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**Abstract:**

Canadian relations with China, historically, have been driven by missionary work and the search for expanded trade. Missionary work drew on the search for souls to save, but morphed into development (schools and hospitals). Trade promotion, meanwhile, drew on age-olds tropes of “Oriental riches” and “the China market.” The missionary and merchant impulses have intertwined in Sino-Canadian relations. This paper examines post-missionary engagement with China by Canadian churches and human rights advocacy by Canadian non-governmental organizations since the 1970s. The focus is on two ecumenical coalitions sponsored by the Canadian churches: the Canada China Programme and the Canada Asia Working Group. The former stressed themes of partnership with Chinese Christian networks as the People’s Republic of China began to open up to the world; the latter stressed advocacy for human rights and economic justice. The tensions within these coalitions illustrates the larger tension between engagement and trade on the one hand, and rights advocacy on the other, in Sino-Canadian relations. These case studies also show the importance of non-state actors in trans-Pacific relations.

**Keywords:** Canada-China relations; non-governmental organizations; human rights; missionaries; Canada Asia Working Group; Canada China Programme; churches

In the 1980s and 1990s, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was declaring that human rights would assume a new, central position in Canadian foreign policy. In 1993, Jean Chrétien’s Liberals rode back to power, pledging to raise human rights to a more central position. Soon after taking becoming Prime Minister in 2006, Stephen Harper declared that Canada’s foreign policy would no longer be driven by “the almighty dollar” but instead would consider human rights. He placed relations with China as Exhibit A in this new declaration. Each of these responded rhetorically to the growth of human rights norms in global affairs, and to the “human rights moments” of the 1970s and 1990s. Each also played to domestic pressure for the promotion of a values-based foreign policy, rather than one driven by trade goals.
Canadian human rights groups were central in each case in pushing political leaders to make rhetorical commitments to human rights. The Mulroney government announced a linkage between human rights and foreign aid. The Chrétien government delinked the two, but made “the promotion of Canadian values” one of the declared “three pillars” of its foreign policy. The Harper government has treated the public to a series of righteous speeches about democracy and human rights. In other words, rights groups have been effective in shaping the terms of debate and forcing political leaders to pledge allegiance to human rights as an integral aspect of Canada’s foreign policy. They have shaped what Michael Ignatieff, in his days as a human rights scholar, called “rights talk.” Rights talk is important, but it has had to contend with the “rhetoric gap” that is perhaps the most notable feature of Canadian foreign policy.

One of the vital debates in Canadian foreign relations since the 1980s has been the question of linkage between trade and human rights. Canadians tell pollsters they want their government to promote rights and democracy. The Mulroney government even established an agency designed to do that—the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (better known as Rights and Democracy)—which the current Harper government later disbanded. On the other hand, each government has ultimately prioritized trade in its relations with other countries, for obvious reasons.

There are two main threads in Canada’s relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). One is the drive to engage, as seen most visibly in the promotion of exports to China. The other thread has been to change China, to help its people through the promotion of values embraced rhetorically in Canada and described as universal. One might call these the Merchant and the Missionary impulses. Both aim to engage China, but in different ways. Sometimes the two threads run parallel; sometimes in opposition. Both hearken back to images of China that
reflected a country more of the Canadian imagination than a real place in East Asia. The Merchant impulse draws on age-old tropes of “Oriental riches” and the “China market” that date to the early modern days before Canada existed. The Missionary impulse also recalls “China’s Millions” waiting to be saved by an uplifting Christian gospel.

One of the early acts of the PRC was to expel Western missionaries. Canadian churches, which had been deeply invested in the country, felt the “loss of China” as keenly as American Republican politicians. They looked sadly for new mission fields and prayed for the day when they might regain access to China and communion with its Christians. Where U.S. policy sought to isolate “Red China,” Canadian policymakers hoped at times to engage it, to enmesh China in the international system once again. Canadians with an interest in China recall the Diefenbaker wheat deals and especially the pioneering Trudeau government recognition of China as special moments in which Canadian engagement trumped American containment, and celebrate, too, the U.S. government’s acceptance of engagement in the 1970s. The opening of a Canadian embassy in Beijing in 1971, then, stands as a moment in Canadian nationalism. A government-business nexus came to set the terms of Canada’s relations with China, and they could be summed up in one word: Engage!

