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Christianity as a Chinese Religion: A Theological Consideration

ALEXANDER CHOW

Abstract

There has been a growing discourse in mainland China about the “Chinization” or “Sinicization” (*Zhongguo hua* 中國化) of Christianity, which can be seen as an extension of the common rhetoric that Christianity is a “foreign religion” (*yangjiao* 洋教). This paper will explore the theological developments of Chinese Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and argue that it has exhibited a key characteristic of all forms of Chinese religiosity: Heaven and humanity in unity (*Tian ren heyi* 天人合一). Indeed, this paper claims that Chinese Christianity must be accepted as a Chinese religion.

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been a growing discourse in mainland China on the “Chinization” or “Sinicization” (*Zhongguo hua* 中國化) of Christianity.¹

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¹ I have chosen in this text to render *Zhongguo hua* as “Chinization.” Historically, the terms “sinicization” or “sinification” are the English translations for various Chinese terms such as *Zhongguo hua*, *hanhua* 漢化, or *huahua* 華化. However, the use of the term *Zhongguo hua* in current discourse emphasizes a strong statist understanding, which therefore makes it more appropriate to speak of Chinization.

In many ways, this conversation needs to be rooted in part of the broader view of Christianity as a “foreign religion” (*yangjiao* 洋教). It is often said that Christianity must learn from the path of Buddhism, another “foreign religion,” which eventually adapted to and embraced “Chinese” culture.² In fact, the description of Christianity as a “foreign religion” largely arose during the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, in which many religious cases (*jiao'an* 教案) were levied against Christianity.³ By the early twentieth century, Christianity received the double charge as being both foreign and feudal. Despite attempts by the Chinese to reform Christianity⁴—as well as Confucianism and Buddhism⁵—all these ideologies were seen as part of the superstitious mindset which hindered the progress of modernity. This changed to a certain extent in the 1980s and 1990s in the Chinese academy. On the one hand, there was a growing interest in the Weberian thesis that the apparent success of capitalism must be attributed to the so-called “Protestant ethic.” But more than economics, Christianity was increasingly seen as offering possibilities to rebuild Chinese civilization. The advent of “cultural Christians” (*wenhua Jidutu* 文化基督徒) heralded the possibility for this foreign religion of Christianity—and its output of Christian culture—to be seen as essential for the progress of China.⁶

Politically, since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party has pursued a number of approaches to the existence of religion in the country. During Deng Xiaoping’s 鄧小平 reforms in the late 1970s, the emphasis was placed on the “freedom of religious belief” (*zongjiao*

In English sources, it is instructive to note that *Chinese Theological Review* rendered the Chinese as “Chinization” in volume 26, but shifted to “Sinicization” in volume 27. See Janice Wickeri, “From the Editor,” *Chinese Theological Review* 26 (2014): vii; Janice Wickeri, “From the Editor,” *Chinese Theological Review* 27 (2015): ix.

² One of the great classics on the development of early Chinese Buddhism is Eric Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

³ For a fascinating discussion on these developments, see Thoralf Klein, “The Missionary as Devil: Anti-Missionary Demonology in China, 1860–1930,” in *Europe as the Other: External Perspectives on European Christianity*, ed. Judith Becker and Brian Stanley (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 119–48.

⁴ See Samuel D. Ling, “The Other May Fourth Movement: The Chinese ‘Christian Renaissance,’ 1919–1937” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1980).

⁵ Examples of this can be seen in the rise of New Confucianism (*Xin Ruja* 新儒家) and Taixu’s 太虛 Humanistic Buddhism (*Renjian Fojiao* 人間佛教).

