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Human Dignity as a Right and Virtue in Practice: A Socio-Theological Reflection from and on the Cross Removal Incidents in China

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Abstract: This paper is written to reflect human dignity in practice with reference to the cross removal incidents in China in Zhejiang Province between 2014 and 2016. This paper starts with three questions: How did the Chinese authorities treat Christians? How did Christians respond to what the Chinese authorities did to them? How did Christians view themselves, taking into account the treatment of the Chinese authorities? In contrast with the indignity of the Chinese authorities, Christians in their resistance have displayed a dignified manner characterized by non-violence and forgiveness, as well as the spirituality of persistence in truth and living in hope. The interaction between the government and the churches in these incidents has revealed both the hope and constraints of human dignity in practice, that is, the rule of law and freedom of expression, dignity and the face culture in China, and dignity as “respect-as-observance.” Christians in their resistance may have little impact on the improvement of human rights conditions in China, but as the *Dao De Jing* says, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Thus, Christian resistance is one of the many steps to protect and respect human dignity.

Keywords: human rights in China; cross removal in China; theology of the cross and Chinese Christianity; freedom of religion in China; freedom of expression in China

1. Introduction

The concept of human dignity has gained significant traction internationally since the middle of the second millennium as a result of World War II and especially since the United Nations promulgated its landmark document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With increasing awareness of the vitality of, and the incessant occurrences of violations and abuses against, human rights, a clarion call for respect and promotion for human dignity resounds. After all, it is human dignity that forms the foundation of human rights. While some schools of thought contend that the concept of human dignity is a modern construct, there are those that posit otherwise. A case in point is the work of Qianfan Zhang, who noted that the notion of human dignity is not completely foreign to Chinese culture, for it has had a very long history in classical Chinese philosophy. In his book *Human Dignity in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Qianfan Zhang examines the three classical Chinese philosophies, that is, Confucianism, Daoism, and Mohism, and concludes that

the three schools of thought do converge on a common moral precept that to treat every human being as the end in itself and not merely as means to other things. (Zhang 2016, p. 200)

Zhang points out that the three schools of thought affirm that human dignity is an intrinsic value of being human. It is the status of being human that demands our full respect and protection. This understanding of human dignity is identical to Immanuel Kant’s second formulation of categorical

imperative, that is, treating humanity as an end in itself. This concept leads to justice-based rights and principles. Moreover, Zhang indicates that these three classical Chinese philosophies, especially Confucianism, consider that the notion of human dignity is reflected in one's dignified manner or bearing (Zhang 2016, pp. 56–58). Human dignity thus is the expression of a sublime disposition: dignity as virtue. These two dimensions of human dignity as a right and virtue are distinct but related. Human dignity as a right is not earned but rather signifies respect-as-respectfulness. However, human dignity as a virtue makes life flourish and signifies respect-as-observance.

In this paper, we intend to investigate human dignity as a right and virtue in practice with reference to a traumatic series of events, namely the forced removal of rooftop crosses from church buildings in China's Zhejiang Province since early 2014. This paper will explore the three dimensions of human dignity in practice by specifically addressing three sets of questions: First, how do the Chinese authorities treat Christians? What do the Chinese authorities take away from Christians when they remove the crosses from their churches? Second, how do Christians respond to what the Chinese authorities have done to them? What kind of conduct towards the Chinese authorities would be allowed so that Christians can protect their rights? Third, how do Christians see themselves? What kind of life should they have in order to avoid humiliation and live a dignified life? Finally, we will correlate the findings from these three questions to a general enquiry of human dignity in practice in China. Apart from a literature review, this paper also employs fieldwork and interviews.

2. The Cross Removal Campaign

In early 2014, the Chinese authorities began a campaign to demolish crosses on the rooftops of churches in Zhejiang Province (Cook 2017, pp. 43–65). There is no accurate record of the number of affected churches, but it is estimated that the number is about 1500.¹ Most affected churches are found not in the cities but in towns and villages. Apart from the removal of crosses, around 20 churches were completely demolished. One significant case is the total demolition of Sanjiang Church in April 2014. Considering that it took 12 years and 30 million yuan (\$5 million) to build the Sanjiang Church, the church's size significantly increased up to 10,000 square meters and took up a space four to five times larger than the approved size. It is interesting to note, however, that while the Sanjiang Church was appraised as a model project by the local authorities, it was still demolished by the government. The affected churches are mostly members of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM, an approved Protestant organization), Catholic churches, and a few house churches (most house churches have their buildings in Leqing). Though the demolition campaign has been relatively quiet since April 2016, it has not come to a complete stop. At the time of writing, there are still some incidents of demolition activities that have been ongoing in other provinces, such as in Jiangxi, Shanxi, and Henan.² The government explains that the demolitions being conducted are all part of the government's intent to implement the policy of "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" (hereafter referred to as TROD) that was endorsed in December 2012 by the Zhejiang provincial government, which aims to address the increasing number of illegal constructions.³ The government further clarifies that a construction can be considered as an illegal construction when the "construction is without approval and construction is beyond the size of approval." Religious buildings, according to the government, would be affected only if they were involved in illegal construction. It is true that some churches are involved in illegal construction, but it would be a discriminating act to demolish such illegal constructions without making a critical review of the extremely cumbersome existing procedures for church construction.

¹ <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20160523/c23chinacross/zh-hant/> (accessed on 10 March 2018); <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bx5XNC-WEt7EJ0zwpmvkrcPjeUbjqCTEMFyqbeJINvmE/edit> (accessed on 10 March 2018), it has a list of affected churches.

