Retrospect and Prospect of Sino-Christian Theology: An Introduction

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Several years ago Yang Huilin and Daniel H. N. Yeung (Yang Xinan) edited the first English source book on Sino-Christian Studies in China, collecting 22 essays authored by contemporary Chinese scholars covering many related areas, including not only Christian theology in contemporary China, but also history of Christianity in China, social analysis of Christianity in contemporary China, etc.\(^1\) In contrast, the present volume consists of focused discussions of Christian theology authored by contemporary Chinese Christian theologians themselves. This comprising essays from scholars from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas, aims to provide a self-explaining sketch of the historical development of a theological movement called “Sino-Christian theology” (hanyu jidu shenxue), analyses on the theoretical issues involved in this movement, concrete examples to illustrate the characteristics of the movement, and articulations of the prospect of this theological as well as cultural movement.

**Historical Background and the “Cultural Christians” Debate**

“Sino-Christian theology”, which is often abbreviated as “Sino-theology” (hanyu shenxue), usually refers to an intellectual movement emerged in the Chinese-speaking world, particularly Mainland China, since the late 1980s, although this term is understood sometimes literally and in a broader sense to cover all theological discourses written in the Chinese language. Given the cultural, social and political contexts of Communist China, the emergence of Sino-Christian theology is a rather strange cultural phenomenon. Before the 1980s, the study of Christianity, especially Christian theology, was basically a prohibited area for academic discussion. However, individuals’ research interests can never be barred by political ideology or administrative restrictions. Some Chinese intellectuals started their academic study of Christianity as part of their studies of western culture, though publications remained scanty in amount at that time. After studying Christianity from the perspectives of western philosophy, history, literature, etc., a few of these scholars became interested in the study of Christian theology. Accompanying the more open political atmosphere developed since the 1980s when the open and reform policy has

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been implemented gradually, more and more Chinese scholars joined this intellectual movement. They published a lot of academic books and papers related to Christianity, including some books translated from foreign languages. This group of scholars researching into the study of Christianity is sometimes collectively called “cultural Christians” (wenhua jidutu) and embodies an important cultural trend in contemporary China.

The first two articles of this book, “The Emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity in Mainland China” and “Historical Reflections on ‘Sino-Christian Theology’”, written by Jason Lam (Lin Zichun) and Li Qiuling respectively offer us concise accounts of the emergence of this theological as well as cultural movement. On top of that, they also outline the proposals articulated by the prime proponents of Sino-Christian theology (particularly Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu), the significant role of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in the movement and related important documents (e.g. Logos & Pneuma [Daofeng], the organ journal of Sino-Christian theology) involved, and the relationship among them. Furthermore, historical and sociological analyses are also provided to facilitate some preliminary theological reflections on the emergence of the movement. Some points made in these papers will be mentioned in the discussions hereafter.

From the above background information about Sino-Christian theology, it is quite understandable that from the very outset the proponents of the movement do not aim at constructing a Christian theology in the (western) traditional sense. They are primarily scholars from different academic disciplines researching into the study of Christianity rather than “Christian theologians”. In other words, they are scholars of Christian culture rather than believers or practitioners of Christianity as a religion. They were interested in the academic study of Christianity, rather than believing in Christianity, though a few of them might take the Christian faith as their personal faith. However, the emergence of this group of scholars is already a significant cultural as well as theological phenomenon because before that there had been very rare serious studies of Christian theology in the Chinese academia. Apart from the publications produced by this group of scholars, there were also some theological activities undertaken by the institutional churches in China, taking the theological seminaries as its institutional bases and orientating itself towards the Christian churches and their ministries. It is quite clear that Sino-Christian theology

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2 The two articles are originally published as Jason Lam, “The Emergence of Chinese Scholars Studying Christianity in Mainland China”, *Religion, State and Society* 32 (2004), pp.177-186; Li Qiuling, “Historical Reflections on ‘Sino-Christian Theology’”, *China Study Journal* (Spring/Summer 2007), pp.54-67; some expressions are slightly modified in this volume. An abridged French version of the two articles by Lam and Li is available as “Réflexion sur l’histoire de la sino-théologie et des études chrétiennes en langue chinoise”, *Transversalités* 103 (2007), pp.113-127.
differs from the theology adopted by the institutional churches with regard to their respective institutional affiliations and intellectual orientations. Sino-Christian theology tends to identify itself as an academic discipline of human sciences or social sciences undertaken in university setting, rather than a function of the Christian church. Furthermore, owing to their religious and academic background, most of these scholars were not properly trained in Christian theology and they are not very familiar with all the branches in the traditional curriculum of theological studies, especially biblical studies. As a result, from time to time, the cultural Christians’ approaches, methods or emphases in their academic studies of Christianity are quite different from those of the church leaders or the theological seminaries. Thus the church leaders may have some mixed feeling of surprise, doubt, joy, fear, and so on towards the emergence of this group of scholars.