⁶ See Fredrik Fällman, *Salvation and Modernity: Intellectuals and Faith in Contemporary China*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

xinyang ziyou 宗教信仰自由).⁷ Ryan Dunch makes a helpful observation that, during this period, “Chinese Communist Party leaders expected that only a small remnant of elderly religious believers remained, and that the disappearance of religion from socialist China was only a matter of time.”⁸ Instead, quite the opposite happened and the number of religious believers grew at a phenomenal rate. In 1993, and reiterated in 2002, Jiang Zemin 江澤民 spoke about the need for religions to “adapt to a socialist society” (*yu Shehuizhuyi shehui xiang shiying* 與社會主義社會相適應). K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun 丁光訓) responded to Jiang Zemin’s call in the 1990s campaign for the “reconstruction of theological thinking” (*shenxue sixiang jianshe* 神學思想建設), with an explicit attempt to adapt Christianity to socialism.⁹ Likewise, when Xi Jinping 習近平 spoke about the “Chinization” (*Zhongguo hua* 中國化) of religions in 2015 and 2016, Chinese academics and Chinese Christian leaders associated with the state-sanctioned Protestant and Catholic bodies echoed such initiatives within Christianity.¹⁰ Hence, the notion of the Chinization of Christianity is in many ways a new phase of this question of Christianity as a foreign religion. It is, however, an odd development as it has progressed in a top-down approach to the localization or, shall we say, domestication of Christianity.

Historically, Christianity can be seen as having already become a Chinese religion in its own right. Christianity first entered the country in the seventh century—almost contemporaneous to the Augustinian mission sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the Anglo-Saxons in Britain. The record in China is most clearly noted through the archaeological evidence found in the so-called “Nestorian stele” (*Jingjiao bei* 景教碑)¹¹—the stone tablet erected as a way to recognize Christianity’s status from the vantage point of the imperial state of the Tang dynasty. Today, one may even be able to speak about “Christian villages” which can be traced

⁷ It should be noted that the phrase should not be translated as “freedom of religion” (*zongjiao ziyou* 宗教自由), which offers a very different connotation.

⁸ Ryan Dunch, “Christianity and ‘Adaptation to Socialism,’” in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 155.

⁹ Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 344.

¹⁰ Sergio Ticozzi, “Xi Jinping’s Meaning of ‘Sinicization of Religions,’” *Tripod* 37, no. 184 (Spring 2017): 99–105. See volume 26 of *Chinese Theological Review*.

¹¹ Whilst many historical studies continue to use the term “Nestorianism” to describe *Jingjiao* 景教, this is inaccurate and highly problematic. See Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 177n1.

back many generations—for some, many centuries.¹² From a historical perspective, Christianity has been present in China for thirteen centuries longer than a more recent so-called “Chinese” ideology—Chinese communism.

We can also challenge this discourse based on numerical growth. In 1949, there were just shy of four million Christians (three million Catholics and 700,000 Protestants) out of the country’s population of some 500 million. Today, while accurate numbers are hard to come by, it would perhaps be safe to estimate roughly 70 to 80 million Christians (58 million Protestants and 12 to 15 million Catholics) out of the country’s population of 1.3 billion. Despite the tripling of the overall Chinese population in the past seven decades, the Christian religion in China has witnessed a phenomenal 20 fold growth.¹³ Much of this has to do with what many have described as a “Christianity fever” (*Jidujiao re* 基督教熱) experienced in the mainland since the 1980s. However, according to many interpreters during the earlier period, this was seen as mainly amongst the “four manys” (*si duo* 四多)—many old, many women, many illiterate, and many ill.¹⁴ In other words, Christianity has been accepted by those in the margins who have turned towards religion in a kind of “rice Christianity.” Clearly, underlying this is a kind of Marxist rhetoric about religion as the opiate of the masses, promoting a backward feudal thinking. It has also overlooked the growing interest in the 1980s and 1990s in cultural Christianity and the burgeoning academic field of Sino-Christian theology (*Hanyu shenxue* 漢語神學). Nevertheless, it shows that Christianity is increasingly being accepted as part of the broader Chinese religious ecosystem.