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with human rights in China increasingly disputed those policies. If the Merchant impulse was central in the dominant government-business nexus, this non-state network drew on the Missionary impulse to propose a counter-policy. It is the human rights groups, and their influence in shaping a debate, that are the focus of this essay. It highlights two types of non-state networks. One is the post-1970s Canadian churches, which were eager to both engage with China and promote their values. The
other is dedicated human rights groups, ranging from Amnesty International to the Canada Tibet Committee, who tried to put rights promotion at the centre of Sino-Canadian relations.

Part of China’s opening to the world, starting in the late 1970s, was to grant permission to approved Chinese Christian groups to resume their activities and even their contacts with church groups outside China. This was also a period in which Canadian churches increasingly sought to insert themselves into national debates through ecumenical coalitions grounded in principles of social justice, human rights, and global partnerships. In the China case, churches were torn because of their conflicting desires to promote social justice principles and demands for silence from partner churches working in the very different political climate of China. Three groups illustrate these points: the Amity Foundation, the Canada Asia Working Group, and the Canada China Programme.

Amity (ai de, the characters for virtue and moral character) might be called China’s first recognized NGO.² Founded in 1985 by the Chinese Christian Council, it took advantage of the PRC government’s more liberal policies, while being careful not to exceed government-imposed limits—thus it displayed “an understanding of the role of NGOs vis-à-vis the government that is complementary rather than antagonistic.”³ Amity was a Chinese organization, but one with heavy foreign involvement. American churches covered eighty percent of the cost for its Hong Kong office, with the China Christian Council kicking in 20 percent. Philip Wickeri, a Presbyterian scholar from the United States, was there at the meetings that decided to form Amity in 1984 amidst “the waning of ultra-leftism in China” and handled its external relations from Hong Kong as Overseas Coordinator until 1998.⁴

Just as many missionaries in early 20th Century China shifted from pure evangelization to service work in building schools and hospitals,⁵ so too would Amity express its mission through
development projects ranging from rural micro-finance to polio treatment. In this, it drew on substantial funding from overseas churches (in excess of 90 percent of its budget came from over 300 global funders, mostly church-related⁶), a process that has worked to restore church-to-church ties between the recognized Chinese Christian groups and churches outside China. The Amity venture was first mooted to Canadian partners by Bishop K.H. Ting (Ding Guangxun), an ordained Anglican bishop and former staff member of Canada’s Student Christian Movement who became chair of state-sanctioned China Christian Council and later the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. “The waning of ultra-leftism in China has now reached a stage when local and individual initiatives are encouraged so long as they work towards socialist modernization,” Bishop Ting wrote in a circular letter to 29 foreign contacts. “We think this is a good environment within which Chinese Christians can not only do our share as citizens in nation building, but also make the fact of our Christian presence and participation better known to our people, without in any way weakening the work of the church proper.”⁷

Canadian churches embraced the new foundation, as did the government in time. The United Church of Canada accepted Canadian International Development Agency co-funding for China work in 1998, and had spent $400,000 on support to Amity by 2005. KAIROS, the social justice arm of the main Canadian churches since 2001, added its own project funding worth $51,500 in 2001.⁸ Canadian aid channeled through Amity has included integrated rural development and poverty alleviation projects. Amity’s pioneer project brought American and other Western teachers to China to teach English, starting with 22 teachers in 1985. The foundation grew to the point where, by its twentieth anniversary, it had an annual budget of RMB 84-million (about US$10 million).⁹

By avoiding preaching, Amity and other Christian groups have been able to compile a
positive reputation, renewed continually through work in high-profile cases, such as Sichuan earthquake relief in 2008. The Chinese Communist slogan “Serve the People” and the Christian commandment to “Love Thy Neighbor” have been seen as compatible; Amity has formed a “bloc within” rather than a dissident “bloc outside.” Yet criticism does creep into the relationship. As one Amity officer notes, new wealth in China has not always helped the poor: “If we take the familiar image of ‘three worlds’, we can now say that in China there are three worlds within one country, and that the gap between the first and the third world is getting bigger and bigger.” Amity has criticized the central government’s decision to curtail its village doctors program, charging that it “disregard[s] the situation of China’s poorest rural residents.” Amity established a Social Development Centre at Nanjing University to train NGO workers, which suggests a role to play in widening civil society. “You must not be concerned about what the government thinks when you speak out on behalf of the poor,” another Amity official argued. “Maybe some officials will think that you are very political—but politics is everywhere, you cannot avoid it if you are involved anywhere at all . . . . If you don’t challenge the government, you cannot change society.”

