send officials from foreign

affairs to escort the guest. The commemoration would be elevated to a diplomatic and political affair. This inevitable politicisation would attract the government's attention. To avoid trouble, the government would probably ban it. Very probably the program would be forbidden by the GMC even before they had reported it for city-level approval. Finally, Qin had to concede and withdrew his invitation to the American diplomat. Apart from Qin's informal communication with foreign affairs officials, nobody else raised the matter of the attendance of any American diplomats to government officials. Most were convinced that it would cause trouble. In this instance the authority of the state was incorporated by the group members. And not only in this case but throughout this whole process group members' perceptions of the authority of the state profoundly affected the shape of the memorial event and generated small crises throughout the planning process.

The Church Behind the Scenes

Stigmatised Missionaries and Official Amnesia

Very few people in the church had known anything about Otte, a fact confirmed through my interviews with both clergy and laity. Turning to the Xiamen church as a whole, it is impossible to say with confidence that local Christians are ignorant of the past. Even today some are still aware of the fate of foreign missionaries under Mao Zedong's regime. 'The art of official amnesia always goes hand in hand with the art of political remembrance' (Ci 1994, 81). Previous studies show that harsh memories of Maoist state repression of Protestantism and Catholicism profoundly affect believers' current religious practices and interactions with the authorities (Harrison 2013; Hunter & Chan 1993; Madsen 1998; Wu 2001).

In the 1950s, instead of being immediately expelled, some missionaries were obstructed from leaving China. It was not uncommon for members of a missionary group to be required to stand trial before being permitted to leave. Henry Poppen, an RCA missionary, was one singled out for trial, undoubtedly because he had served in many capacities during his more than thirty years' service in the Xiamen region. Poppen's trial was held on the athletics field of Talmage College in Zhangzhou in 1951 and was attended by approximately 10,000 local Christians and non-Christians. The trial lasted about three hours with various accusations made against Poppen, including 'colluding with the Japanese', 'sowing dissension between the masses and the government' and 'opposing world peace and democracy' (*Xiamen Daily*, 5 March 1951). The newly founded regime associated missionaries with Western (mainly American) imperialism, and mobilised the masses to humiliate them publicly, a tactic used by the new Communist regime to gain legitimacy. At that time, anything related to missionaries could cause Chinese citizens serious trouble. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), numerous pictures were burnt for fear of being raided by Red Guards. Another painful memory was awakened by recollections of the destruction of the missionary cemetery, including Otte's grave,

on Gulangyu in 1957. The incident severely offended the sensibilities of elder-generation Christians, something mentioned several times during my field research.

In the Maoist era no exception was made for the Hope Hospital. In December 1951, the Xiamen Health Bureau formally assumed control of it and its affiliated nursing school, and renamed it the Second Hospital of Xiamen. The Hope Hospital was condemned as a tool of imperialist aggression and American medical personnel were accused of adopting an ‘anti-Communist stance’, involvement in ‘counterrevolutionary activities’, ‘deliberately distributing the wrong medicine to sick children’ and ‘carrying out tests on Chinese patients for experimental purposes’ (*Xiamen Daily*, 8 January 1951).

Although only two pastors attended the Otte ceremony, dozens of lay Christians were present. No public prayer was led but attendees prayed silently for Otte. The commemoration proved a success for the Christian community as the number of Christians learning about Otte increased. Additionally, Gulang Voice gained popularity among Christians.

State-Recognised Pastor: Coordinator in Local Politics

Pastor Zhou now holds several positions in state-recognised Christian organisations, including the Xiamen YMCA and TSPM, the provincial TSPM and the Fujian Theological Seminary. Obviously Zhou has been endowed with legitimacy by the state. He participates actively in various social events and enjoys a good relationship with the authorities. During the WHS application process, on behalf of the TSPM, he assisted cadres in the restoration of church buildings as cultural relics, and by doing so won officials’ trust. As a ‘resourceful negotiating agent’ (Cao 2011, 172), Zhou specialises in dealing in communication and coordination in local politics.