From a different vantage point, we can approach this question about whether or not Christianity is a Chinese religion based on its sociopolitical influence. Connected to the last point, what we find happening since the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century has been a significant shift in Chinese Christianity to include many entrepreneurs and well-educated intellectuals. Chen Cunfu 陳村富 of Zhejiang University is

¹² For instance, see Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹³ The sociologist Yang Fenggang 楊鳳崗 has made the prediction that China, by 2030, will become the largest Christian country in the world, with over 247 million. Only time will tell if these estimates come true. Tom Phillips, “China on course to become ‘world’s most Christian nation’ within 15 years,” *Telegraph*, April 19, 2014, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>.

¹⁴ See Bao Zhimin, “Facing Reality and Responding to Challenges: On Ten Years of Chinese Church Reconstruction,” trans. Francesca Rhys, *Chinese Theological Review* 5 (1989): 3.

perhaps the first to discuss these developments, speaking of two new types of urban Christians which he terms “boss Christians” (*laoban Jidutu* 老闆基督徒) and “intellectual elite Christians” (*zhishi jingying Jidutu* 知識精英基督徒).¹⁵ Perhaps we should now be speaking of a new set of “four manys”—many young, many urbanites, many educated, and many prosperous. What is particularly significant, is that China’s recent pushes towards rapid urbanization and the upward mobility of Chinese Christians have produced a growing understanding of what I have termed a “public theology”—a desire amongst Chinese Christians, especially in unregistered churches, to participate in the state and the society—through addressing questions around social engagement, civil society, and human rights.¹⁶ Chinese Christians, disproportionate to their numbers, have been exercising a surprisingly strong voice in the Chinese public space.¹⁷

However, for this paper, my interest is to engage this topic from the vantage point of theology—that is, the thinking of Chinese Christians, and argue the case whereby Christianity in China today must be understood as a Chinese religion. Much of this will focus on the “elite” forms of Protestant Christianity in urban parts of mainland China,¹⁸ largely due to the volume of theological output it has produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My main hermeneutic lens is on the notion of “Heaven and humanity in unity” (*Tian ren heyi* 天人合一).¹⁹

¹⁵ Chen Cunfu 陳村富, *Zhuanxingqi de Zhongguo Jidujiao: Zhejiang Jidujiao ge'an yan-jiu* 轉型期的中國基督教——浙江基督教個案研究 [Chinese Christianity in Transition: A Case Study of Zhejiang Christianity] (Beijing: Oriental Press, 2005), 51–52.

¹⁶ Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ I prefer to use the term “public space” as opposed to “public sphere” or “public square.” See *Ibid.*, 4–7.

¹⁸ For a discussion of popular Chinese Christianity, see Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

This discussion could be expanded to include Chinese Christians located outside of mainland China, such as Peter K. H. Lee (Li Jingxiong 李景雄) and Lai Pan-chiu (Lai Pinchao 賴品超) of Hong Kong or Chow Lien-hwa (Zhou Lianhua 周聯華) of Taiwan. However, for the purposes of this paper, the discussion will be circumscribed to Christians based in mainland China.

¹⁹ An earlier form of this paper was produced as part of an oral presentation in the Chinese Christianities Seminar of the 2017 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. This paper has since been updated and revised for the purposes of publication, though it was not originally conceived as such.

Inspiration for this paper comes from Nicholas Standaert, “Christianity as a Religion in China: Insights from the *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume One (635–1800)*,” *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 12 (2001): 1–21. Whilst Standaert’s reflections come

HEAVEN AND HUMANITY IN UNITY

The theme of the unity of Heaven and humanity is regarded by many scholars as the central thread that runs through all Chinese religions and philosophies. Julia Ching (Qin Jiayi 秦家懿) explains:

[*Tian ren heyi*] arose out of a primeval experience: that of the human being possessed by the spirit or spirits, in a moment of trance. We could call this a kind of shamanic experience, and we shall be speaking much more about the shamanic aspect of ancient religion, as well as the surviving importance of ecstasy and of theistic beliefs in today's popular religion. This maxim was to become better known in the later traditions, such as in Confucian and Taoist philosophies, to represent less a union between the divine and the human, and more a continuum or a communication between the two orders, moving more and more away from the originally anthropomorphic, to an increasingly pantheistic sense.²⁰

Likewise, the eminent scholar of Chinese thought Chan Wing-tsit (Chen Rongjie 陳榮捷) opens his magnum opus, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, with a similar claim. He explains that Chinese thought is fundamentally humanistic. But when he uses the term humanistic, he explains that this is “not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven [*Tian ren heyi*]. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history.”²¹ This means that much of Chinese traditional thought is not anthropocentric, but anthropocosmic. The latter is a term

after editing his important handbook, the basis for my reflections comes after producing two (humbler) studies: *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment* (2013) and *Chinese Public Theology* (2018).

²⁰ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 5.

²¹ Chan Wing-tsit, trans. and ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3.

Compare this with an alternative narrative offered in Vincent Shen, “The Fading of Political Theology and the Rise of Creative Humanism,” in *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy*, ed. Vincent Shen (London: Springer, 2014), 23–51.

coined by Tu Wei-ming (Du Weiming 杜維明) which brings together the triad of Heaven, Earth/cosmos, and humanity.²²

Mindful of this tradition, the rest of this paper will focus on using this notion of the unity of Heaven and humanity as a hermeneutic tool to draw out themes related to the development of Chinese Christianity. I will focus on three major themes: transcendence, causation, and collectivism.

TRANSCENDENCE

One of the major points of debate related to Christianity and Chinese culture has been around different understandings of the divide between transcendence and immanence. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci saw, in the Chinese classical works, teachings of transcendence on par with that of the Christian God. In a Thomistic fashion, Ricci argued that these Chinese writings provided evidence for the Christian God, whereas the Daoists, Buddhists, and Neo-Confucians of his day had insufficient understandings of metaphysics.²³ By the twentieth century, New Confucian scholars such as Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 and Tu Wei-ming argued that *Tian ren heyi* shows *Tian* is both transcendent and immanent—and so is humanity. In contrast to the “outer transcendence” (*waizai chaoyue* 外在超越) of the Christian God, the Confucian emphasis on an “inner transcendence” (*neizai chaoyue* 內在超越) provides a basis for human morality.

In terms of the course of Chinese Christianity, much of this can be found in the motif of the cosmic Christ (*yuzhou de Jidu* 宇宙的基督), often attributed to the controversial figure K. H. Ting.²⁴ Drawing from

²² Tu Wei-ming, “An ‘Anthropocosmic’ Perspective on Creativity,” in *Dialogues of Philosophies, Religions and Civilizations in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Zhao Dunhua (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2007), 143–53.

To be clear, what is generally translated as “Heaven” (*Tian* 天) can be underscored in a God-like sense of divinity, and also a naturalistic understanding. Whilst the former is more characteristic of Confucianism, the latter is more characteristic of Daoism.

²³ See Douglas Lancashire and Peter Kuo-chen Hu, “Translators’ Introduction,” in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T’ien-chu Shih-i)*, by Matteo Ricci (Taipei: Ricci Institute, 1985), 23–24, 47–48.

²⁴ Whilst this is true in China in the 1980s, the discourse around cosmic Christology was dominant in ecumenical debates of South Asia from the 1960s to 1970s.