Amity, like the officially recognized arms of the Protestant and Catholic Churches in China, struggled to balance loyalty and a non-confrontational approach with the commandment to witness to Christian values and the drive to speak up for social justice born of lived experience in development work. This was not a new dilemma—it went back to the founding of the People’s Republic, an officially atheist regime deeply suspicious of missionaries as potential agents of Western powers. The dilemma was clear, for instance, in a message Chinese Christians sent in 1949, the year Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the PRC, to mission boards overseas:

A new chapter in the history of China has begun; a new era has dawned. A new ‘People’s Government’ has been born under the leadership of the Communist Party, with
the co-operation of all the revolutionary elements of the country, and with the avowed common purpose of putting into execution the political, social and economic principles of the New Democracy . . .. We Christians in China feel the urgent necessity of re-examining our work and our relationship with the older churches abroad in light of this historical change in China . . .. Just how the Christian gospel can be witnessed in a clime that is, by virtue of its ideology, fundamentally materialistic and atheistic presents a challenge stronger than ever before . . .. The banner of the Cross has never been easy to carry and it will not be easy in the new era of China.¹⁴

While welcoming continued missionary involvement, Chinese churches knew they had to purge themselves of foreign control and that Christians would face hard times. The authors of this message therefore wrote that they would have to accept government leadership in providing social services and education and “conform with the general pattern of service, organization and administration.”¹⁵

In many ways, the new openness to Christian churches, so long as they were loyal to the regime, fulfilled the hopes of Canadian missionaries of the middle decades of the 20th Century. Evangelizing calls had given way to an acceptance of the need for self-supporting Chinese churches, although sometimes Canadian missionaries dragged their feet on implementation even while endorsing the principle of a self-supporting Chinese church. There was no necessary rejection of the PRC by Canadian churches. For instance, the United Church of Canada, the country’s largest Protestant church (a union of Methodists with some Presbyterians and Congregationalists), ran a large West China Mission in Sichuan. Its West China missionaries were keen to remain and offered ritual pledges of loyalty to the new communist regime. “We declare ourselves to be true friends of the Chinese people, desirous of serving them in such ways as we are able,” a draft statement from Protestant missionaries in Chengdu ran. “We are sincerely opposed to their exploitation, both by selfish, reactionary, capitalistic and feudalistic practices within China, and by imperialistic forces from abroad,” it further avowed. “We declare ourselves to have no connection in China with any political activities of the government of our
home lands.” The statement even endorsed membership for the PRC in the United Nations in place of “the KMT [Kuomintang] regime in Taiwan.”16 The United Church of Canada’s mission board was keen to remain as well, and saw potential for cooperation with the new Communist government; some Protestants even spoke admiringly of the dedication and lack of corruption of Chinese Communists who spent two hours a day studying their scriptures, something few Christians could claim to do.17

Outreach from Chinese Christians in the 1980s, after a long period out of substantial contact, therefore thrilled officials in the Canadian Protestant churches who had once had mission fields in China—the United, Anglican and Presbyterian churches. “We were excited,” recalled Rhea Whitehead of the United Church of Canada’s Division of World Outreach (successor to the church’s missionary arm). “Chinese Christians were pushing our understanding of mission by inviting us to cooperate with them in a new venture in faith.”18

Amity responded to a “new beginning” in relations between Chinese and overseas Christians, launched at a time when the World Council of Churches and others were questioning the idea of a dichotomy between donor and recipient. This opening led to the creation of the Canada China Programme (CCP) by Canadian churches, on the request of Chinese churches and “in response to China’s growing participation in the world community and to develop friendship and open-ness between our two peoples.”19 The CCP, formed in 1971, became a formal ecumenical coalition with staff in 1976. Its board and committees included staffers from the Anglican Church of Canada, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Presbyterian Church in Canada, United Church of Canada, Mennonite Central Committee, Christian Church (Disciples), Holy Ghost congregation, two Catholic missionary societies, and five Catholic religious orders.20

The CCP’s first major initiative came in 1981 with its “New Beginning” conference, with ten
Chinese delegates joining Christian leaders from 25 countries in Montreal in “mutual respect and support.” American churches convened another conference in Nanjing in 1986 that followed this initiative with the China Christian Council present.²¹ The CCP was also the first group to receive an invitation to send a delegation to meet with the official Catholic Patriotic Association in 1982, reporting thriving numbers in Catholic cathedrals and in Protestant circles, where “every three or four days, a new church opens.”²² The CCP, in other words, was highly identified with partnership with China’s official, state-sanctioned churches. It faced criticism from Catholic circles in Canada for ignoring the underground churches. In response, the CCP added this notation in its 1984 annual meeting minutes: “The term ‘underground church’ . . . means one thing to us and another to the Chinese. Whereas here, it is taken to mean heroic individuals loyal to their religious faith at any cost, there it means organization, structure and regular channels of communication with outside forces that are hostile to the New China.”²³ The debate doomed the CCP in 1996, when the abrupt withdrawal of Catholic funding meant the coalition had to be folded into the Canada Asia Working Group.²⁴