² <http://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/church-08042017093029.html?encoding=traditional> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

³ <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/04/exclusive-china-aid-receives-internal.html> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

Although the TROD was initially implemented in Zhejiang Province and not nationwide, some argue that this is proof that there has been no fundamental change of the government's policy in relation to religion. It was not obvious at the time of the introduction of the TROD, but in the subsequent years it became more obvious that the TROD has a political agenda. The introduction of the program of "Five Entries and Five Transformations" in late 2015,⁴ cross removals in other provinces since 2016, and the introduction of the "Revised Regulations of Religious Affairs" in September 2017 convinced us that what happened in Zhejiang Province was a test case for future tightening of religious activities and policy by the government. Apart from the increasing number of illegal constructions being cited as a reason for the implementation of the TROD, another reason being considered is the active religious activities in Wenzhou County. Wenzhou County is known as "China's Jerusalem" among Chinese Christians, because it has a high concentration of churches and Christians. It was observed that the severe cross removal campaign was carried out as a reaction to a complaint expressed by Xia Baolong, the secretary of Zhejiang Province, as to how a communist country could have so many crosses, which is for him nothing but humiliating to the Chinese Communist Party.⁵ In addition, the church, Xia Baolong contends, represents foreign beliefs, and is a sign of foreign imperialism (Wang 2017, p. 795). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the TROD has been more devastating to folk religious sites that are labeled as an expression of superstition than to Christian churches (Ying 2016, p. 29). Thus, it may be argued that Christianity is not solely targeted, but rather religion as a whole.

There are two more important reasons causing the cross removals. First, there is a "holy" tie between the Christian business people and local cadres in Wenzhou County. Without the "one eye open, one eye blind" unwritten policy of local cadres, Christians would have been unable to build the unapproved churches. The "holy" cooperation between the Christian business people and local cadres in Wenzhou County is not a secret. In fact, a number of local cadres are Christians, and some Christian business people are members of the Chinese Communist Party. There is therefore a reciprocity of benefits between the churches and the local government, which has received both material and non-material benefits from churches. Furthermore, the boss Christians in Wenzhou County liaise skillfully with the local government in order to promote their faith. Cao Nanlai comments that the boss Christians are "economically powerful, politically connected, and moralizing Christian entrepreneurs" (Cao 2011, pp. 33–35). This explains the reason why the demolition order came from the provincial government with the support of the central government and not from the local government. Cao succinctly opines that

the current campaign, in my view, is a measure adopted by the central government to strengthen local control and reshape local political-economic order in the context of the party-building work and high profile commitment to combat corruption. (Cao 2017, p. 36)

A second reason for the removal of crosses is that some rooftop crosses may be structurally dangerous, and the crosses in some areas may not look nice. However, all of these reasons do not justify such a large-scale demolition. Since most affected churches are found in towns and villages, we suggest that the government intends to have tighter control of towns and villages. Traditionally, people in towns and villages have strong blood ties, and the government hardly controls them. The uncontrollable towns and villages can therefore be seen as a threat to the government. A recent example is Wukan village's protests in 2011 and 2016. In short, the conflict between the residents of Wukan village and the

⁴ "The five entries consist of: government policies and statutes enter the church; health care activities enter the church; popular science and culture enter the church, assisting and helping the poor enter the church, and harmonious construction enters the church. The five transformations refer to localizing religion, standardizing management, indigenizing theology, making finances public, and co-opting the Christian teachings". <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/12/china-change-second-interview-with.html> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

⁵ <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/12/china-change-second-interview-with.html> (accessed on 10 March 2018). It is interesting to note that Xia Baolong was elected vice chairperson of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on 14 March 2018.

local government was due to the corruption of government officials. What concerned the government most, however, was that the village chief showed more loyalty to blood tie relationships than to the government.⁶ This was a signal that the village was reaching outside the government's control. Furthermore, one of the characteristics of some towns and villages in Wenzhou County is that the location and the size of church buildings in Wenzhou County reflects their centrality in the life of the people. The demolition of the crosses served to destabilize the centrality of Christianity in the life of the people because, after the cross removals, the government established a Center of the People or Hall of Culture in towns and villages to replace the role of churches in the villages' life. Thus, the TROD is not simply intended to target illegal construction, but has a very strong political agenda. This explains the reason why the government makes no concession to local churches' grievances and appeals.

Have the actions of the government successfully destroyed dignity among Christians? This has to be determined and commented upon from the victims' responses. This does not mean that the oppressors would not be condemned if the victims do not feel badly about what the oppressors have done to them. Rather, the concept of dignity as a right means that no matter how serious a violation is committed against an individual, that person must not be deprived of dignity. Ironically, virtues expressed by victims have manifested a dignified life in which the indignity of the oppressors is revealed. This will be examined in the following sections.

3. Protecting Dignity

Some Christians are inclined to see the TROD incident as an opportunity for them to grow spiritually. Some even consider the incident to be God's punishment for the arrogance of churches that focus too much on buildings rather than their spiritual life. Repentance is the first word, not resistance. They argue that the core of the Christian faith is not outer freedom, but Christian living expressed in fellowship, worship, and prayer. This spiritual freedom would not deteriorate even without the outer freedom. They finally conclude that, to a certain extent, the cross removal incidents revealed the spiritual weakness of the churches. An emphasis on inner freedom is an invaluable lesson that the Christian community had learned and developed during the hard times of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During this period, no religious activities were allowed, and Christians were sent to re-education camps. All these adversities did not destroy the faith of Christians. Ironically, their endurance in suffering has become a prevailing source for the rapid growth of churches in China after the Open Door Policy in 1978. There is truth in this emphasis. Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Yet, Christian inner freedom should not be understood as a justification of attacks on freedom of religion. Protecting dignity through resistance is not less spiritual than endurance in suffering, and this is something that the churches in China should learn. More importantly, Christian inner freedom should be transformed to an unconditional commitment to the welfare of people. In the following, we will focus on Christian resistance in light of the cross removal incidents.