In the eyes of the church leaders, especially those who had received the traditional theological training formally in theological seminaries, the approaches to the study of Christianity adopted by the cultural Christians look rather arbitrary and fundamentally deviate from the “normal” practice of doing Christian theology. It is thus rather natural that some church leaders were skeptical and even critical towards the theologies proposed by the “cultural Christians”. Apart from the question whether the “cultural Christians” are Christians, an equally fundamental question is whether the “theologies” proposed by the “cultural Christians” are Christian at all. For some church leaders, the theological discourses made by the “cultural Christians” are entirely flawed because they fail to take serious the integrity of the Christian tradition and the authority of the Bible. It is expected that although these two approaches to theology seem to address the same subject matter and share similar goals, e.g. promoting the understanding of Christianity among the Chinese people, they are so radically divergent that some sorts of tension, competition or even conflict between them seem to be inevitable. In fact, this is exactly what happened when Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu articulated their respective theological proposals in the early 1990s. The heated debate sparked off by the emergence of “cultural Christians” and their theological discourses is often rendered as the “cultural Christians debate”.

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3 Liu Xiaofeng might be the only “cultural Christian” of his generation who had been formally trained in Christian theology. He studied Christian theology at doctoral level under the supervision of Heinrich Ott at Basel University, after studying foreign languages, philosophy, comparative literature, etc. in Mainland China.


5 Their respective agendas are found in Yang & Yeung eds., Sino-Christian Studies in China, pp. 52-89, 106-132.
The term “cultural Christians” was coined probably by some church leaders in Mainland China, with the implication or connotation that these Chinese scholars of Christian studies were significantly different from the ordinary practicing Christians. However, the meaning of “cultural Christians” is quite ambiguous and even misleading because it seems to imply that “cultural Christians” are “Christians” in a “cultural” but not “religious” sense. In other words, they are “non-religious” and thus different from those Christians who profess and practice Christianity as their own religion. This demarcation between “cultural Christians” and, if there is such a term, “religious Christians” is actually far from clear. Some people can be Christians in both “cultural” and “religious” senses of the word. For example, Liu Xiaofeng himself would prefer to use the term “cultural Christians” to refer to the intellectuals from Mainland China with personal experience of religious conversion, rather than those who are merely interested in studying Christianity as a cultural phenomenon without any personal religious faith. According to this definition, in terms of personal faith, “cultural Christians” are also “religious Christians”; they are not “religious” merely in the sense that they are not officially registered members of any Christian church or regular church-goers.

The debate related to the “cultural Christians” phenomenon occurred among many scholars from Mainland China and Hong Kong. It was started and carried on by a series of articles published in a rather popular Christian weekly newspaper Christian Times (shí dài lùn tán) from the fall of 1995 to the spring of 1996, lasting for a whole year and thus catching much attention of the public. The third and fourth articles in this volume, “The ‘Cultural Christians’ Phenomenon in China” by Peter K. H. Lee (Li Jingxiong) and “Conceptual Differences between Hong Kong and Chinese Theologians” by Chan Shun-hing (Chen Shenqing), review the whole debate and introduce the different views articulated by various participants. Other than the differences between Hong Kong and Mainland scholars, Chan argues, the diversity among scholars from the same region is by no means less significant than that between regions. This brings up the question that the differences of opinion may not be attributed to the differences in social and cultural situation alone. It has to do also with the various theological trends

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7 Their writings are collected in Institute of Sino-Christian Studies ed., Cultural Christian, pp.94-196.
which had influenced the scholars involved and may probably affect the future development of Sino-Christian theology.