This ended years when the CCP was the Canadian churches’ only country-specific ecumenical coalition. Others tended to focus on regions. Of most relevance, the Canada Asia Working Group (CAWG) formed in 1977 to campaign on human rights in the region, with an early focus on the Philippines and Korea. CAWG’s mandate specifically excluded China, left to the CCP, and this permitted a very different version of partnership to emerge.²⁵ CAWG links were with church groups critical of the governments of their countries, with no specific partners singled out. Despite this, CAWG’s networks tended to overlap closely with those of Hong Kong-based Christian Conference of Asia. CAWG was noted for its links to Asian-Canadian communities—a linkage the CCP tended to resist, lest Chinese-Canadian critics interfere with the
demands of partnering with official Chinese churches. As a final difference, the CAWG also began with a clear focus on human rights and economic justice issues, sustained throughout its existence.26 The organization published a widely respected annual brief on “Human Rights in Asia” in advance of the annual UN Commission on Human Rights meeting. By the early 1990s, the absence of China from this brief was proving conspicuous, and a section was added after CCP screening. But the inclusion backfired: CAWG’s steering committee later characterized the circumspect China paragraphs as “not helpful,” adding that they “diminished the way readers viewed the rest of our submission (i.e. they felt we were ‘soft’ on China and thus viewed our submissions on other countries with greater circumspection).” CAWG’s move to integrate thematic concerns for the Asia region, such as labour rights, also raised the question of whether church critiques of trans-Pacific rights and economic justice issues in Asia could be valid if they continued to leave out China. A joint meeting of CAWG and the CCP produced few solutions other than an agreement to consult. The coalitions jointly met with Raymond Chan, the Chrétien government’s Secretary of State (Asia-Pacific), which only could have given Chan a view of contradictory opinions from the church-based NGOs. When CAWG assumed a central role in campaigning around the 1997 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vancouver, the CCP resisted any participation in the calls to link trade with rights, preferring to consider framings such as “the ethical implications of trade” as “less threatening” than the words “human rights.”27

Tensions rose between the CCP’s focus on “partnership” above all, and CAWG’s stress on human rights and social justice. They flared into the open when the CCP’s director delivered a controversial speech at a 1994 NGO “solidarity fair” in Toronto on the theme of linking trade and human rights. She opened with a question asking how NGOs could best support the Chinese
people, and blasted the position of most NGOs on the issue. “I basically affirm the Canadian government’s policy of multi-sectoral engagement with China, including trade based on principles of mutual respect and benefit,” she declared. In calling for trade and rights to be completely de-coupled, she praised the position of the Canadian and U.S. governments, and condemned NGO calls for linkage as the latest example of “arrogant Western attempts to make China over in our image.” The speech stirred a hornet’s nest, indicating a shift in thinking towards the CAWG method, but the CCP director stood by her words, telling her board the speech was an example of “standing up” for CCP partners. “In the end, this paper is all about PARTNERSHIP,” she insisted. The CAWG, on the other hand, was playing a lead role in NGO calls to integrate rights and economic justice concerns into the Chrétien government push for more trade with Asia.

Nevertheless, the decision to fold CCP in 1998 led the Anglican, Presbyterian, and United churches to seek a new home for its work in CAWG. Would this permit a continued Canadian contract point for the official Chinese Protestant church, or would CAWG conduct its new work in China as it had its existing work on the rest of Asia from a critical perspective? As CAWG noted,

Canadian churches want to continue to work with the Chinese people and the church in their efforts to open the space in their society, to create a civil society. At CAWG, such work has been undertaken from a set of values, within a particular framework, using a specific type of language (e.g. human rights—values which impel us to advance human rights yield advocacy strategies which call on us to employ very specific language).

In that work, “the contribution of the Chinese church is one contribution but should not be seen as the only or defining piece.”

On the other hand, the officials who had worked on China for the Anglican, Presbyterian, and especially United Churches hewed to the China Christian Council line that Canadian churches
should be “faithful to our agenda and not impose your agenda.” (Despite this, other Presbyterian officials preferred China work that “more closely follows CAWG’s approach” with increased support for underground churches.)