Consulted about the Otte event, Pastor Zhou was adamant he should keep a low profile and not advocate openly on its behalf. Hence his coordinating role between Gulang Voice and the church did not attract undue attention. While his identity as a pastor was deliberately obfuscated in the subsequent media coverage, his role should not be underestimated. Besides the participation of the YMCA choir, Zhou remained in contact with Otte’s descendants and received the latter’s support for the commemoration. Even more importantly, as a member of the organising team, his presence definitely encouraged Gulang Voice. All present were aware of Otte’s missionary background. They would have been disappointed had the church stayed away, since the memorial service was, to a certain extent, a celebration of Christianity.

Conclusion

This analysis clearly reveals how the memory of the late John Otte was utilised by the parties involved to meet their respective needs. Despite its political sensitivity and the potential risk involved, the grassroots group, assisted by Pastor Zhou and with the acquiescence of local government officials, made the memorial event possible. The

actual theme pervading the negotiation was the historical narrative about a once stigmatised missionary. As a national project, social memory and the production of history have been dominated by ruling groups. Although the Maoist social engineers hope to dictate remembrance and forgetting, the official manipulation of society's memory is sometimes unsuccessful. The reconstruction of a collective memory is an ongoing process of negotiation and illustrates the limits imposed on the power of present-day actors to remake the past to suit their own requirements (Misztal 2003, 67–74). As Watson (1994b) notes, representations of the past consist of much more than written histories. The commemoration service for Otte represents a form of popular endeavour to negotiate with official narratives.

Such a grassroots event also prompted the people involved to reflect on issues touching upon history and politics. People, including members of Gulang Voice, the clergy and local history experts, were found to be willing to proclaim their cultural and historical missions, and to make it known that they expected a fair evaluation of historical figures. What made Otte a useful subject for commemoration was not his American identity but the fact that he was an international figure who exhibited good will to the Chinese people and whose memory had been sullied during the political campaigns of the early PRC. Rectifying the wrongs done to Otte was a means by which local people could put into practice their aspiration for alternative narratives. Although people disbelieve state narratives, these great master-narratives do not disappear (Connerton 1989, 1). The influence of state discourses on people's ways of thinking and behaving is not unexpected because the authority has been incorporated into their minds. However, under the current circumstances they needed the state's authority to legitimise the event, thereby ensuring its success.

The state is a shrewd, often relentless manipulator of society's memory. Ironically, what enabled the reversal of discourses on missionaries was the local government's pragmatic motivations and tacit approval. It was as a result of the municipal government's application for WHS status of Gulangyu that the authorities joined in the reappraisal of the value of a church legacy, alongside the grassroots group and the congregation of the Xiamen church. Acknowledging the pragmatic exigencies, the local officials allotted Christianity more social space. However, the amount of social space allowed by the state is limited; the seemingly open-minded officials refused to make any major compromises that would risk their political futures.

Two years after the 2010 memorial service, a small-scale commemoration event for Otte, attended by dozens of people, was held in the newly restored Gulangyu Union Church. Additionally, a free medical diagnostic service was supplied for island residents by the Xiamen YMCA to mark the 102nd anniversary of Otte's death. This time, it was the Christian community, rather than any non-Christian groups, that organised the event. Although government officials did not attend, they sent flowers in the name of the Gulangyu Management Committee. Compared to the 2010 memorial service, the holding of a second event for Otte was a bold move on the part of the Christian community, expanding space for Christian history and heralding a change in official attitudes.

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Notes

- [1] Throughout the article, unless noted, the term ‘Christianity’ refers to Protestantism. When referring to the entire Xiamen Christian community, the phrase ‘the Xiamen church’ or ‘the local church’ is used.
- [2] After the churches reopened in 1979, the RCA rebuilt ties with the Xiamen church, the pioneer field in its China mission. John de Velder, who was close to Otte’s descendants, established relations with a few church leaders and locals. In 2004, the original building of the Hope Hospital was scheduled for demolition to make way for real estate development. Some concerned local residents informed Otte’s family and his granddaughter wrote to the municipal government, underlining the significance of the site. Local leaders eventually abandoned their plans for development. The connection between Otte’s family and Xiamen is limited, however, to a very small circle.
- [3] Interestingly the only use of the term ‘imperialism’ in the application is in a description of the Japanese occupation (1941–45) that is blamed for the disruption to plurality of culture on the island.

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