**Intellectual Orientations and Theoretical Issues**

Given the historical review outlined above, it is important to examine the intellectual orientations and the theoretical issues involved in the movement for a deeper exploration. Four articles are included in Part II to illustrate the theological, humanistic, linguistic and cultural orientations and implications of Sino-theology and to highlight some of the theoretical issues involved.

During the 1980s some so-called “cultural Christians” began to use the term “Sino-Christian theology” to describe their theological proposal(s). According to their understanding, the most fundamental feature of Sino-Christian theology is its employing *hanyu*, which is often called the Chinese language (*zhongwen*), as its medium of expression and this makes Sino-Christian theology different from theologies articulated in other languages. It is important to understand this proposal against the wider context of Christian theology in modern China. The first article of Part II, “Theological Translation and Transmission between China and the West” authored by Lai Pan-chiu (Lai Pinchao) gives us such an overview. Against this background, Sino-Christian theology apparently differs from indigenous theology (*bense shenxue*), which was quite dominant in Mainland China before 1949 and continued to flourish in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Whereas indigenous theologies tend to focus on the relationship between Christianity and *traditional* Chinese culture, Sino-Christian theology emphasizes the importance of the relationship between Christianity and *contemporary* Chinese society. Similarly, Sino-Christian theology as a concept also differs from other possible alternatives such as China’s theology (*zhongguo shenxue*) and Chinese people’s theology (*huaren shenxue*), though the references of all these concepts may largely overlap. Similar to the term “Chinese”, which may be understood in political (referring to China as a nation), ethnic (referring to the Chinese people), cultural (referring to the Chinese culture) and linguistic (referring to the Chinese language) terms, there are many possible ways to define the relevant theological endeavors. It is rather obvious that Sino-Christian theology prefers to define its own theological endeavor in linguistic terms. This makes it distinct from some other approaches to Christian theology prevalent in contemporary China. With regard to its relationship to the theologies in other

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9 The expression “*hanyu*” reflects the awareness that China is a multi-ethnic country, in which there are many other ethnic groups in China, although these ethnic minority groups are overshadowed in both cultural and numerical senses by the most dominating tribe of *han*. Since there are many languages with various dialects being used by different ethnic groups in China, it is more accurate to call the official language of China “*hanyu*” rather than “*zhongwen*”, which literally means the Chinese language or the language of China.
languages, Lai points out that in the past Christian theologies in China were mainly translated from the West. However, Lai also argues, the two most active periods of Chinese theological innovations, namely the rise of Chinese theology in the 1920-30s and the revival in the 1980-90s, coincide with massive translations. Furthermore, both theological translation and innovative construction were usually triggered by some contextual concerns. They are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Lai expects that as the Chinese situation is rather unique, the theological renaissance partly constituted by the emergence of cultural Christians may one day become capable to contribute significantly to the international theological discussion. At that time, the theological exchange between China and the West will no longer be a one-way traffic from the West to China.

The next two articles of Part II, “The Value of Theology in Humanities: Possible Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology” by Yang Huilin and “Sino-Christian Theology: the Unfolding of ‘Dao’ in the Chinese Language Context” by Zhang Qingxiong, address some theoretical issues involved in the construction of Sino-Christian theology. Yang’s article attempts to evaluate the value of theology against the context of humanities in China from the perspective of modern hermeneutics. This kind of attempt is quite necessary because Sino-Christian theology is developed mainly in the academia of Communist China. The participants of the movement are mostly non-believers and Christianity has never been a major constituent in this culture. In order to justify its place in the Chinese academia, Sino-Christian theology has to explain from the academic point of view why it is so important to include theology in humanities and why it is beneficial to translate and adopt some “foreign” concepts in the Chinese academia. Zhang’s article adopts a more philosophical, mainly Wittgensteinian, perspective, emphasizing on the connection between language (related to word and dao) and the related form of life of the relevant language users. Zhang further illustrates that with the aid of human words, the divine Word recognized by the Christians will generate some new contents. Therefore when Christian theology comes to the Chinese context, an exciting new form (Sino-Christian theology) is expected to emerge.