The CCC was willing to see CAWG include China in its regional analysis “as long as we do not expect input or response from them, we keep them informed of what we are doing, writing, and saying, and we do not focus on human rights issues in such a way that interferes with their capacity to do their work in a sensitive context.”31 Armed with this ambiguous blessing, the churches added funding in 1999 for a third full-time CAWG staff person to deal with China, Japan, and Taiwan (included since it was important to any regional economic analysis and because of its historic Presbyterian missionary presence). This did nothing to resolve tensions, as the discussion at a CAWG retreat revealed. “Some of our partners have compromised and we have to take the lead from them,” a steering committee member from the old CCP circles argued. “If we became associated even with pro-democracy groups here, we could be written off.” A CAWG staffer had this response: “Part of our role is to gently prod our partners.” And another participant noted the calls of one of the Canadian rights NGOs with which CAWG networked, the Canada Tibet Committee, calling for a boycott of visits to China.32 Definitions of solidarity and partnership were clashing, and the expanded Canada Asia Working Group proved unable to “hold in balance human rights and partnerships,” as one steering committee member bemoaned.33 South and Southeast Asia human rights work could continue as normal, but Northeast Asia human rights work would have to concentrate on economic, social, and cultural rights, considered “less sensitive” than civil and political rights. The circle could not be squared—including China work created “an almost irreconcilable tension between the human rights advocacy mandate of CAWG and the imperative of CCC sensitivities.”34 The steering committee
finally convened with staff barred and decided to prohibit any CAWG criticism of China’s internal human rights record—by which it meant civil and political rights and the right to self-determination. In other words, the inclusion of China and the “partnership” imperative softened CAWG’s edge. Tensions continued to simmer until the churches merged all their advocacy and funding coalitions into one new body named KAIROS in 2001. China work was left out of the new KAIROS country focuses.

If Sino-Canadian interactions concentrated on politics, trade, and economic development, the June 1989 killings in Tiananmen Square drew Canadian attention to another aspect of China that had not been central in Ottawa’s engagement with Beijing—human rights. Pledged to promote rights overseas but keen to engage the PRC, the Mulroney government wavered, then carefully found ways to impose sanctions that it hoped would not reduce Canadian trade prospects. Human rights groups demanded stronger pressure. Mulroney issued a general declaration of principle in 1991 that Canada in its foreign policy and foreign aid would no longer “subsidize repression and the stifling of democracy,” but offered no plans for implementation. Indeed, Canadian aid in this period was marginally more likely to flow to countries with poor human rights records than those with better records. The aid-rights linkage, in other words, has been almost entirely rhetorical.

When the Chrétien government came to power, it promised more respect for human rights, and then made the “promotion of Canadian values” one of the “three pillars” of its foreign policy. In practice, however, it paid most attention to another pillar—the promotion of Canadian trade. The trade stress was expressed most visibly through large “Team Canada” trade missions to Asia. Rights groups in Canada responded with calls for linkages between trade and rights—ranging from union pressure for sidebar agreements on rights attached to trade deals, to demands
for sanctions on rights violators. The calls for linkage were especially strong from solidarity
groups campaigning against specific governmental human rights abusers, such as the PRC and
Indonesia. The government rejected any such linkage. Foreign Minister André Ouellet, meeting
in 1995 with representatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in
Vancouver, endorsed the ASEAN conception of “constructive engagement” with human rights
violators. Ouellet’s successor, Lloyd Axworthy, was a proponent of human security and active
Canadian niche diplomacy, but did not depart from the policy of avoiding trade-rights linkage.
Trade and rights, Axworthy argued, were “not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.”
Good governance, including respect for rights and the rule of law, made growth possible, and
growth made stable rights-respecting societies more likely.37 This reflected the prevailing
Western government consensus. Canada, the United States, Australia, and Western European
states had introduced resolutions in the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) critical of
the PRC’s human rights record, including its record in Tibet, for some years. China had the votes
to defeat those efforts, but the symbolic value was nevertheless strong and the exercise served as
pressure on Beijing.

In 1997, the UNCHR effort began to collapse as governments keen for better trade with the
PRC embraced a new approach—“bilateral human rights dialogues.” The logic behind this
tactic was that two countries will sit down together for a conversation about means to strengthen
human rights, present concerns to each other, and work for improvements in a confidential,
confidence-building atmosphere; this in turn would diffuse rights norms and values.38 Australia
led the pursuit of this new approach in 1996, announcing it would end its sponsorship of the
annual UNCHR resolution on human rights in China, and instead focus its efforts on a bilateral
dialogue. At the 1997 UNCHR, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Japan also dropped their
sponsoring. Human Rights Watch called this shift a “sustained attack” on the “universality of human rights—the fundamental premise that they apply to all nations without exception.”

