

Bookreview on *Sino-Christian Theology: A Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China*

edited by Pan-chiu Lai and Jason Lam. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010. Hard cover, ix + 237 pages, including an appendix.

G. Wright Doyle

This extremely valuable collection of essays by eleven distinguished Chinese scholars from Greater China and the United States most helpfully introduces the English reader to the past, present, and potential of Sino-Christian Theology. Reflecting, analyzing, and summarizing a large and growing literature in Chinese, the book serves as an essential guide to this increasingly-important field of study.

An opening chapter by the editors, titled “Retrospect and Prospect of Sino-Christian Theology: An Introduction,” first surveys the contents of the volume and then offers an illuminating description of the rapidly-evolving state of this field, along with some suggestions and forecasts for the future. We quickly discover that this is a tightly-edited, well-constructed piece of work, with a clear program and flow, despite the large number of contributors.

*Basic characteristics of Sino-Christian Theology*

Especially in its early days, and even to a large degree even now, Sino-Christian Theology (SCT) has been distinguished by several characteristics: It (1) “takes *hanyu* or the Chinese language as the medium of expression”; (2) “takes seriously the contemporary Chinese context [as distinct from traditional Chinese culture]”; (3) takes the Chinese academy, especially universities, as its institutional base; (4) emphasizes the “intellectual, cultural and humanistic nature of theology rather than its ecclesiastical function”; (5) “employs the methods shared by some other discipline in [the ] humanities without excluding the method(s)” particular to Christian theology.

### *Definition*

From the beginning, scholars have struggled to find a precise definition of SCT. The editors clarify the situation by offering two: A “narrow” definition refers to “the theological thinking of some cultural Christians, i.e., a kind of philosophical expression of personal faith gaining a footing in the academic society of the humanities and social sciences.” It is different both from church-based dogmatics and the “indigenous theology” of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century.

More “broadly,” CST can be viewed as “any theology written in the Chinese language,” especially that produced within the Chinese academy, and written “from historical and sociological perspectives rather than from philosophical or theological perspectives,” and potentially including even modern indigenous theology.

### *Recent developments and future prospects*

In recent years, though the core characteristics remain, new developments have significantly altered the original flavor of SCT. Briefly:

1. Though still in the minority, more and more younger SCT writers identify themselves as committed Christians, and are more open to “healthy interactions” with churches.
2. More scholars, especially younger ones, “identify themselves as ‘Christian Scholars’ (*jidutu xueren*) in order to distinguish themselves from ‘Cultural Christians’ who do not have [a] clear commitment to Christianity.” They also believe that one must employ distinctly theological methods in this task, rather than just the methods of the human sciences.
3. SCT is moving away from dependence upon translated western works to “the creative re-interpretation of western theologies and the articulation of innovative theological discourses with Chinese characteristics.”
4. More studies are employing more the methods of “the social sciences, including sociology, and anthropology,” to reflect the reality that Chinese Christianity is a social phenomenon.
5. The scope of SCT is continually becoming broader, especially since younger scholars are now trained in the biblical languages.

6. As a result, SCT hopes to make a contribution to the international scholarly community by offering “brand new type of scriptural theologising” with Chinese distinctive.

7. SCT is “moving towards a full-fledged study (or studies) of Christianity,” including theological and non-theological studies, such as Christianity and culture. SCT is becoming “Sino-Christian studies” ranging over “all ... aspects of Christianity.”

Thus, though SCT is still in its infancy stage, there is great hope for the future.

### *Overview of the book*

With that introduction, let us very briefly glance at the contents of each chapter.

### Part I: Historical Review

“The emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity,” by Jason T. S. Lam, first offers a “description” of the phenomenon of the recent “production of theology” in the universities of China, including the research interests of various scholars and their degree of commitment to Christianity.”A historical and sociological analysis” provides a brilliant and penetrating explanation for the rise of SCT in a communist nation. The “analysis of the nature of theology” coming from this environment concludes that SCT retains the flavor and speaks the language of the social and human sciences. Lam’s “theological reflection on the typology of theology” ends with a powerful challenge for theologians in Asia to produce works that can gain the respect of scholars throughout the secular academy.

LI Qiuling offers “Historical Reflections on ‘Sino-Christian Theology’” which trace the rise of SCT from the original thought of Liu Xiaofeng, in cooperation with Daniel Yeung (Yang Xinan), who became Executive Director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, and who offered Liu the necessary institutional base and resources to pursue the development of SCT. He notes also the early and formative influence of He Guanghu. Their goals were to (1) “develop Christian theology and its culture by means of the historical philosophical resources and social experiences of Chinese-language culture, in order to form a Christian theological culture imbued with Chinese-language thought and culture”; (2) “develop the subject of theology within the academic field of Chinese language thought,” and to establish dialogue with other

Chinese religions; (3) to make it “the shared enterprise of Chinese-language religious studies scholars from all social areas within the Chinese-speaking world.”