In his “The Paradigm Shift: from Chinese Theology to Sino-Christian Theology” included in this volume, Chin Ken-Pa (Zheng Qingbao) attempts to spell out the implications of Liu Xiaofeng’s theological proposal with some further elaborations. According to Chin, Liu’s theology assumes that Sino-Christian theology should be placed in parallel with theologies of other languages, since all theologies are the consequences of accepting the divine Word into the respective native languages (and forms of life). According to this view, when the divine Word comes to the Chinese context and when the academics in China listen to it, it is not merely a process of translation or adaptation, but the formation of a new paradigm. It is because it is not only the
adoption of a foreign classic or tradition, but the acceptance of the divine Word which might “interrupt” or even “endanger” the transmission of the original “pure” Chinese tradition. At this juncture, perhaps one may be able to understand why in spite of Liu’s seemingly awkward expressions, his theological proposal aroused a lot of heated debates from different academic perspectives.

Basic Characters and Contingent Features
After sketching the background of Sino-Christian theology as an intellectual movement, we are going to delineate some of the basic characters of Sino-Christian theology. We will see that due to the institutional, personal and historical factors, Sino-Christian theology is neither static nor monolithic. It did not start as a school of theological thought with one single founder and a clearly articulated theological position, although the prime proponents’ proposals were widely discussed. The movement does not have any particular doctrinal formula agreed by all of its proponents and followers. It has no representative doctrine of God, Christology, ecclesiology, etc. It even does not have a philosophical framework or methodology shared by its advocates. On the contrary, there are significant differences among the prime proponents of Sino-Christian theology with regard to their approaches to Christian theology. For example, Liu Xiaofeng’s theology appears to be more “Barthian”, being influenced particularly by Barth’s early publications without proper attention paid to his later ones, whereas He Guanghu’s more “Tillichian”. Other than translating several books by Tillich, He Guanghu proposes that given the context of Mainland China, Tillich’s theology should be translated and introduced before that of Barth. He Guanghu’s theology also attempts to make use of traditional Chinese culture, which is considered by Liu as unnecessary or even wrong theological attempt. In addition to the divergence among its proponents, another important factor for the variations of Sino-Christian theology was that even the delineation of Sino-Christian theology made by individual proponent might not be very clear and consistent.

Nevertheless, since the launching of Sino-Christian theology, it has bore several identifiable characters shared by the prime proponents, particularly Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, even though some of these characters were rather “contingent” – meaning that these characters might change or even disappear in the course of subsequent development. Before we move on to the discussion concerning the development of Sino-Christian theology, it is helpful to briefly sketch these characters first:

1. Sino-Christian theology takes hanyu or the Chinese language as the medium of expression. Sino-Christian theology is defined in neither political, nor cultural, nor political terms, but by the language it uses.10

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10 This is a rather definitive character, though not entirely free from ambiguity. It is not entirely clear as to whether the theology written in Chinese by a foreigner (whose
2. Sino-Christian theology, which is inevitably contextual because the language it uses is shaped by the Chinese cultural, religions, social and political contexts, takes seriously the contemporary Chinese context.

3. Sino-Christian theology takes the academia, particularly universities, rather than churches or theological seminaries as its institutional basis.


5. In terms of methodology, Sino-Christian theology employs the methods shared by some other disciplines in humanities without excluding the method(s) particularly to Christian theology.\(^\text{11}\)

Of course, other than these rather basic characters, there are also some dominant but not essential features appearing in the writings of some but not all representatives of Sino-Christian theology.

As we are going to see, due to the theological diversity among its proponents, the conceptual ambiguities involved and the subsequent developments brought forth by some other scholars, some characters are no longer the definitive characteristics of Sino-Christian theology. In other words, Sino-Christian theology as an intellectual, cultural or theological movement underwent some significant changes in its subsequent developments. In order to have a more adequate understanding of the movement, it is thus very important to pay attention to the recent developments and to reconsider which characters or features should be regarded as contingent rather than essential to the movement.

**Sino-Christian Theology at the Crossroad**

In the year 2000, an important book on Sino-Christian theology was published.\(^\text{12}\) In addition to a few essays by Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, the book includes many essays from other scholars in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and even overseas. Some of the authors articulated their own ideas of Sino-Christian theology, while some others provided critical comments on the ideas of Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu. In a paper published in that volume, Lai Pan-chiu argues that instead of focusing on Liu Xiaofeng’s theology, Sino-Christian theology can and should be understood in a much broader way.\(^\text{13}\) The strategy adopted in the paper is to emphasize the distinction between two senses of the word “Sino-Christian theology” – one narrower and one broader. Through

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mother tongue is not Chinese) should be recognized as part of Sino-Christian theology.