Canada joined the shift. Instead of backing UNCHR resolutions, Canada would conduct its human rights diplomacy (HRD) in private, one on one, with more reliance on “bilateral and quiet diplomacy channels.” This reacted to apparent Chinese receptivity to rights dialogue, and picked up on prior Canadian “quiet diplomacy” on human rights in China.

Chinese government officials, as researcher and former diplomat Charles Burton’s influential review of the China-Canada HRD recounts, characterized the dialogue with Canada as a “model” HRD, “one of the best ones,” showing “less political prejudice against us.” Chinese officials clearly understood the HRD as a concession to Canada in exchange for taking no action at the UNCHR, one serving a domestic political need of the Canadian government by disarming NGO criticism. Evidence of the HRD leading to change in China is lacking. As the Charter 08 declaration Chinese dissidents approved points out, “this political progress stops at the paper stage.” Despite earlier assertions that HRD was one mechanism for use alongside other forms of advocacy for human rights, officials pointed to HRD itself as a contribution to rights in China. In sum, process replaced pressure. Nor was it clear that there was any need to end Canadian co-sponsorship of a UNCHR resolution to carry out dialogue on human rights with the Chinese government. In 1996, Canadian and Chinese diplomats held a meeting devoted to human rights in Beijing, one unaffected by continuing Canadian sponsorship of the annual UNCHR resolution. Rather than the hoped-for “diffusion and enmeshment” of China in international human rights regimes, Chinese diplomats have been effective in altering international human rights norms.

A coalition of Canadian human rights organizations concerned about China formed to oppose the HRD process. “There is no use engaging in private government to government discussions
on human rights when there is no system for public accountability nor benchmarks by which to measure progress of the dialogue,” Cheuk Kwan of the Toronto Association for Democracy in China argued.  

The Canada Tibet Committee attacked Canada’s HRD as a failure and called for its suspension pending a parliamentary review. This stance won support from Amnesty International, PEN Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress, and others. No less than 23 NGOs backed a campaign seeking Canadian support for a resolution on human rights in China at the UNCHR meeting in 2000. They included the parliament-funded Rights and Democracy, which issued this statement:

> The bilateral human rights dialogue has not achieved its objectives, the situation of human rights in China has deteriorated, and Canada’s access to China’s markets has not yet increased. More importantly, the UN human rights system has been weakened by manipulation and application of a double standard.

These two concerns—effectiveness and the erosion of the international human rights system—convinced a normally cautious organization to speak out against the dialogue process and to call for a more effective form of “engagement” on bilateral grounds. The effect on global human rights regimes, weakened by Chinese pressure for a shift from multilateral resolutions to bilateral and secretive “dialogues,” was central to broadening the human rights NGO coalition beyond groups focused on China and Tibet, to include groups that took a global approach to rights.

On the other hand, church groups demurred. At an NGO campaign meeting in Montreal, church representatives stressed their “reticence to support the resolution in favour of the current path of constructive engagement.” The Network for International Human Rights, an umbrella of NGOs lobbying Ottawa, opted for a middle stance. “Human rights are central, not peripheral to both national and international affairs,” it argued. On HRD, the network “ask[ed] that Canada carefully review whether the bilateral initiatives with China, Indonesia and Mexico have indeed brought results, or whether such initiatives prevent the UN Commission on Human Rights from
acquiring greater relevance and credibility as it deals with the full range of human rights violations around the world.” In its statement, the Network for International Human Rights added that “no nation, even those with significant economic clout, should be able to bypass the Commission through various and multiple bilateral programmes.”

Campaigns to put rights at the centre of Canadian relations with China drew lamentation from some academics and policymakers who saw barbarians at the gates, activists lining up with a Conservative mob poised to wreck a carefully-honed foreign policy. The alignment, indeed, made many left-leaning activists uncomfortable, forcing them to grapple with their traditional antipathy for the Canadian right wing—a sign that Conservative tactics aimed to win new domestic constituencies to their banner. But one also can read the translation of the issue into the public realm as a welcome democratization of foreign policy. Public debates over the Canada-China HRD, in the context of the overall human rights situation in China, achieved three things. First, the Harper government eventually did suspend the HRD. Second, a parliamentary subcommittee on international human rights held hearings on the HRD in 2006, concluding in a report that still remains secret that it “had not met its objectives.” Third, the debate forced the government to agree to Charles Burton’s independent review of the HRD, which identified a series of problems with the process. A screened version of his report was made public in 2006.