Although the affected churches are in different locations, we confined our research to Wenzhou city. Not all churches in Wenzhou city have been affected by the TROD. It is estimated that the affected number is about 15–20%. Protestant churches in Wenzhou city are divided into six dioceses, and there are about 150–170 churches in total. All dioceses issued statements in response to the forced removal of crosses.⁷ For instance, the statement released by the Diocese of Pingyang Wanquan stated that

1. We hold prayer and fasting meetings;
2. We organize all churches to have regular church services;

⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-37346540> (accessed on 10 March 2018); <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2058588/dream-has-been-killed-chinas-democracy-village> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

⁷ <https://chinachange.org/2015/08/07/christian-sentiment-in-zhejiang-against-cross-removal-three-statements/> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

3. We employ lawyers for *weiquan*;
4. We make a trip to Beijing for *shangfang*;
5. We cooperate with other churches;
6. We rebuild the crosses if they are demolished;
7. We rely on God in solidarity, mutual service, and bearing the yoke of Christ.

Holding regular church services and prayer meetings was not only intended to meet religious needs, but also a strategy to ensure that members were stationed at the church most of the time in order to stop cross removals from taking place. The practice of *shangfang* (petition to the central government) reflected that their negotiation with the local government was futile, and the practice of *weiquan* reflected that they considered the cross removal itself to be unlawful and unconstitutional. The resistance of the churches reflected that the existing channels to communicate with the government were no longer able to address their concerns.

Apart from issuing statements, churches organized day and night patrols to protect church buildings from being attacked. Some Christians tied themselves up with the crosses and went on hunger strike. Some rebuilt the crosses when the crosses were removed. For instance, Wuxi Church in Yongxi Diocese rebuilt the cross on 22 August 2015, and invited other churches to come and celebrate. Some, such as Shuangcun Church, stood the removed crosses up in gardens or in front of churches as a form of protest. Some, such as Shatantou Church, painted crosses on the walls in order to show that the cross was never demolished. Some set up a monument to record how the demolition of the cross took place. This form of protest was employed by Xianqiao Church in Pingyang Diocese, but the monument was forcefully demolished. Some arranged Sunday school classes to be held around the demolished crosses in order to teach younger generations about the event. One favorite biblical story was the story of Daniel in the lions' den. This is about the virtue of courage, non-compliance, endurance, and keeping faith in God. Some unaffected churches joined the affected churches in solidarity to protect their churches. They used different forms of media to spread the news locally as well as internationally in order to put pressure on the government. They held rallies to protest against the cross removals. All of these responses were non-violent. In order to counter the resistance, many pastors and members of the laity were summoned by police for interrogation. Some were beaten, detained for several months and even longer, or imprisoned for different reasons. Apart from these illegal reactions, the police threatened the protestors that their families would be affected if they continued to protest.

A spirit of martyrdom was gradually stirred up and developed among Christians. On 24 July 2015, a prayer letter was circulated among Christians with the heading "We are for the Faith." This phrase was first used by Wang Mingdao, dean of the house churches, to stand against the intervention of the government into his church in the 1950s.⁸ This phrase not only expresses standing firm in one's faith but also signifies a firm non-compliant attitude toward the government.

The responses of the churches reflected that the act of demolishing the crosses has challenged the baseline of Christian existence. The baseline of existence is about dignity. Dignity is something that must not be traded off for anything. The cross itself has carried such a value among Christians. It is true that the Christian faith would not be destroyed by the cross removal incidents, but the act of removing crosses represents the humiliation of Christians.

4. Protecting Dignity and Rights Defense (*Weiquan*)

One significant issue in Christian resistance is their association with the *Weiquan* Movement. *Weiquan* literally translates as a defense of rights. It is a broadly based social phenomenon involving all social strata throughout China to assert human rights through individual and collective litigations, petitions, campaigns, and protests (Benney 2013). *Weiquan* is fundamentally about human rights, but it

⁸ He was imprisoned for his faith from 1955 to 1980. <http://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/w/wang-mingdao.php> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

does not address human rights directly since it is aware of the political sensitivity of the issue of human rights in China. The features of *weiquan* are that, first, it uses the law to challenge the authorities and their officials in order to push the regime to live up to the promises of its policies and laws. Second, ordinary citizens have become more aware of their constitutional rights, so when those rights violated by the corruption of local officials they are more willing to speak up. Third, *weiquan* accepts the legitimacy of the existing political system, while the democracy movement does not (Hung 2010). Even though *weiquan* is non-violent and is carried out within the boundary of law and order, the authorities still feel uncomfortable and consider it as a possible threat since it has the potential to develop into a nationwide social movement. A recent and significant event occurred on 9 July 2015, when the police arrested more than 300 people related to the *Weiquan* Movement from 25 provinces. This was called the 709 crackdown, and it was a huge blow to the *Weiquan* Movement.⁹

The *Weiquan* Movement is not new to churches, not only because a number of lawyers in the *Weiquan* Movement are Christians, but also because some non-registered churches (house churches) are engaged in *weiquan* to defend their rights. A small booklet entitled the *Weiquan Handbook for Churches* was published in 2006. However, in the past, churches under the TSPM had no connection with *weiquan*, because the TSPM is a government-recognized institution. The cross removal incident thus changed the relationship between *weiquan* and the churches under the TSPM.