Alfred North Whitehead's caricature of God as a distant and ruthless tyrant, Ting explains that a cosmic Christology counteracts a perspective of God which is so transcendent that He is perceived to have forsaken the world. Instead, it highlights the breadth of God's concern throughout the world, and the depth of God's love as exemplified by Jesus Christ in the gospels.²⁵ Ting argues that the Chinese soil has already been prepared for this view of Christ, pointing to the *Dao De Jing*, and this view has been more acceptable than the Chalcedonian formulation of a two-nature Christology.²⁶

However, Ting is but one of a number of individuals who have developed a cosmic Christology. For instance, Edmond Tang has argued that it can be traced back to theological figures such as T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen 趙紫宸) and Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗) in the early twentieth century.²⁷ Beyond these more progressive theologians, a cosmic Christology can also be found in the evangelical Wang Weifan 汪維藩²⁸ and, possibly, even in the fundamentalist theologian Jia Yuming 賈玉銘. These developments are quite different from the general course of Western theology which, due to the European enlightenments, has resulted in a more disenchanted cosmology.²⁹ Whilst all of these figures have drawn from elements of Western theology, their own formulations are likewise guided by pressing Chinese contextual factors as well. For these Chinese Christians, through the God-man Jesus Christ, the Incarnation offers a collapsing of worlds whereby the Transcendent has entered into history.

²⁵ K. H. Ting, "The Cosmic Christ," *Love Never Ends: Papers by K. H. Ting*, ed. Janice Wickeri (Nanjing: Yilin Press, [1991] 2000), 408–18.

²⁶ Ibid, 418.

²⁷ Edmond Tang, "The Cosmic Christ: The Search for a Chinese Theology," *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 2 (October 1995): 131–42.

²⁸ Alexander Chow, "Wang Weifan's Cosmic Christ," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 3 (July 2016): 384–96.

²⁹ While this is true in a general sense, there have been Western Christians interested in speaking about a cosmic Christ. Some examples which may have influenced the thinking of K. H. Ting and, possibly, T. C. Chao are the *Lux Mundi* theology of the Anglo-Catholic Charles Gore and the evolutionary theology of the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. See Li Jieren, "In Search of the *Via Media* between Christ and Marx: A Study of Bishop Ding Guangxun's Contextual Theology" (PhD diss., Lund University, 2008).

For more recent Western interests in cosmic Christology, see Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1990); Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

It is interesting, however, to consider the works of various cultural Christians on this matter.³⁰ For instance, He Guanghu 何光滬 discusses how all religions uphold a kind of transcendence.³¹ Yet, He speaks about transcendence not with the conventional term *chaoyue* 超越, but with the term *chaoren* 超人—that is, to transcend humanity. In Christianity, this is the wholly other God. In Chinese religions, it is the ritual practices of sacrifice: Confucianism sees this in terms of Heaven, Earth, ancestors, and various deities, whilst for Daoism and Buddhism, it is their own pantheons of gods. That which transcends human nature is an object of religious worship. Hence, these religions all have comparable understandings of transcendence in terms of having an object of faith.

Contrastingly, others such as Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 and Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 would specifically underscore the unique contribution of the Christian notion of transcendence towards China's search for modernity. For Liu, he would explain this in terms of the need for a transcendent moral reference point.³² For Zhuo, it would be the basis for Western modern values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.³³ This would be echoed by later human rights activists, such as Wang Yi 王怡 and Yu Jie 余杰, who have taken Liu Xiaofeng's views and argued that the transcendent spirit within Christianity is what China needs.³⁴ For these latter figures, they try to advance a kind of political liberalism built upon the transcendent spirit of Christianity which they see as superior to all other political theories.

This relationship between the transcendent and the immanent is not exclusively found within “elite” theology. Pentecostal-like forms of Chinese Christianity have been known to include religious experiences of trances, chants, spiritual dances, exorcisms, and the use of talismans. A number of scholars have argued that this is a folk religionization of

³⁰ See Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 81–85.

³¹ He Guanghu, *Baichuan guihai: Zouxian quanqiu zongjiao zhexue* 百川歸海：走向全球宗教哲學 [All Rivers Return to the Ocean: Towards a Global Religious Philosophy] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing, 2008), 137–42.