The Harper government in its early days showed the influence of some of the activists for international human rights who had backed it. Canada Tibet Committee national coordinator Tenzin Khangsar upset some fellow rights activists when he sought office as the Conservative candidate in a Montreal-area riding in 2006. Although he suffered a sound defeat, he went on to serve as chief of staff to Immigration Minister Jason Kenney until 2008. In this position, he played a role in Kenney’s highly successful outreach to ethnic communities, which promoted
Conservative electoral gains. Kenney’s office stood at one wing of Conservative party opinion on China, which informed the government’s early shift away from Liberal engagement strategies. At first this wing prevailed over the pro-business lobby within the party, which had former Liberal David Emerson, the trade minister, as its standard-bearer. A struggle that pitted a rights-first wing against a business-first wing within the government, however, saw the tide turn in 2009. Resumption of the HRD continually seems on the cards, but irritants such as the grant of honorary Canadian citizenship to the Dalai Lama, spats over attendance at the Beijing Olympics, and Canadian words of sympathy for dissidents like 2010 Nobel peace prize winner Liu Xiabo periodically delayed it. It may be that the issue is symbolic enough that the defeated rights-first wing will be able to stop resumption of the HRD, while engagement continues and intensifies in all other realms.

The imperatives of partnership and pressure have both operated in Canadian relations with the PRC. Wild twists in Canadian government policy become more visible when the role of NGOs, both secular and religious, receives consideration and scrutiny. Churches offered their own version of foreign policy, one that both influenced government policy and was influenced by it. So too, more loudly and publicly, did dedicated human rights organizations in Canada with a China or Asia-wide focus. Church interest in China did not vanish as the last missionaries departed that nation’s shores. Connections and the desire for more partnership continued. So too did the desire “to change China” in ways that would realize ideals of human dignity and social justice. Church coalitions also had partnerships with secular NGOs in advancing these ideals. They worked together at times, in opposition at others, but in all cases influenced the interactions between Chinese and Canadian society.

Recent turns in Canadian policy towards China signal a defeat for human rights NGOs
centered on China. Jason Kenney continues to attend the annual Tiananmen commemoration in Toronto, but the government clearly is determined to return to the once-reviled policies of its predecessor. The “almighty dollar” won after all. The reasons for the Conservative rights-first wing’s defeat can be traced, in part, to the shallowness of its critique. Where Canada’s Liberal governments presented an image of rights advocacy that would not impede trade prospects, the Harper Conservative government initially preferred finger-wagging and public lectures. These aimed at building favorable domestic public opinion, and were not accompanied by any apparent search for effective ways to deliver change. There was verbal posturing on human rights, but little apparent search for effective rights-promotion strategies. Quite the reverse—the Harper government’s dislike of certain Canadian civil society organizations has prompted the Canadian International Development Agency to sever support to such NGO voices as KAIROS and the Canadian Council for International Cooperation.

Canadian human rights NGOs will have to respond creatively to the so-called “peaceful rise” of China. It will require partnership, but that need not mean allowing state-sponsored partners in the PRC to impose silence on groups in Canada. Partnership must mean each side can speak out. It is important to realize that no Canadian human rights activist seeks to return to “isolating” or “containing” the PRC. Instead, they seek a different and broader engagement with China that goes beyond the state-sanctioned level. It is also important for Canadian human rights NGOs to take an approach that does not single out the PRC as a unique, exceptional case. There should be no embrace of “Chinese exceptionalism.” Instead, transnational, global thinking is required. Anything else would be to accept that human rights are not, as rights groups insist, “universal and indivisible.” Canadians need to be multilateral, rather than bilateral, to be effective. Also, Canadian human rights groups should continue to be self-critical on Canada’s own record of
human rights violations, from Afghanistan to Alberta. And finally, rights promotion partnerships have to be at least regional in approach, meaning two-way, and Asia-wide, not solely China-centred. In other words, a changing context means rights NGOs also have to change in creative ways. That can only be good for the future of Sino-Canadian relations.

Endnotes

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2 For information on Amity, see http://www.amityfoundation.org/


4 “Introducing the Amity Foundation,” undated pamphlet; Canada China Programme staff report on Canadian Catholic Friendship Delegation to China, 2-27 March 1985, file 7, box 9.; Norman Hall Mackenzie fonds, 89.155C, United Church of Canada Archives (henceforth UCCA), Toronto.