Some affected churches contacted Zhang Kai, a Christian lawyer committed to *weiquan*.¹⁰ He and other lawyers took the initiative to form the Lawyers for the Protection of the Cross on 14 July 2015, and provided legal advice to the affected churches. Furthermore, Zhang Kai and his team published a small book for the affected churches entitled *A Handbook of Weiquan and the Cross*. He advised the affected churches to take a progressive response instead of a defensive response. He said,

If more than 10 churches in your town are not able to resist the cross removal campaign, how can you expect a town with one church only to resist it?¹¹

Slightly more than 100 churches employed him to be their representative. He made four petitions on behalf of these churches:

1. To request compensation for the damage caused to the churches by the government;
2. To accuse the government of blocking electricity and water supplies to the churches;
3. To file a lawsuit against the announcement of the demolition of illegal constructions;
4. To request an open hearing of the involved government officials.¹²

However, most churches preferred to be spectators. First, *weiquan*, in whatever sense, was too radical and political for them. This was not only due to the theological position of church–state relations but also a result of sociopolitical arrangements, for churches were trained not to be engaged in public life. Second, they considered that *weiquan* would not bring them justice, but paradoxically would bring them further damage. In other words, they had unreservedly accepted the realpolitik as an unchallenged reality. Third, they accused some *weiquan* lawyers of taking advantage of the case of religious freedom for their own agenda, namely, an opportunity to express their opposition to the government.

On 23 August 2015, a few days before Zhang Kai was scheduled to meet with the U.S. ambassador-at-large concerning international religious freedom, David Saperstein, Zhang Kai, and his two assistants, Lui Peng and Fang Xianrui, were held in custody by the government. On 23 March

⁹ <http://www.chrlawyers.hk/sites/default/files/booklet-b-content-english-output.pdf> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

¹⁰ There is a substantial proportion of Christian *weiquan* lawyers. They are motivated by their Christian beliefs to fight for equality, fairness, and justice. See (Wielander 2009), “Bridging the Gap? Intellectual House Church Activities in Beijing and Their Potential Role in China’s Democratization”, *The Journal of Contemporary China* 18: 849–64.

¹¹ <https://theinitium.com/article/20150901-mainland-wenzhou-church-protest/> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

¹² Ibid.

2016, Zhang Kai was released after he made a televised confession of his wrongdoings on the issue of the cross removals. He admitted that he was endangering state secrets, collecting money from foreign organizations, and gathering a crowd to disturb public order.¹³ Since then, Zhang Kai has no longer been involved in *weiquan* for the affected churches. His retreat from this issue has left churches without legal support, but this has not stopped them from continuing different forms of *weiquan* and *shangfang* to protect Christian dignity and their rights.

Yang Fenggang comments that the resistance of Wenzhou churches is a sign of churches moving from accommodation to and cooperation with the government to resistance to and even confrontation with the government (Yang 2017, p. 87). It must be noted, however, that only a minority of the affected churches took a relatively active role in the resistance. Most churches chose to be passive. Apart from the reasons mentioned above, some church leaders are businesspeople, which is very common in Wenzhou, and they are afraid that their businesses would be negatively affected if they encouraged their churches to take an active role in the resistance against the government. As a result, they are inclined to persuade their church leaders to compromise with the government. Second, many Christians consider that the removal of the crosses is a lesser evil in comparison with the demolition of the church. The case of Sanjiang Church is an example of a non-compromising congregation and, as a result, the whole church was demolished. Moreover, the TROD talks only about illegal construction and says nothing about accountability. In other words, this is a relatively mild suppression. In order to prevent complications of the situation, the best strategy for the churches, it is felt by some church leaders, is to be silent about the cross removals and just comply with the regulations. The passivity of the majority of churches challenges the optimism of a number of observers about the emergence of civil society among churches, but there is no doubt that the option of resistance as a Christian response is growing among TSPM's churches.

Another unintended consequence of the cross removal incidents is the establishment of solidarity among churches within and outside of Zhejiang Province. Both the Zhejiang TSPM and Zhejiang China Christian Council, as well as the National TSPM and National China Christian Council, expressed their displeasure with the cross removals. They complained that the cross removals themselves were an unconstitutional act and a violation of the policy of religious freedom; it harmed the feelings of Christians. They strongly requested the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of Zhejiang Province to halt this "ridiculous" activity.¹⁴ Pastor Joseph Gu was outspoken on this issue and complained to the government. He was the former chairperson of the Zhejiang China Christian Council and the former pastor of Chongyi Church in Hangzhou, a church with 10,000 members. His outspokenness, however, caused him to be removed from office and put in custody from February 2016 to January 2018 on the charge of embezzling funds.¹⁵ The fate of Pastor Gu has left the affected churches isolated from the ecumenicity of the churches in China since many churches and pastors are afraid that they might get into trouble if they show solidarity with the churches in Wenzhou. However, at the same time, Pastor Gu set an example for other churches in the country, demonstrating what it means to be Christ's disciple.

Some Christians have paid a high price for their non-cooperation and *weiquan*. For instance, some churches have been totally demolished, and some Christians have been beaten and detained for months and even years. Still, they do not regret their actions, because they have come to realize that dignity can never be bought or traded. Their stubborn resistance matches the views of Mencius (372–289 BCE) concerning what it is to be a great person. He said,

¹³ <http://www.chinaaid.org/p/free-zhang-kai.html> (accessed on 10 March 2018). Zhang released a prayer request on 24 March 2018, in which he mentioned that he had been under different forms of arrest for nearly three years and had no contact with his wife and child.