11 Whether Christian theology is to be regarded as part of the human sciences is an issue for further discussion.


reviewing the relevant primary and secondary publications, it argues that the
word “Sino-Christian theology” is being used in two different ways. Broadly
speaking, “Sino-Christian theology” could refer to any theology written in the
Chinese language, so that one can trace the history back to several centuries ago,
say, starting from Ming dynasty. Nevertheless, sometimes Sino-Christian
theology seems to designate specifically the theological thinking of some cul-
tural Christians, i.e. a kind of philosophical expression of personal faith gaining
a footing in the academic society of the humanities and the social sciences. In
this sense, Sino-Christian theology is radically different from both the semi-
nary-based church dogmatics and the “indigenous theology” adopted by many
theologians in Hong Kong and Taiwan. One can find the evidence for this nar-
rower understanding of Sino-Christian theology in the works of Liu Xiaofeng,
who clearly opposes theological indigenization and emphasizes on the
individuality of faith and theology. Such a conceptual ambiguity in Liu’s own
discourses on Sino-Christian theology shows that Sino-Christian theology re-
 mains in its infancy stage of searching for its own niche and orientation. On the
one hand, it would like to adhere to a long-standing tradition (Sino-Christian
theology in the broad sense); on the other, it is dissatisfied with the tradition and
tries to develop a particular approach out of the current context (Sino-Christian
theology in the narrow sense).

This strategy of distinguishing the two senses of Sino-Christian theology and
favoring the broader sense makes possible for more people, including Lai Pan-chiu
himself, to take part in Sino-Christian theology as a theological or cultural
movement, without being a Sino-theologian in a narrow sense of the word. An
implication of this strategy is that some of dubious or controversial characters of
Sino-Christian theology can be regarded as something non- essential. In other
words, it is for some contingent or personal reasons that some scholars, particularly
Liu Xiaofeng, tends to emphasize the individual character of faith, the
non-ecclesiastical character of Sino-Christian theology, etc. The approach proposed
by Liu is to be regarded as merely one of the possible approaches and by no means
the only possible or legitimate way to do Sino-Christian theology.

In addition to the distinction between the narrow and broad senses of
Sino-Christian theology, Lai’s paper further argues that it is advisable for
Sino-Christian theology to adopt a broader sense of the word in order to make
room for the participation of other scholars because there are many other schol-
ars who study Christianity from historical and sociological perspectives rather

15 This usage of “Sino-Christian theology” can be found also in Chen Zuoren (Stephen
Chan), “Zhongyiben dao yan” (Introduction to the Chinese Edition), in Dionysius,
Shenni Shenzxue (Mystical Theology), Bao Limin trans. (Beijing: Sanlian, 1998), p.27;
and “Jiaoyi, shenxue yu ‘wenhua Jidu tu’” (Doctrine, Theology, and ‘Cultural
Christians’), in Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument, pp.244-254.
than from philosophical or theological perspectives. Furthermore, it is not necessary for Sino-Christian theology to exclude indigenous theology and the use of resources of traditional Chinese culture. As Sino-Christian theology remains at its infancy stage of development, there is no need and no hurry for its advocates to give an exclusive definition of Sino-Christian theology and to confine it to a particular type of theology. It is because the healthy development of Christian theology in China may need various types of theology.16

Based on the idea of this diversity, Jason Lam developed a “Typological Consideration of Sino-Christian Theology”.17 Through examining the history of Christian theology and adopting the typology of modern theology suggested by Hans W. Frei,18 Lam argues that the divergence between the theology constructed in the Chinese academia and that in the ecclesiastical setting is only a contingent phenomenon emerging in a rather special socio-political setting in Mainland China. Since the two institutions have not been given much room to communicate to each other, and they both have very different developing agendas, their theological discourses constructed in the past show significant differences. In stead of taking them as a contradictory dichotomy of either-or, a healthier approach to handle their diversity is to assign the seemingly opponents to a continuous theological spectrum, in which various types of theology with different orientations and setting would flourish in their own ways and have dialogue with each other.