5 See for instance Address of Dr. R.B. McAmmond, Jenshow, West China, General Board of Missions, 17 Oct. 1921, file 46, box 6, fonds 14, UCCA.


8 Rhea Menzel Whitehead, “Canadian Churches and Amity Foundation Partnership,” in Fiedler and Zhang, 184; funding papers on file at KAIROS Global Partnerships Program, KAIROS papers, private collection, Toronto.

9 “Amity’s Teachers Program Ready to Go Into Its Third Year: An Interview with Ting Yen-ren (Summer 1987),” in Fiedler and Zhang, 112; “Putting An End to Suffering Now: An Interview With Zhang Liwei,” in Fiedler and Zhang, 130.

10 Kathy Call, “Amity’s ‘Three Cobbler Effort’ To Better The Loves Of China’s Dear People,” in Fiedler and Zhang, 195.

11 Katrin Fiedler, “One Country. Three Worlds” [interview with Qui Jie], in Fiedler and Zhang, 93.

12 “The Needs Are Enormous’: An Interview with He Congpei,” in Fiedler and Zhang, 141.

13 “‘Give Them Quality of Life’: An Interview with Wu An’an,” in Fiedler and Zhang, 146.

14 “A Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad,” undated typescript [1949], file 311, box 12, series 4/1, fonds 502, UCCA.

15 Whitehead, 180.

16 Jesse H. Arnup [Secretary of Overseas Missions], “Church Adjustments Under Communist Domination,” The United Church Observer, 1 Feb. 1950, 7, 30; Excerpts from the minutes of ad interim committee of the General China Conference of the Methodist Church, 11 Aug. 1949, Shanghai, file 311, box 12, series 4/1, fonds 502, UCCA.

17 Whitehead, 180.

18 Whitehead, 180.

19 Note on CCP mandate and structure, UCCA, 2002.004C/7/3; “Ecumenical Partnership and the Churches in Canada,” [document for Canadian-Chinese Protestant consultations in Nanjing, 1997], file 7, box 8, CAWG papers, private collection, Toronto.

20 CCP committee membership list, 1985, file 7, box 9, accession 89.155C, UCCA.

21 Memorandum by Theresa Chu, CCP director, 14 Nov. 1985, file 7, box 9, accession 89.155C, UCCA; “God’s Call to a New Beginning, Montreal, Oct. 2-7, 1981,” pamphlet on file 3, box 7, accession 2002.004C, UCCA.
22 Theresa Chu, “Visit to Seven Dioceses in China, Sept. 23rd to Oct 20th, 1982,” file 7, box 9, accession 89.155C, UCCA.
23 CCP AGM minutes, 30 June 1984, file 7, box 9, accession 89.155C, UCCA.
24 “Ecumenical Partnership and the Churches in Canada,” [document for Canadian-Chinese Protestant consultations in Nanjing, 1997], file 7, box 6, CAWG.
25 CAWG minutes, 28 Sept. 1977, file 7, box 7, CAWG.
26 CAWG minutes, 26 Oct. 1977, file 7, box 7, CAWG.
29 See for instance CAWG press release “Canadian Churches Urge Prime Minister Jean Chretien and Members of the ‘Team Canada’ Mission to Korea, the Philippines and Thailand to Link Trade and Human Rights,” 6 Jan. 1997, file 21, box 6, CAWG.
30 Retreat minutes, 9-10 Sept. 1997, file 16, box 7, CAWG. Emphasis in original.
31 Consultation with the China Christian Council, Nanjing, Nov. 7-10, 1997 – “A New, New Beginning,” file 17, box 7, CAWG; CAWG minutes, 27 Jan. 1997 and Presbyterian Church in Canada memorandum, 9 March 2000, both on file 7, box 6, CAWG.
32 CAWG minutes, 7 April 1999, file 18, box 7, CAWG.
33 Summary of CAWG discussion on Japan-Taiwan-China program, Sept. 7, 1999, file 7, box 6, CAWG.
34 Overview of China positions, 1999?, file 7, box 6, CAWG.
35 CAWG minutes, 12-13 Sept. 2000, file 20, box 7, CAWG.
43 NGO press release by Amnesty International Canada, Canada Tibet Committee, Canadian Labour Congress, PEN Canada and TADC, 11 Jan. 1999, file 14, box 6, CAWG.
45 Joint press release, March 28, 2000, file 7, box 6, CAWG.
46 Review of Montreal meeting, 14 Feb. 2000, file 7, box 6, CAWG; Network on International Human Rights statement at Department of Foreign Affairs annual human rights consultations, 4 March 1999, file 14, box 6, CAWG.