³² Liu Xiaofeng, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao: Zhongxifang shiren dui shijie de butong taidu* 拯救與逍遙——中西方詩人對世界的不同態度 [Delivering and Dallying: Different Attitudes towards the World by Chinese and Western Poets] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1988).

³³ Zhuo Xinping, “Jidujiao dui Zhongguo shehui xiandaihua de yiyi” 基督教對中國社會現代化的意義 [Christianity's Significance for the Modernization of Chinese Society], in *Jidu zongjiao lun* 基督宗教論 [Discourse on Christianity] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, [1995] 2000), 212–14.

³⁴ Lian Xi, “‘Cultural Christians’ and the Search for Civil Society in Contemporary China,” *The Chinese Historical Review* 20, no. 1 (May 2013): 78–79; Gerda Wierlander, *Christian Values in Communist China* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 130–50.

Christianity.³⁵ This popular development of Chinese Christianity emphasizes the immanent's mystical union with the (not so) transcendent Divine.

From these various examples, I would argue that this emphasis on the transcendent benefits the immanent—there is a causal relationship between Heaven and humanity. Whether one is to speak about the cosmic Christ, transcendence in Christianity and other religions, or one's mystical experiences, these Chinese Christians believe that through God's transcendence, humans are afforded a possibility to engage both the existential and mundane concerns experienced in this same history. In essence, the transcendent or the otherworldly has immanent or thisworldly significance.

CAUSATION

This tension between the transcendent and the immanent in many ways points to a coming together of Heaven and humanity. We have already had a glimpse of our second point, that is, a synergistic understanding of causation. Humans are coworkers with Heaven or God (Romans 8:28), encapsulated in the Chinese phrase *Tiansheng rencheng* 天生人成—Heaven engenders, humanity completes.

I have discussed this elsewhere, but perhaps I can briefly summarize my view here.³⁶ Firstly, it should be noted that in Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, the relationship between cause and effect are not as absolute as found in more monergistic systems such as Augustinianism or Pelagianism. Instead, there is a more organic negotiation between Heaven and the world, whereby nature may reject the will of Heaven (*Tianming* 天命).

Secondly, we can also see this in terms of how various Chinese Christians have formulated their understandings of salvation. For Watchman

³⁵ Gao Shining, "Twenty-first Century Chinese Christianity and the Chinese Social Process," trans. Janice Wickeri, *China Study Journal* 15, no. 2/3 (August–December 2000): 14–18; Edmond Tang, "'Yeller' and Healers: Pentecostalism and the Study of Grassroots Christianity in China," in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, rev. ed., ed. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2011), 393–94.

³⁶ See Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 120–24.

Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝聲), salvation is accomplished through the uniting of a person with God: first through the union of our lives with God's life and second through the union of our wills with God's will.³⁷ The former occurs immediately upon regeneration—when a person becomes a Christian, the life of God is united with the life of the individual. This is a cooperation of human and divine wills, whereby God daily initiates, by his grace, to change humans; yet it is the choice of each individual, with his or her God-ordained free will, to respond to God's initiation. For Nee, salvation is complete only when the will of a person is united with the will of God.

But this is also the view of more liberal theological thinkers such as T. C. Chao and K. H. Ting. This may be due in part to the Anglican background of these two which would have been disposed to a Thomistic understanding of free will and efficacious grace. Yet, for both, their systems of thought are less focused on God as first mover and more focused on God as first lover—humans are to love like the God of love. Their metaphysics of causation are not mechanical (first mover), but biogenerative (first lover).

So whether we speak about understandings of salvation or understandings of moral or public significance, as mentioned earlier with the cultural Christians, we are reminded of Chan Wing-tsit's point that Chinese thought is fundamentally humanistic.