¹⁴ <https://chinachange.org/2015/08/07/christian-sentiment-in-zhejiang-against-cross-removal-three-statements/> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

¹⁵ <https://chinachange.org/tag/joseph-gu/> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

To dwell in the wide house of the world, to stand in the correct seat of the world, and to walk in the great path of the world; when he obtains his desire for office, to practice his principles for the good of the people; and when that desire is disappointed, to practice them alone; to be above the power of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend—these characteristics constitute the great man.¹⁶

5. Dignity as Virtuous Comportment

Even though the government has not shown any sign of compromise on the cross removal, this does not mean that the dignity of Christians is totally dependent upon how they are treated. Rather, dignity also is expressed in how one sees, judges, and treats oneself. Dignity here is “the expression of a sublime disposition” (Rosen 2012, p. 35). In the following, we will explore the expression of the sublime disposition of the Christian community.

“Near the Cross” was one of the favorite hymns sung by Christians in China during the cross removal incidents. The lyrics are as follows:

Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain
Free to all, a healing stream—
Flows from Calv’ry’s mountain.

Refrain:

In the cross, in the cross,
Be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.

Near the cross, a trembling soul,
Love and Mercy found me;
There the bright and morning star
Sheds its beams around me.

Near the cross! O Lamb of God,
Bring its scenes before me;
Help me walk from day to day,
With its shadows o’er me.

Near the cross I’ll watch and wait
Hoping, trusting ever,
Till I reach the golden strand,
Just beyond the river.

This hymn echoes the sentimental experience of Christians who have suffered from the incidents of the cross removals, but this has not reinforced the feeling of victimization. This hymn carries a message that the cross is not a humiliation, but a reflection of Christian dignity. This is a dignity that comes through bearing one’s own cross, that is, suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ and God’s Kingdom. This is not about religious fanaticism, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained that the life of Jesus Christ is that of the man living for others (Lawrence 2010, pp. 35–53). To be human is to be

¹⁶ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Works_of_Mencius/chapter06 (accessed on 10 March 2018).

responsible for others. God's Kingdom is not about life after death, but is concerned with God's Reign from the present to eternity. God's Reign is characterized by liberation, justice, and ecumenicity. We thus examine how the theology of the cross is manifested in the life of Christians who have suffered from the cross removals in China.

First, dignity is not only about the personal ability to control oneself and to determine one's own destiny, that is, autonomy, but it is also experienced in the nature of one's relationships with others, that is, how one is treated and how one treats others. Christians experience dignity in terms of being forgiven, loved, and healed by the cross of Jesus Christ. No matter how one's dignity is humiliated and denied, one's dignity in Jesus Christ will not be eliminated. A passage from the Bible was frequently quoted by Christians during the cross removal incidents:

[A] bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. (Isa. 4:3)

The fundamental difference between the encounter with the government and that with God is that the former is marked by deception, violence, and domination, while the latter is characterized by truth, love, and graciousness. It is the latter that empowers Christians to not seek revenge against people who disgrace them, but rather to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness:

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Following Jesus, Christians learn to forgive the cadres coming to demolish their crosses, for the cadres are ordered to remove the crosses, and they do not know what they are doing. Christian dignity is expressed in treating others in a dignified manner. This reminds us of Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Prize speech, *I Have No Enemies—The Final Statement*. He wrote,

Hatred can rot away at a person's intelligence and conscience. Enemy mentality will poison the spirit of a nation, incite cruel mortal struggles, destroy a society's tolerance and humanity, and hinder a nation's progress toward freedom and democracy. That is why I hope to be able to transcend my personal experiences as I look upon our nation's development and social change, to counter the regime's hostility with utmost goodwill, and to dispel hatred with love.¹⁷

Liu's message corresponds to the message of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is in the cross that Christians see, judge, and treat themselves and others differently. On the one hand, Christians are the victims of the cross removal incidents. However, they can seek to avoid the tendency toward attitudes of victimization. On the other hand, they have the capacity to forgive their enemies and create an ambiance of mutual respect. They choose non-violence, not because it is a strategy, but because Jesus said, "Love your enemies", and Liu Xiaobo said, "I have no enemies."

Additionally, the cross in the Christian tradition represents the Christian way of living. This is not to justify any form of suffering, but a willingness and determination to suffer for a cause, that is, for others and for the Kingdom of God. This is a cause in which certain things mean more to Christians than others. By taking care of the things that are important to them, they develop a sense of "who I am" and "what I live for." This realization by Christians in a sense parallels the Chinese motto, "Morality is doing what is right regardless of what you are told." In the cross removal incidents, Christians take the cross seriously, for the Christian faith (and Jesus Christ) means more to them than other things in life. They do not regret being beaten, detained, unemployed, or even jailed due to their resistance to the injustice committed against them. The following biblical text is frequently quoted in Christian living:

¹⁷ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2010/xiaobo-lecture.html (accessed on 10 March 2018).

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”.

(Matt. 16:24–25)

An interviewee reflectively said,

I wish that I can have a better understanding of the meaning of [the fact] that Christ calls me to die for him. If the suffering and death of some Christians can calm down the campaign of the cross removals and help our country to move to the rule of law in all areas of life, I am prepared for it. May God strengthen me.

One may disagree with Christians’ strong commitment to their faith, but it is mistaken to condemn the way Christians act to protect the cross as a kind religious fanaticism. “Fanaticism can be defined as overenthusiasm and zealotry. This overenthusiasm may cross all bounds of reason and may tend to become wild and dangerous” (Engineer 1997, p. 701). Fanaticism is a human psychological phenomenon found in politics, community, and other areas, and is not confined to religion only. Fanaticism is dangerous because it is manipulative, exclusive, and sometimes violent. In the cross removal incidents, the Christian resistance is not manipulative, exclusive, and violent. What they have shown instead is non-violence, tolerance, and forgiveness. The cross as a representation of the Christian way of living reveals that dignity is the expression of the sublime disposition of living for a cause. Ironically, the accusation of fanaticism against Christians could also be labeled against those who express profound commitment to the government, especially to those who turn a blind eye to the injustices perpetrated by the government. This is why the accusation of fanaticism against Christians holds no credence; the accusation works both ways.

