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## Human Rights in a world of diversity : Chinese perspectives

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## Human Rights in a World of Diversity: Chinese Perspectives

Theresa Cariño

### **Human Rights and a Legal Framework**

Setting up a strong legal infrastructure, which has been a very important part of China's reform and opening up, has been happening over the last four decades.

China's engagement with the West has been essential in China's move toward putting in place more "democratic infrastructure": rule of law is an accepted concept, and the evolving legal system has given increasing participation by the public. There have been significant reductions in the use of the death penalty. There has been an increase in the mention of rights. New laws on women's and children's rights have been put in place in the last few years. More than 85 percent of the population now have the right to decent living conditions, including access to clean drinking water, electricity, roads, bridges, mass rapid transportation, adequate access to education and health care. Social security has improved for all, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that setting up the legal framework is one thing; making sure the laws are well implemented is another. Many more lawyers need to be trained, and law enforcement agencies, such as those on ecological protection, have to be empowered and trained as well. Needless to say, the rich and powerful always try to find means of circumventing the law. That is part of the problem.

### **The Adherence to Human Rights Requires More than Legislation**

It also has to do with the cultivation of moral and ethical principles and behaviour through education and positive reinforcement. There has to be a building up of mutual trust among people. I think that one of the negative results of capitalist globalization has been the rise in cut-throat competition

leading to an increasing lack of mutual trust among people. This is now seriously aggravated by unending streams of fake news in social media.

From an Asian perspective, there has to be a holistic approach to human rights. In human rights implementation, we need to take into account the concern with contextuality, values, and culture.

- Human rights ought to be community-based, pluralistic, and inclusive, especially in multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural settings.
- Human rights have to be integrated with local culture, not imposed, given that they have to operate in a non-Christianity centric society. With the exception of the Philippines, Christianity in Asia has been regarded as a foreign religion that is also a minority religion. In China today, seminaries are exploring traditional and cultural elements as part of the ongoing process of rooting Christianity in Chinese soil. To build a broader understanding of human rights, there has to be serious consideration of how human and social relations are seen in the local culture, not only in the Bible.

## **Biblical and Cultural Roots of Human Rights**

With their emphasis on justice, human dignity, loving your neighbour, some of the biblical references cited in the presentations of the Wuppertal conference resonate well with Chinese Christians and are found in the writings of 20th-century Chinese theologians. What I would like to point out in addition is that in more recent efforts to contextualize Christianity in China, theologians are looking at cultural and ideological elements in their environment. These would be important for developing a broader understanding of human dignity and human rights in the local context.

One idea is that of the Cosmic Christ—Tao, a Taoist term which has been used in the Chinese Bible to translate “the Word”: it denotes the incarnation and God’s love for all of humankind. The idea of the Cosmic Christ is all-encompassing and has pluralistic, inclusive connotations. It includes human flourishing *and* creation. God is love, and therefore redemption cannot be separated from creation.

The second aspect is an orientation toward a Christocentric theology. The question for many Chinese Christians is how to emulate Christ; how to follow in his footsteps—with ethical and behavioural implications at the

personal level; how to be human. In Confucianism and Taoism, it is said that “To be human is to be benevolent.”

The third aspect to consider is elements in Chinese political ideology. There is the shared understanding that economic, social, and political inequalities undermine human rights and deprive people of human dignity. Inequality leads to discrimination. The Chinese government lays heavy emphasis on distributive justice. This is widely supported by the Chinese people.

### **What Does This Mean in Practice?**

In 2008, Amity Foundation,<sup>1</sup> in distributing aid to victims of the terrible Sichuan earthquake, wanted to give extra to those who were especially vulnerable. This started a huge debate about how to define who is vulnerable. Everyone felt vulnerable and sensed that they were all victims. Amity staff insisted that the communities had to define vulnerability in their midst—it was not for Amity to impose its own definition on them. In the end, the villages decided that families with disabled members, who were economically challenged, with elderly to care for, or single-parent families were the most vulnerable. This generated compassion and raised sensitivity to the needs of neighbours. The process of thinking about the vulnerability of others became transformative in its effect.

### **What Can Chinese Churches Do in Relation to Human Rights?**

Ecumenical *diakonia* has been an area of transformative engagement in China. I would like to cite the experience of the Amity Foundation. Environmental conservation—planting of trees and renewable energy projects—were supported by Amity in close partnership with ecumenical partners from the North. At the local level, there is space for quiet experimentation and setting up of viable models, such as education and training. Churches have been supporting HIV/AIDS work with those living with AIDS, and some are quietly working with LGBT groups.

It is important to understand that China is not monolithic politically or socially. Neither is the Chinese Communist Party. More moderate and reform-oriented political leaders often look for evidence to back up their policy options for change. One of the roles of NGOs and faith-based organizations is to provide this evidence.

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1. See <https://amityfoundation.org/eng>.

## What Can Be Done Ecumenically

- There should be more intercultural exchange and dialogue in the form of ecumenical *diakonia* that has led to important elements of inculturation of values, such as participative democracy and human dignity.
- We need education for human rights: spreading the ideas of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in churches and Chinese classrooms. It is a major entry point for dialogue on human rights. In its Summer Academy on Diakonia, Amity produced a booklet of Bible studies on each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), developed by Khell Nordstokke and translated into Chinese on the biblical basis for supporting the SDGs.
- There should be renewal of an ecumenical commitment to solidarity on human rights.
- At the same time, we should develop an ecumenical consensus on ethical and moral principles that underpin human rights, biblically rooted but also *open and sensitive to contextual elements in the non-Western world*.

## Obstacles to Compliance with Human Rights

One of the greatest obstacles of ensuring compliance with human rights is the heavy reliance on a legal system that originated in the West and that is seen in the global South as favouring the rich and the powerful. We desperately need to overcome the instrumentalization of human rights as a political tool and weapon linked to the imposition of economic and other sanctions. Human rights have been made into a formidable tool of geopolitical competition between major powers; the brazen inconsistency in their application has resulted in heightened distrust and growing cynicism toward the idea of human rights. We are tired of double standards. I believe our biggest challenge here is to address the universality of human rights and its implementation in a world of diversity. We cannot deny that the world is diverse and that the number of voices has grown for greater participation from the global South in something as essential as human rights. It is not just the principles that matter; it is our practice that will make an impact.