COLLECTIVISM

The third matter is around the notion of collectivism, something I would like to speak of in terms of the theological category of ecclesiology. This connects with the broader theme of the unity between Heaven and humanity in the sense that, according to Herbert Fingarette, the most important aspect of Confucianism is *not* notions of morality, wrapped around the concept of benevolence (*ren* 仁), but ritual propriety (*li* 禮).³⁸ Humans are to be united with Heaven's approach to the world to

³⁷ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, 3 vols. (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, [1928] 1977), 3: 83–84.

³⁸ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

bring about a so-called “magical” change in human society, through human relations.³⁹

This idea, of course, is largely dependent on the virtue of filiality (*xiao* 孝). In the *Analects*, Confucius explains, “When the gentleman [*junzi* 君子] feels profound affection for his parents, the common people will be stirred to benevolence” (*Analects* 8:2).⁴⁰ Mencius offers a similar view when he states, “If only everyone loved his parents and treated his elders with deference, the Empire would be at peace” (*Mencius* 4a:11).⁴¹ For both Confucius and Mencius, moral transformation is not limited to the individual, but is manifested in the outworkings of moral excellence in the family, which is likewise manifested in the moral excellence of the society and the empire. Moreover, while this is often a view associated with Confucianism, this is not exclusively true. Kenneth Ch’en (Chen Guansheng 陳觀勝), for instance, has argued how filiality has been key in the developments of Chinese Buddhism.⁴² Moreover, the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 explains this in twentieth-century Chinese society in terms of concentric circles formed by throwing a rock into a lake.⁴³ Relationships are formed through marriage, having children, and growing outwards towards the broader society and empire.

However, in the twentieth century, and even more as we move into the early twenty-first century, traditional family structures have tended to break down. This is partly due to the course of modernity and the shift in gender roles since the 1910s and 1920s. Even Mao Zedong, several decades later, famously declared that women would hold up half the sky. In the last three decades, this has also been accelerated by the controversial one-child policy that was in effect from 1979 until 2015.⁴⁴ Moreover, the pursuit of a socialist market economy has also effectively pulled apart these traditional understandings. With rapid urbanization and mass migration, no longer is a single large family living under one roof—no longer is there a sacred space centered around the family home and the

³⁹ This view highlights the important role the church now has in spreading moral and spiritual cultivation through concentric circles: from the individual, to the church, and to the broader society and state. See Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 146–59.

⁴⁰ D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000), 69.

⁴¹ D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), 161.

⁴² Kenneth Ch’en, “Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 28 (1968): 81–97.

⁴³ Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, trans. Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 63–64.

⁴⁴ The slowdown of birth rates in East Asia is not idiosyncratic of mainland China, but also characteristic of regions such as South Korea and Taiwan. Here, the point is that the one-child policy has accelerated this process.

ancestral hall (*citang* 祠堂). Chinese New Year has now become one of the few occasions when families separated throughout different parts of the country are able to physically meet face to face. The dire reality of this situation has been recognized by the Chinese government which, in 2013, put into effect an amendment to a Chinese law which mandates adult children to regularly visit their aging parents and care for their physical and spiritual needs.⁴⁵ In extreme cases, some have reported that failure to do so risks fines or possible prison confinement.

What we see happening in Chinese society is not a wiping away of these familial structures but a reorientation of them—we see shifts happening in social identities. Now concentric circles are drawn around different collective bodies, such as the university or the workplace or even the church.

In the early part of the twentieth century, we see the need to underscore the church as a surrogate family through controversies related to the paternalism of foreign missionaries. Chinese Christians from Cheng Jingyi 誠靜怡 to Wang Mingdao 王明道 and Watchman Nee wanted to underscore an indigenous Chinese church, led and sustained by indigenous Chinese. A figure such as Jing Dianying 敬奠瀛 would take this a further step when he established the communitarian group the Jesus Family 耶穌家庭. Lian Xi describes this latter group as “a traditional family writ large,” where spiritual relations replaced blood relations, leaders were revered as parents, and marriages were arranged.⁴⁶ In all of these examples, the emphasis on indigenous leadership underscored the Christian family against the imposition of those outside of the family—whether we speak of foreign missionaries or, in the case of Wang Mingdao, the imposition of the state through the new Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