Nowadays, the distinction between the broad and narrow senses of “Sino-Christian theology” has become widely accepted. In recent years, there are more publications related to “Sino-Christian theology” in the broad sense than those focusing on the narrow sense. For example, a recent volume of Logos & Pneuma (vol. 27 [2007]) takes “Sino-Christian Theology in Ming & Qing Dynasties” as the title for the main theme. This is all too obvious that it assumes a very broad understanding of “Sino-Christian theology”. As Wang Xiaochao observes, in recent years, the study of Sino-Christian theology entered into a stage of “various articulations under one flag” (yimian qizhi, gezi biaoshu). Though some of these articulations of Sino-Christian theology are deviated from the ideas of the prime proponents, Wang suggests, one has to accept this diversity because as the participants have diversified academic, cultural and religious backgrounds, it is neither necessary nor possible to unify their opinions.19

Recent Development and Prospect

Partially due to the cultural, social and political atmosphere of China as well as the efforts made by the cultural Christians and many other institutions, including particularly the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, the academic study of Christianity enjoyed a phenomenal growth in China in the last two decades. In recent years, several important developments or changes, which will affect the theological development in Mainland China, became more and more apparent.

The first noticeable change to be mentioned is the cultural, intellectual and religious background of the researchers. As He Guanghu notices, there are some significant differences between the scholars of Christian studies of his generation and those of the younger generations.20 In a recent questionnaire-survey conducted on the younger generation (aged roughly 35 to 45) of Mainland China scholars engaging in the study of Christianity, it is found that in comparison with the scholars of previous generation (aged 45 or above), there are more and more scholars of the younger generation taking Christianity as their own religion and actively involving in church activities. Some of them admit that their academic studies of Christianity are partially motivated by their Christian faith. A report of the survey, “Preliminary Survey on the New Generation of Scholars of Christian Studies in Mainland China”, prepared by Gao Xin is appended to this volume. In light of these findings, there may be more healthy interactions or even cooperation between the academia and the Christian churches in the future. Though Sino-Christian theology needs to preserve its own identity as an academic enterprise, it does not necessarily mean that it has to be separate from or hostile to the ecclesiastical circle. This point is also indicated in the second chapter of this volume authored by Li Qiuling, who belongs to the older generation of Mainland China scholars engaging in Christian studies. As the study of Christianity includes both the humanistic and ecclesiastical dimensions,21 the prospect of Christian studies in Mainland China may benefit from the healthy interactions between the academia and the Christian churches in China.

Secondly, some Mainland China scholars of Christian Studies, particularly of the younger generation, would prefer to identify themselves as “Christian Scholars” (jidutu xueren) in order to distinguish themselves from the “cultural


Christians” who do not have clear commitment to Christianity. Some of these scholars of the younger generation, notably Sun Yi and Zhang Xuefu, even argue that the methodology of human sciences are inadequate for Sino-Christian theology which should take seriously the Christ event, proceed from a Christian theological perspective and not to reduce theology to some sort of philosophy. In fact, Liu Xiaofeng also emphasizes on the centrality of the Christ event in theological thinking and the distinctiveness of theological method vis-à-vis other human sciences, but Liu does not stress the role of the church in theological thinking as Sun and Zhang do. This new self-identity of “Christian scholars” clearly signifies an important development of the movement.

Thirdly, in terms of its relationship with theologies in other languages, Sino-Christian theology has moved gradually from focusing on translating and introducing the works of famous western theologians to placing greater emphasis on the creative re-interpretation of western theologies and the articulation of innovative theological discourses with Chinese characteristics. This can be seen from the recent publications of the two volumes concerning Karl Barth and Sino-Christian Theology (2008). In fact, the first volume is a reprint of a previous volume published in 2000. Comparing the contents of the two volumes, one may find a rather subtle yet significant development. Both volumes have introductory essays on Barth’s theology, but the second volume addresses wider range of issues and presents Barth’s theology in a more comprehensive and systematic way. An even more significant development is that in the first volume there is only one paper on the significance of Barth’s theology for

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25 Andres S. K. Tang (Deng Shaoguang) & Lai Pan-chiu eds., Bate yu Hanyu Shenxue: Bate shenxue de zai si [Karl Barth and Sino-Christian Theology: Barth’s Theology Reconsidered] (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma, 2000, reprint 2008) and the second volume Ou Li-jan (Ou Li-ren) and Andres S. K. Tang eds., Bate yu Hanyue shenxue er: Bate shi shi si shi zhou nian ji nian wen ji [Karl Barth and Sino-Christian Theology II: Essays to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of his Death] (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma, 2008).
Christian-Confucian dialogue, but in the second volume there are three essays on Barth and Buddhism. Furthermore, the roles played by Barth’s theology in these essays are different. In the essay in the first volume, it is basically a unilateral application of the insights of Barth’s theology to the Confucian-Christian dialogue. In the essays on Barth and Buddhism in the second volume, one may find some sort of bilateral dialogue between Barth and Buddhism, including an attempt to evaluate Barth from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective. This development reflects that Sino-Christian theology has become more mature in its attitudes towards Western theologies as well as the resources of traditional Chinese culture.

