
Daniel H. Bays
(1942-2019)



As one of the leading American historians of modern China, Daniel H. Bays (Ph.D., the University of Michigan, 1971) pioneered the study of Chinese Christianity and built it into a vibrant field of serious academic inquiry. He began to focus on the history of Christianity in China in the late 1970s while teaching at the University of Kansas. After three decades of dedicated work while serving as Chair of History Department and Director of the Center for East Asian Studies in Kansas, Bays returned to his native state of Michigan in 2000, and founded the Asian Studies program at Calvin College in Grand Rapids (now Calvin University). In addition to his first monograph *China Enters the Twentieth Century: Chang Chih-tung and the Issues of a New Age, 1895-1909* (1978 and 2016), Bays' most influential single-authored and collaborative works under his leadership include *A New History of Christianity in China* (2011), *China's Christian Colleges* (2009), *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home* (2003), and *Christianity in China* (1999). Throughout his career, Bays shaped and nourished the field of study not only through his numerous publications both in English and

Chinese but also grant-supported, collaborative research projects with his colleagues until passing away in 2019.

Known globally both for his generous mentoring of students and colleagues, and for his sharp analysis and criticism of the American public discourse on China, Bays left a strong impact on future scholars while building an important subfield of China Studies: *Chinese Christianity*. How best can we understand the process and factors of the *indigenization* of Christianity within China's own historical and social context? How can we move beyond the sometimes Euro-American centric "mission studies" and begin to understand the history of Christianity in China in its own light? What can we learn from the unavoidable *mutual* influence between foreign missions and Chinese churches? And, in fact, what does the often ill-informed, unnuanced, and polarized contemporary American public discourse on China and Chinese churches reveal about us, the American society? According to Daryl Ireland at Boston University, when Bays embarked on these set of important questions in the late 1970s, "few scholars were seriously exploring the subject at the time. Dan's response was simple: 'I hope to change that.' And he has. His leadership, encouragement, and mentorship has led to a blossoming of historical and social scientific work on Chinese Christianity. We can all thank Dan Bays for that!"

As Xi Lian, Professor of World Christianity at Duke Divinity School considers, Bays was "a pioneer of the China-centered approach in the study of Christianity in China." Already in the early 1980s, Bays perceived "the centrality of the local people's agency in the growth of Christianity in China." Lian points out that Bays' new approach to the studies of China and Chinese Christianity stemmed from his "careful attention to and extraordinarily generous spirit" toward indigenous historical agents, which, in turn, resulted in the eventual reshaping of the entire field of study across the globe. Echoing Lian, Robert Entenmann at St. Olaf College believes Bays' greatest scholarly contribution can be found in the studies of the history of indigenous Chinese Christianity, as revealed in his 1982 essay

“Christianity and the Chinese Sectarian Tradition.” In it, Bays emphasized Chinese agency through utilization of Chinese-language historical source materials. According to Ryan Dunch at the University of Alberta, Bays’ focus on Chinese agency appeared first in *Ch'ing-shih wen-t'i* in 1982 (vol. 4.7, June 1982, 33-55) which pointed out the important connections between Chinese conversion to Christianity and Chinese sectarian movements, thus “building on and contributing to the rediscovery of the complexity and variety of historical China that came with the new historiography of the 1970s and the concurrent end of the Maoist era.” Since then, according to Dunch, Bays’ insights continued to develop and inspire new work from other scholars in the study of Chinese Christianity, Chinese religions, and modern Chinese history in general.

In Dan Bays’ terms, Western Christianity was able to maintain an inflated self-image in China because of the unequal treaty system, which in a way seems to be creating continuing conflict and dispute despite today’s new reality in many senses. But, Bays argues, “the real achievement, the construction of a vibrant and firmly grounded Christian community”—which continues to grow against all odds as China boasts the largest number of Sunday church service attendees on earth today—has been that of the Chinese Christians themselves. How then, can we apply this lesson to our analysis of the American rhetoric on China today? In his 2009 article, “American Public Discourse on the Church in China” for *China Review*’s special issue on Religious Studies in China, Bays lamented how foreign observers have widely differing and strong views on China-related topics and produce an extensive public discourse in North America, *but* still assert contradictory and contentious claims, “shedding more heat than light.” For example, the issue of Christian churches in China has been “debated by people and groups that really do not know much about China, and the level of the discussion has been very unnuanced and unnecessarily low. But the polarized views are well entrenched, and are resistant to change.” As part of Bays’ ongoing effort to fix that, he and Dong Wang, Bays’ former doctoral student at the University of Kansas and currently Director of the

Wellington Koo Institute for Modern China in World History at Shanghai University, co-directed a National Endowment for the Humanities program in 2015. Held at Calvin College, the program allowed teachers and scholars to collaborate under the project title of “America’s China Dream and China’s American Dream: 150 Years of Encounter.” Wang attested that Bays, one of the most widely quoted scholars in the fields of the U.S.-China relations and the history of Christianity in China, was an ideal project leader. As always, Wang recalls, Bays “taught how to embrace life with a purpose, humility, and optimism” – this, even despite the rising “China-bashing” public discourse in the U.S. and his marathon battle with Parkinson’s disease.

Grant Wacker, Professor Emeritus at Duke Divinity School explains that “the health challenges that Dan has grappled with, so bravely, have only deepened” his respect for the strength of Bays’ character along with “his ability to cut through words to substance, and, again, his willingness for mentoring and guiding other scholars.” As Timothy Mankong Wang at Hong Kong Baptist University testifies, Bays was “an inspiring mentor for younger scholars as well as a respected colleague across the globe who paid close attention to their needs and challenges that they confronted.” Indeed, since my own encounter with Bays at the American Society of Church History Session (concurrent with the American Historical Association annual meeting) a decade ago, he never stopped showering his students, other scholars like myself, *and* their students with his wisdom and spirited encouragement whether at the annual meetings of Association for Asian Studies, the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, or at Calvin’s chapel. Such was the life of Daniel H. Bays, an extraordinary character of immense scholarly integrity and universally loved scholar-mentor in the Midwest. Bays’ keen observation of the main historical agents and his sobering warning on ill-informed public discourse on China at the expense of all its complexity, diversity, and the agency of Chinese people will be missed now more than ever before.

- Jinhee Lee, Eastern Illinois University

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