In the 1980s and 1990s, we also see this in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement which, on the one hand, has prized its “post-denominational era” free of foreign ecclesial imposition whilst, on the other hand, has emphasized ecclesiology as one of the areas needing greater

⁴⁵ “Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo laonianren quanyi baozhang fa” 中華人民共和國老年人權益保障法 [Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly], *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo zhongyang renmin zhengfu* 中華人民共和國中央人民政府 [The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China], accessed April 30, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/banshi/2005-08/04/content_20203.htm.

⁴⁶ Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, 80–81.

reconsideration.⁴⁷ This is not entirely obvious amongst the “cultural Christians” who have tended to avoid any local church community. According to Liu Xiaofeng in a 1990 essay, “cultural Christians” are not members of the dominant registered or unregistered church, but are part of a mystical church.⁴⁸ Effectively, he spoke of a kind of ecclesiology which mirrors the coffee houses, salons, and table societies of Jürgen Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere, and now through the academic field of Sino-Christian theology and a number of influential academic periodicals.

The reorientation of familial structures is perhaps most vividly seen in the more recent phenomenon of urban intellectual churches, which have underscored ecclesiology as their central theological category. For some Christians like Wang Yi and Yu Jie, the connection between reformed covenantal theology and constitutionalism necessitates a covenantal understanding of infant baptism and Christian marriage.⁴⁹ For others such as the famous Shouwang Church of Beijing 北京守望教會, the outworkings of the Neo-Calvinist cultural mandate includes understanding the church as a non-governmental organization capable of engaging the Chinese civil society.⁵⁰

Overall, the Chinese church has taken the place of the traditional family as a new surrogate family. This reorientation places extra emphasis on the pastors and the elders as patriarchs who have Christian families under their care. As opposed to the family home or the ancestral hall, the church takes on a new kind of role as a sacred familial space.

⁴⁷ Duan Qi 段琦, “Contextualization in the Contemporary Chinese Church,” in *Christianity and Modernization: A Chinese Debate*, ed. Philip L. Wickeri and Lois Cole (Hong Kong: Daga Press, 1995), 42.

⁴⁸ Tan Xing 譚興 (pseudonym of Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓), “Guanyu dangdai Zhongguo dalu ‘wenhua’ Jidutu de shenxue pingzhu” 關於當代中國大陸「文化」基督徒的神學評註 [Theological Commentary about “Cultural” Christians in Contemporary Mainland China], *Tripod* no. 6 (1990): 7.

⁴⁹ This has also been noted in a study about the small mission to China by the Christian Reformed Church. See Kurt D. Selles, *A New Way of Belonging: Covenant Theology, China, and the Christian Reformed Church, 1921–1951* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 180.

⁵⁰ Sun Yi 孫毅, “Jidujiao jiuguo qingjie dui jiaohui guan de yingxiang” 基督教救國情結對教會觀的影響 [The Influence of Christian National Salvation Complex upon Ecclesiology], *Xinghua* 杏花 [Almond Flowers] (Winter 2012): 37–40.

CONCLUSION

If we were to return to the introduction of this paper, it is worth remembering that much of the discourse on Chinization has focused on political developments and the need to adapt to a socialist society. However, my goal has been to speak about Christianity in terms of this genus of “Chinese religion” from a theological and philosophical viewpoint, rather than from a political viewpoint. This has not been a comprehensive examination, and some of these examples would contest my analysis. Nevertheless, what I have endeavored to show is that Christians of many stripes—from Wang Mingdao and K. H. Ting, to Liu Xiaofeng and Wang Yi—all have underscored themes within their conceptions of Chinese Christianity which are undeniably characteristic of a Chinese religion, as much as they are undeniably characteristic of a Christian religion.