Fourthly, the approaches adopted by Mainland China scholars of Christian studies also shifted from being dominated by the human sciences, particularly philosophy and to a less extent literature and history, to include more and more the methods in social sciences, including sociology, anthropology, etc. This development reflects not only the growth of what is called empirical or positive studies (shizheng yanjiu) in Mainland China, but also the awareness that Christianity is no longer something belonging exclusively to Western civilisation and it has become a cultural as well as social phenomenon or reality in contemporary China. Over the past few years, the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies has published several books related to the sociological and/or anthropological studies of Christianity in China. These studies include both empirical studies of the practices of Christianity in Beijing, Tai’an and Duanzhuang with some well-articulated theoretical frameworks. On top of these, the Institute of


Sino-Christian Studies is launching a translation series of “Western Academics and Public Ethics”, which introduced some state-of-art publications of public theology in the western world. The integration and mutual enrichment between empirical studies and theoretical works may yield another flourishing scene in the academic studies on Christianity in the future. This may become not only an important trend in the development of Christian Studies in China as a whole, but also a contribution to the practical or pastoral activities of the Christian churches.

Fifthly, other than the diversification of approaches, the scope of study has become broader and broader. In the past very little has been done to the area of biblical studies. Since most “cultural Christians” are not strongly affiliated to the institutional churches, the role and authority of the Bible in the construction of Christian theology was an important issue involved in the “cultural Christians” debate. But in recent years, due to efforts made by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and some other institutions, there are more and more properly trained biblical scholars in Mainland China. With regard to the publications in China related to biblical studies, phenomenal growth can be detected in both qualitative and quantitative terms. The Institute of Sino-Christian Studies is also launching the first comprehensive textbook series on biblical studies in Mainland China. These publications are supposed to exert some lasting influence on the future generations. In fact, the recent issue of *Logos & Pneuma* (vol. 31 [Autumn 2009]) took “Biblical Studies and Chinese Academia” as its main theme. Most of the articles published in the issue are written by younger generation of scholars and show their potential to match the international academic standard. An even more encouraging sign is that You Bin, one of the theme initiators, has proposed an agenda of “Sino-Christian Scriptural Hermeneutics”, disclosing the intention to produce a more integral discipline of theological studies in the Chinese context.

Sixthly, following the developing trend in biblical studies, when scholars re-read the Bible and the whole Christian tradition in dialogue with the Chinese culture, a brand new type of scriptural theologising may emerge in China. In “Sino-Christian Theology, Bible, and Christian Tradition”, the first article of Part III, Lai Pan-chiu examines the development as well as prospect of biblical studies in Mainland China. Lai argues that in spite of the difficulties to be overcome, biblical studies in China has the potential to make distinctive and innovative contributions to biblical studies worldwide. There are some recent publications in biblical studies vividly confirming Lai’s expectation that the Chinese contexts (including the Chinese texts) can play vital as well as creative roles in the Chinese interpretations of the biblical texts. One of them might be the second article of Part III, “Messianic Predestination in Romans 8 and

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Classical Confucianism”, authored by Yeo Khiok-khng [Yang Keqin]. In the essay, Yeo develops an inter-textual reading between Confucius and Paul or between the Romans and the Analects. Although the two sides seem quite incommensurable at first glimpse, Yeo demonstrates in his account that a cross-textual reading can facilitate a Chinese-Christian worldview which is open to the future without discounting the past. This case illustrates the possibility of constructing a Sino-Christian theology in an innovative way. 30 Although the theological significance of this kind of biblical studies may remain far from clear, the Chinese interpretations of the Bible have recently attracted the attention of some foreign scholars. 31