They hoped to see the “entry of Christian theology into mainstream Chinese culture” to enrich the resources of Chinese-language thought, and to incorporate Christian theology into “Chinese humanistic scholarship.” This ambitious program raised fundamental questions, of course, which Li skillfully probes. The growth of the movement has come with translation of western Christian classics; publication of journals by the Centre in Hong Kong; sponsorship of scholars; and convening of conferences.

Li also explains how SCT grew out of particular social and political circumstances, meeting the need for Chinese scholars to understand Christianity and explore its potential role in Chinese culture and society, at a time of “ideological adjustment” in China. Finally, he briefly explores certain problems for SCT, namely, its relationships to the “tradition” of Christian theology; to traditional Chinese culture; to “the universality of Christianity”; and to the organized church. In each case, he advocates greater mutuality, so that SCT may draw upon the riches of both the Christian tradition and Chinese linguistic and cultural resources, and may make its unique contributions to worldwide Christianity theology.

Continuing the historical survey, Peter K. H. LEE narrates the early discussion in Hong Kong of “the ‘Cultural Christians’ Phenomenon in China.” Of interest mostly to scholars from Hong Kong, the record of the debate that took place in 1995 and 1996 still sheds light on the origins of the movement as well as the important role that Hong Kong has played, and continues to play, in the maturation of SCT.

## Part II: Theoretical Reflection

The crucial question of the relationship between Chinese and western theology is concisely examined by LAI Pan-chiu in “Theological Translation and Transmission between China and the West.” He notes the charge that Chinese theology has consisted largely in translation from the west, as seen (it is said) in the similarity between evangelical/fundamentalist views of Chinese Christians and their counterparts in the west, but believes that the situation has been, is, and will be more complex than some people assume.

He first reviews the two most prolific periods of Chinese theological production: The

1920s/1930s and 1990s/1990s. In the first period, Chinese Christians began to wrestle with the possible relationships between Christianity and traditional Chinese culture, producing works of “indigenous theology,” and then turned to the urgent question of the relevance of Christianity to China’s social and political crisis in the “contextual theology” movement. They not only translated (mostly liberal theological) books from the west, but wrote creative new theological works. Even their “translations,” however, became works of interpretation and adaptation to the Chinese context. In all this, they reflected the larger situation, in which “modern China has been subject to the influence of more than a few Chinese translations of foreign writings” and ideas, including democracy, Marxism, socialism, scientism, evolutionism and materialism.

In the second period, there arose another “revival “of Chinese theology in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China, again in response to local conditions. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, indigenous theology gave way to contextual theology (especially in Taiwan), as political conditions seemed to call for Christian response. Starting with the translation projects of Liu Xiaofeng, western theological thought – mostly neo-orthodox and liberal – was re-introduced to China, while in the institutional church Ding Guangxun drew upon western philosophy to propound his theology of the Cosmic Christ.

He concludes his chapter with a call for “bilateral translation and transmission,” urging both Chinese and western theologians to learn from each other and to contribute to each other. Significantly, he issues his challenge in a paraphrase of the most famous sentence from the inaugural speech of U.s. President John F. Kennedy in 1960!

In “The Value of Theology in Humanities: Possible Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology,” YANG Huilin surveys 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century German and French hermeneutics to show how liberal theologians and linguistic philosophers have tried to elucidate a legitimate theory of interpretation. His sophisticated analysis leads to the conclusion that while we cannot fully understand truth and reality, nor can we allow the destruction of all meaning. He believes we can learn from the ways in which German thinkers have tried to balance both the subjective nature of faith commitment and the objective nature of authoritative texts and indeed of all reality.

This is because “theological hermeneutics is the source of activities in textual interpretation” and “ the absence of theological hermeneutics leaves the questions of

‘power discourse’, ‘openness of text’, and other basic hermeneutical problems unsettled.” In other words, all the humanities need theology as a fundamental discipline if an meaning is to survive.

### *Evaluation*

As I have already indicated, this book is truly outstanding in almost every way. Students of SCT should read and ponder it carefully.

In my opinion, Jason Lam’s challenge has been met in the west by the late Carl F. H. Henry, whose writings rightly earned him respect in not only evangelical but also liberal and academic circles. With four volumes of his *God, Revelation, & Authority* already in Chinese, Henry may offer an example for Chinese thinkers.

As one who can barely write one correct sentence in Chinese, I hesitate to make this criticism, but I am sad to say that the English of much of this book suffers greatly from a lack of professional editing for standard usage and style. It may seem culturally imperialistic to suggest that authors and editors of books written or translated by people whose first language is Chinese should employ a native British or American English editor to render such valuable material into a form that meets international standards of academic English writing, but I do make that suggestion. Indeed, the same requirement is imposed upon even the most distinguished English-language scholars. It is not necessary for the presence of so many errors, both stylistic and typographical, to distract the reader from the excellence of the content, as happened to me.