Lastly, dignity is not an acceptance of finitude, but instead is living in hope. This is about spirituality. The cross is not just about suffering and crucifixion, but it is the cross leading to resurrection. It is the resurrection of Jesus that gives people hope to live in the midst of injustice and frustration, for they know that the exercise of power, even to the point of putting one to death, is not the final word. Resurrection says no to all kinds of determinism, fatalism, and stoicism. The cross stands for suffering, but it kindles hope in life. However, this is not to suggest that resurrection can only come through suffering. Rather, it is the belief that there is hope in hopelessness. The focus is not on how we can achieve hope, but it is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ that hope emerges and springs forth. Hope is defined by when we do not give in even though we are defeated. Hope is when we do not lose our heart for goodness even though we are powerless to transform injustice. Christians in their resistance to the government are not naïve to believe that they can finally prevent the cross removals. With hope, they resist; with hope, they accept the hostile reality. They accept their failures and defeats, but they do not lose hope in God’s justice. In terms of spirituality, this is the dark night of the soul. A favorite biblical message that circulated among churches during the cross removals is as follows:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope, we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom. 8:18–25)

Furthermore, William Lynch rightly said that “hope comes close to being the very heart and center of a human being” (Lynch 1965, p. 31).

Nevertheless, there is always a tendency to stress the essentially otherworldly among Christians. In fact, the theology of pre-millennialism is commonly found in Chinese churches. Social responsibility is less emphasized, as pre-millennialism considers that nothing can be done to improve social conditions. What Christians can do is to pray for divine intervention to rupture the historical process and bring about a radically novel state of affairs. Theologically speaking, Christians who are inclined to be passive in the cross removal incidents cling to the theology of pre-millennialism. Regarding the matter of hope, Ernst Bloch made a pertinent clarification in distinguishing between the proper imaginative activity of hope and mere fantasizing. “In the former, hope is often a stretching of the imagination way beyond the limits of what is currently possible. Imagination fuels the engines of our movement into the future. Mere fantasizing is a matter only of projecting our desires on to the blank screen of what may lie beyond” (Bloch 1986, p. 144). Real hope liberates and moves us forward while false hope entraps and leaves us where we began. In terms of Bloch’s distinction, Christian hope should not be mere fantasy. However, there is a danger of the moralization of eschatology, in which it is believed that the Kingdom of God can be brought about by human action. Christoph Schwöbel reminded that “the Christian hope distinguishes the eschatological orientation of faith from the open future of humanity’s own project, and this is the reason why we can hope that it will not be frustrated when human projects flounder” (Schwöbel 2000, p. 241).

Christians in their resistance have manifested some kind of sublime disposition, but we have to admit that many churches and Christians choose to comply with the TROD. This is not because they agree with the TROD but because they are under different forms of pressure from the government. If those who resist are virtuous, then those who have chosen not to protect the crosses publicly could be easily considered as weak, timid, and even unfaithful. As a result, dignity as respect-as-observance might create a sense of guilt among those who compromise and are bystanders to these incidents. This is very similar to the Donatist controversy in early Christianity. The immediate issue centers on whether the churches have the capacity to embrace Christians with different strategies and considerations. Since the church is a community of sinners, the core issue is not to build up a community of saints but to educate Christians that human dignity is an intrinsic value, that this should be respected and protected and to empower Christians to bear one’s own cross.

6. Rule of Law and Freedom of Expression

This paper began with three questions to reflect on human dignity in practice: How did the Chinese authorities treat Christians? How did Christians respond to the Chinese authorities’ treatment? How did Christians see themselves, taking into account the treatment of the Chinese authorities? After reviewing these three questions, our next question is: What do the results of the investigation of these questions enable us to learn, as a reflection on human dignity in practice in China?

At its fourth plenary session of the 18th congress in October 2014, the Chinese Communist Party leadership passed a reform plan on the legal system.¹⁸ It presented an ambition to build a system of rule of law in the country. In reality, the legal reform does not change the fundamental nature of the Chinese legal practice, that is, rule by law. The TROD is a test case. Whether the TROD conforms to the provision articulated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in which the Chinese government is a signatory, is something worth evaluating. (Please note that the ICCPR is not legally binding for the Chinese government unless the government ratifies it.) The ICCPR, specifically Article 19, states,

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.

¹⁸ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/zheng-yongnian/rule-of-law-china-crackdown-lawyers_b_9238644.html (accessed on 10 March 2018).

2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.
3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
 - (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
 - (b) For the protection of national security or of public order or of public health or morals.

