

Moving toward a Mature, Balanced Stage of Studying Christianity in China

Research >
East Asia

Before the 1970s, if anyone wanted to study, or even mentioned the topic, of Christianity in China, he/she would quite naturally adopt a “mission” approach. This approach is vividly reflected in a number of major works, for example, Kenneth Scott Latourette’s monumental one-volume work *A History of Christian Missions in China* (1929), Columba Cary-Elwes’ *China and the Cross: A Survey of Missionary History* (1957), and Pasquale M. D’Elia’s *The Catholic Missions in China: A Short Sketch of the Catholic Church in China from the Earliest Records to Our Own Days* (1934), or John K. Fairbank’s (ed.), *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America*, which was derived from a conference held exactly thirty years ago. This approach is understandable because the West was the origin of foreign missions for more than a thousand years. And the “mission” approach has been well accepted and well established in the Western world.

By Peter Chen-main Wang

The attitude of Western church circles echoes this approach. This was especially true when all foreign missionaries were either deported or put into goals in China about half-a-century ago. Church organizations, mission boards, as well as individual missionaries held various discussions/seminars in order to find out why China was “lost”. Individual missionaries, mission boards, as well as worldwide missionary organizations often examined their own behaviour and mission strategies in order to figure out why countless good works with the investment of a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy could not win the Chinese souls.

The availability of historical sources also helps to justify this approach. When church or university scholars in the West pioneered research on Christianity in China, they were easily attracted to numerous rich collections of

church/missionary archives. Based on missionary field reports, minutes of the meetings of mission boards, as well as correspondence between the home board and missionaries and between missionaries and their governments, the researchers could easily draw a picture of foreign “missions” in China.

However, this “mission” approach declined in the early 1970s. Because scholars in this field switched their interest to other subjects, few important works were produced for a decade. Scholars in this field gradually recognized that they could not study ‘Christianity in China’ without saying anything about the Chinese context and Chinese converts. A ‘China-centred’ approach to the study of ‘Christianity in China’ burgeoned in the early 1980s. Whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, Chinese converts became an important subject to study. A number of questions were raised: Why did they accept the religion? Did they really understand the

religion? To what did they respond in the missionary preaching? How did they keep a balance between Chinese culture and Christian ideas? And how did they justify their religion in the face of anti-foreign, revolutionary tides in China?

Terms such as “Indigenization of Christianity” or “Indigenized church” soon became popular in church history circles in the 1980s. These terms seemed to suggest that the goal and methods to build an independent Chinese church could be integrated into Chinese culture. Increasingly more articles, theses, books, and conferences have dealt with this issue.¹ Major Chinese Christians, Chinese churches, as well as Chinese theology have attracted much attention from academic circles.

Along with this research trend, a great amount of Chinese church materials have been unearthed in China and in the rest of the world since the 1980s. Quite a few reference books and search aids were edited and published, making it easier to locate church material in the West and also in China. In this way, “Christianity in China” not only regained its scholarly momentum in the West, but also won the attention of Chinese scholars. With the relaxation of restrictions on church material and church studies in China in the late 1980s, we have wit-

nessed the sudden emergence in China of a younger generation of Chinese scholars in this field. Hundreds of Chinese books on Christianity in China have been published in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.² The 1990s was a fruitful season for a “hundred flowers blooming” for Christian history in China. For example, more than fifty academic books in Chinese were published in 1998 and 1999.

One of the most important trends in studying Christianity in China is the swing of the academic pendulum from the extreme side of the “indigenization” approach to the “contextualization” approach.³ Scholars in this field gradually recognized that they must keep a balance between the “mission” and “indigenization” approaches. In other words, a mature work must pay attention to the interaction between the Gospel and the Chinese context, between missionaries and the Chinese converts, between mission strategies and Chinese response. This kind of approach is not possible unless the researchers can use both Chinese and Western materials diligently and extensively. A research of this two-way communication will clearly present a complete picture of the development of Christianity in China or in any given area.

Contextualization is also a better tool to evaluate Christian missions and local churches, as well as Chinese Christians. This approach will help us get a better understanding of how a foreign religion was introduced into a Chinese context, how a foreign context influenced mission strategies, how Chinese converts faced their non-Christian countrymen, and how Chinese Christians tried to establish their own churches in China. Furthermore, this new method might also serve as a useful evangelical consideration before the start of a mission in China or in the rest of the world. Recognition of a new mission context might not necessarily guarantee the success of a mission, but the lack of it will doom it to failure. <



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Josephine Powell, courtesy of SPACH.

River goddess found at Begram among ivories exported from India (3rd cent. AD, height 40 cm). Formerly Kabul Museum. In 1996, art dealer and scholar Johnny Eskenazi had been shown the Begram ivories at the house of a Pakistani politician, where they were wrapped in pink toilet paper and in worn condition. The present whereabouts of the Begram ivories is unknown. Of the loss of the Kabul Museum’s treasures, Eskenazi writes, “The shadows of a past civilisation are vanishing. They do not interest the present civilisation.”

[For his story, see <http://www.theartnews.com/news/article.asp?idart=8330>]

... see this issue’s theme section, pp. 8-16.

Editors’ note >

Please see the interview with Professor Chen-main Wang by Dr Masayuki Sato on p. 5 of this issue, as well as the information on the upcoming conference on “Contextualization of Christianity in China” on p. 59.

Notes >

- 1 More than twenty conferences have been held in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, and Europe since the mid-1980s. I also organized an international conference on “Indigenization of Christianity in China” in 1988.
- 2 For a general survey of Chinese books on Christianity in China, see Peter Chen-main Wang, “Jidujiao caihuashi zhongwen shumu xuanyao” (Selected Chinese Bibliography on Christianity in China), in Peter Chen-main Wang (trans.), Jessie G. Lutz, *Sochuan weiho—Jidujiao caihua xuanjiao di jiantao* (Christian Missions in China—Evangelists of What?), Taipei: Academia Historica (2000); pp. 247-273.
- 3 “Contextualization is a dynamic process of the church’s reflection, in obedience to Christ and his mission in the world, on the interaction of the text as the word of God and the context as a specific human situation.” See, Ferguson, Sinclair B., David F. Wright and J. I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press (1988); p. 164.

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