Freedom of expression in Article 19 is not only about freedom of information but also about the individual and collective right of the expression of freedom. As such, the cross is the form of expression exercised by the Christian community. The cross removals themselves are a violation of Christians' freedom of expression. However, the government argues that it is legal to demolish crosses, for it is in accordance with the law; however, according to the ICCPR, any law overriding freedom of expression has to be subject to Article 19.3 (a) and (b). The government may argue that it has received complaints against rooftop crosses from *fengshui* (cosmic harmony) believers who claim that the crosses have damaged the local *fengshui* and that the damage of *fengshui* would affect the fate of the people (Wang 2017, p. 795). The government thus explains that the removal of crosses is to necessary bring society into harmony. First, although Wenzhou County is known as "China's Jerusalem", the number of Christians is estimated to be about 10–15% of the population. The rest of the population may not be happy with the crosses. Second, the belief of *fengshui* is commonly found among Chinese people, and it is understandable that the cross is seen as something foreign and incompatible with the existing *fengshui*, such as the local architecture, and that this disturbs the existing harmony. Third, the evangelistic zeal of churches sometimes may worsen the relationship with the local people. For instance, some churches advocate praying for the demolition of some ruined temples. Therefore, complaints about churches from the locals are not uncommon. Consequently, it seems that the government's argument conforms to Article 19.3 (a). However, the decision to remove crosses as an appropriate solution to social disharmony is entirely questionable, if not unreasonable, as it does not conform to the provision articulated in Article 19.3 (a); instead of creating an ambiance of trust and harmony, it creates distrust and hatred. Promoting dialogue is the best course of action in dealing with differences. It requires an invitation to all stakeholders to come together to negotiate—however, the government never consults the churches. Since the number of affected churches is about 1500, it is difficult to be convinced that *fengshui* is the major and real reason for the cross removals. In fact, the Chinese government does not take *fengshui* seriously, for it is condemned as superstition.

Additionally, Article 19.3 (b) states that public order and national security are justified reasons to restrict freedom of expression. In short, public order refers to the normal standards and operations of society. In the case of the TROD, the concern of public order should be understood in terms of protecting the safety and the wealth of the people as well as a fair use of land. In fact, the TROD states that its purposes are "promoting the new-style urbanization, improving the urban and rural landscapes, optimizing the human environment for residence, and building a beautiful Zhejiang." These purposes are grand and impressive, but they have nothing to do with public order.

Another seemingly justified reason to restrict freedom of expression is national security. Yet, the question remains: in what ways could the crosses be considered threats to national security? We argue that the real issue is not the crosses, but rather freedom of religion and freedom of expression. It is quite well known that the Chinese government considers freedom of expression as a potential threat to its security. This is fully reflected in its censorship of the internet and media. For instance, Google, Facebook, and WhatsApp cannot be used or accessed in China. Moreover, the Chinese government has not changed its basic suspicions of religion. In Article 27 of the National Security Law of the People's Republic of China passed on 1 July 2015, it is stated that

The State lawfully protects citizens' freedom of religious belief and normal religious activities, upholds the principle of religions managing themselves, preventing, stopping, and lawfully punishing the exploitation of religion's name to conduct illegal and criminal activities that endanger national security, and opposes foreign influences' interference with domestic religious affairs, maintaining normal order of religious activities.¹⁹

Article 4 of the Revised Regulations of Religious Affairs in 2017 states that among the many perils posed by religion are dangers to "national security and public health, threats to ethnic and national unity, and the possibility of terrorist activities." Religion may also "violate people's civil and democratic rights, obstruct public administration, and invade public or private property." First, the government considers that religion always has a tendency to have its own development without accommodating itself to Chinese socialism as well as the "Sinicization of Christianity." In addition, some members of the Chinese Communist Party are more tolerable to religion and this consequently weakens and softens the party and government's alertness to the penetration of religion. In order to prevent religious penetration, the government has taken a tight control and non-negotiable policy to handle religion. In an authoritarian government, national security is an excuse to restrict the activities of the imagined enemies more than something truly dangerous to the country.

It is not to be denied that there are illegal constructions of churches, but any law should give high priority to ensure the respect and protection of freedom of expression. Obviously, the TROD gives no justified reason to override freedom of expression. Moreover, the case of the cross removals reflects that the Chinese legal system is far from meeting the basic standards of the rule of law, that is, the protection of human rights. What the Chinese government emphasizes regarding the importance of the rule of law is actually rule by law.

7. Human Dignity and the Notion of Face (*Mien-Tzu*)

During the time of the implementation of the TROD, there were ongoing formal and informal negotiations among the government, local cadres, and churches. Some local cadres spoke to the churches,

Don't resist the cross removal. Give us face (*mien-tzu*) and be cooperative so that we can have a good report to the senior. In return, we will not make you suffer too harshly and will give you face on other occasions.

On other occasions, some local cadres said,

We normally would not interfere with the practice of the churches. But if they do not give us face (*mien-tzu*) by ignoring who the boss is, we will have to punish them severely.

What does it mean by giving face and losing face? How is this related to dignity? There are two Chinese words for face, namely, *lien* and *mien-tzu*. "*Lien* is something to which everyone is entitled by virtue of his membership in society and can be lost only through unacceptable conduct" (Ho 1976, p. 870). It focuses on the conduct of oneself. Though this has something to do with the inner qualities of the individual, the public image is the concern. *Mien-tzu* focuses on how one is treated by others in public. Those of lower social status are supposed to defer to those of higher social status, and those of higher social status maintain face by protecting low-status others (Hu 1944, p. 61). If those of lower social status do not give face to those of higher social status, those of higher social status have no responsibility to protect them. *Mien-tzu* is a reciprocal concept; however, in an asymmetrical relationship, those of higher social status do not need to give *mien-tzu* to those of lower social status. Both *lien* and *mien-tzu* are a kind of social control, as they are more related to one's position in a social

¹⁹ <http://www.chinalawtranslate.com/2015nsl/?lang=en> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

system than to a personal attribute. Face puts a person under pressure to live up to others' expectations, but has little to do with dignity. *Mien-tzu* in particular would not help to build a culture of dignity characterized by self-worth, self-esteem, and respect of others. Nevertheless, there is always confusion between face and dignity in Chinese culture, and this confusion is a hindrance to the development of human rights consciousness. Here, we employ the cross removal incidents to explain this idea.

Like the national flag and national anthem of a country, the cross is the symbol of the Christian faith. This is why Christians consider the demolition of the cross as a grave violation against their faith. It is an act of disrespect to and humiliation of the Christian faith. In an interview, a pastor from one of the affected churches said,

The cross is the symbol of our faith. The forced removal of the cross is a humiliation of our faith and disrespect to the glory of our God.

I am not concerned about the stone cross, but it is my conscience calling me to stand up against injustice.

His words were echoed by other Christians. In another interview, a church leader said,

The cross is not our faith, but an icon of our faith. Why does the government play with our cross? Starting from the end of last year [2013], there are no more lights on the crosses. And starting from this year, most crosses have been demolished. Undoubtedly, this is a challenge to our faith, and also a humiliation.

How are the cross removal incidents to be interpreted?

The Chinese government would not consider the cross removals as a violation of human dignity. Its concern is whether the churches give *mien-tzu* to the government, that is, obedience, for the churches belong to a lower social status and have no power to bargain with the government. Christian resistance to the government would not be positively seen as an exercise of their right to protect themselves, but rather as an offensive act against the government. According to the logic of *mien-tzu* culture, compliance and persuasion, instead of resistance, is the appropriate response of those of lower social status to those of higher social status. This explains the reason why the government officer said, "If you [the churches] do not give us *mien-tzu* by ignoring who the boss is, we will have to punish you severely." Once those of lower social status accept the logic of *mien-tzu* as the basic foundation of relationships, resistance to injustice would not be considered as an option, for this would be seen as an inappropriate and disgraceful act to those of higher social status. It cannot be denied that a number of churches choose to comply with the TROD because they consider that giving *mien-tzu* to the government is the best way to protect their interests.

On the other hand, is it possible that the purpose of Christian resistance is to retain *mien-tzu*? *Mien-tzu* is related to one's position in a social system, and it does not make any sense for those of lower social status to care too much about their *mien-tzu*. Since the Christian churches do not have a high position in the Chinese social system, it is unreasonable to view Christian resistance as being for the sake of retaining *mien-tzu*. On the contrary, we suggest that their resistance is a response to the violation of their dignity. There is nothing wrong in the churches giving *mien-tzu* to the government, but the churches are aware that dignity cannot be traded off, and therefore Christian resistance is an appropriate response to the violation of Christian dignity by the government. It would be a long-term project to educate the public, however, to distinguish between dignity and *mien-tzu* to appreciate this point.

8. Respect-as-Observance and Respect-as-Respectfulness

One of the concerns of this paper is to illustrate that human dignity is not solely dependent upon how one is treated, but is also about how one treats others and how one sees, judges, and treats oneself. In fact, it is from individuals engaged in Christian resistance that we learn what human dignity is. The

Chinese government has a poor human rights record ([Chinese Weiquan's Lawyers Concern 2016](#)),²⁰ but we witness people manifesting dignity as respect-as-observance in a world still encumbered by oppression and injustice. In this paper, they are the people protecting the crosses. Some have been beaten, some are in custody, and some are in jail.

Regarding the incidents of the cross removals, our concern is how the Christian community correlates their unjust experience to the understanding of human rights. Christians believe that all humans are created in the image of God, but sometimes they are not consistent in applying this belief to people of other faiths and people struggling for civil and political rights. For instance, many churches are hesitant to join the *Weiquan* Movement, for they consider them political. Moreover, they rarely work with local religions who are also the victims of the TROD. This reflects their lack of knowledge of human dignity as respect-as-respectfulness. However, their lack of knowledge of human dignity as respect-as-respectfulness is also the result of the strategy of the government to fragmentize social movements. As a result, almost all social movements in China are isolated, and solidarity is rarely formed within the public. This explains why there has been no large scale of social movement catching the wider social attention and participation since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. Despite these unfavorable conditions, Laozi (570–470 BCE), in the *Dao De Jing*, reminds us that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” The concern and scope of Christian resistance in these incidents are limited, but they have unmasked the narrative of the empire and upheld the narrative of the Gospel. The narrative of the empire is characterized by violence, lies, and rule by law, while the narrative of the Gospel features a theology of the cross that reverses the value system of the narrative of the empire. Despite its powerful mechanism of domination, the government has no power to dismiss the narrative of the Gospel, not only because the narrative of the Gospel is lived in Christian resistance, worship, and service, but also because of the people acting as human witnesses to the narrative of the Gospel. It is dignity as respect-as-observance that enables us to have faith in dignity as respect-as-respectfulness.

9. Conclusions

This paper seeks to examine human dignity in practice in China with reference to the cross removal incidents. The cross removals are not simply about illegal constructions. Rather, they have a clear political agenda, that is, to tighten the control of society. Churches under the TSPM are used to complying with the government, but there have been some changes among them in the cross removal incidents. Some have chosen to resist. The change is due to the fact that the baseline of Christian existence is being seriously challenged by the removal of crosses from their churches. In other words, their dignity is under threat. Even though the Christian resistance is confined to their sphere in terms of location and interest, their resistance not only provides the churches with a practical experience to reflect on what the church–state relationship should be, what Christian freedom and resistance are, and what Christian responsibility for society is, but it also un masks the narrative of the empire, which is characterized by the Chinese rule of law and the culture of face. Christians have suffered a great deal in these incidents, but spirituality has emerged from it, embodied by non-violence and forgiveness, persistence in truth, and living in hope—resources to nourish human dignity as respect-as-respectfulness and respect-as-observance.

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²⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china/report-china/> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

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