Seventhly, with the developments mentioned above, Sino-Christian theology is moving towards a full-fledged study (or studies) of Christianity, rather than focusing on the theological aspect alone. Some years ago Logos & Pneuma changed it subtitle in Chinese 32 from Chinese Journal of Theology (hanyu shenxue xuekan) (up to vol. 11, Autumn 1999) to Christian Cultural Review (Jidujiao wenhua pinglun) (starting from volume 12, Spring 2000). 33 This change of subtitle, in hindsight, might have indicated that the scope of the journal was broadened to cover those non-theological (usually systematic or philosophical) studies on Christianity or Christian culture. This move is further reinforced by the recent publication of a bilingual journal in Taiwan titled Sino-Christian Studies: An International Journal of Bible, Theology and Philosophy (hanyu Jidujiao Xueshu Lunping). The subtitle of the journal in English clearly indicates not only its international character but also the width of its scope which includes not only philosophy and theology, but also biblical studies. In other words, the goal or target of Sino-Christian theology as an intellectual movement is no longer restricted to systematic theology, which was the focus of discussion during the 1980s and 1990s. After two decades of development, the aim of the movement seems to be expanded from the establishment of Sino-theology to the establishment of “theological studies” as a whole or “theology” in a broad sense, which may better be called “Sino-Christian Studies”.

Admittedly, during the last two decades, academic publications on Christianity from both the prime proponents and younger scholars have grown

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30 Another book-length example can be found from Lin Yan, Zai Hanwen Guji Chuangshi Shenhua de Liangguangxia Chongdu Chuangshiji 1-3 [Re-reading Genesis 1-3 in the Light of the Creation Myths of Ancient Chinese Texts] (Lanzhou: Lanzhou University Press, 2008).
33 In fact, this is also the Chinese title for a book series or “book in lieu of journal” (yi shu dai kan) called “Christian Culture Review” (Jidujiao wenhua pinglun) published in Mainland China (Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin, 1990-) edited by Liu Xiaofeng.
phenomenally and in exciting ways. It is not difficult to find that various disciplinary approaches are employed to conduct serious studies of Christianity. However, it is also important to note that the theological construction of Sino-Christian theology remains far from well developed. There are some volumes related to Sino-Christian theology published recently, but these volumes look like collections of essays or introductory writings rather than truly book-length research monographs.\footnote{Some examples can be found in Liu Xiaofeng, \textit{Hanyu shenxue yu lishi zhexue} [Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History] (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000); Yang Huilin, \textit{Jidujiao de Dise yu Wenhua Yanshen} [Basic Features and Cultural Extensions of Christianity] (Harbin: Heilongjian Renmin, 2002); He Guanghu, \textit{Tien ren zhi ji} [The Heaven and the Human] (Beijing: China Social Science, 2003), \textit{Yue ying wan chuan: zongjiao, shehui yu rensheng} [The Moon in Streams: Religion, Society and Life] (Beijing: China Social Science, 2003); Zhuo Xinping, \textit{Shensheng yu Shisu Zhijian} [Between Sacred and Profane] (Harbin: Heilongjian Renmin, 2004); Jason Lam, \textit{Duo yuan xing Hanyu shenxue quan shi} [A Polyphonic View on Sino-Christian Theology] (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma, 2006); Lin Hong-hsin’s 3-vol. series, \textit{Shui qi meng shui} [Who Enlightens Whom?], \textit{Dian yu xian} [Point and Line], and \textit{Luo ye sui feng} [Fallen Leaves Gone with the Wind] (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma, 2008); Chin Ken Pa, \textit{Shangdi, guanxi yu yan shuo} [God, Relation & Discourse] (Shanghai: VI Horae, 2008); Paulos Huang (Huang Baoluo), \textit{Hanyu xueshu shenxue} [Sino-Christian Academic Theology] (Beijing: Religious Culture, 2008); Wen Weiyao, \textit{Shenming de zhuanghua yu chaoba} [On the Transformation and Transcendence of Humanity] (Beijing: Religious Culture, 2009).} It remains very difficult to find any systematic articulation of Christian theology to be identified as a showcase for Sino-Christian theology. Therefore more substantial works of Sino-Christian theology are called for in order to become a truly mature theological enterprise. If becoming more reflective or critical on oneself is one of the signs for becoming mature, Sino-Christian theology seems to begin to mature. The last chapter “Reflection on Enlightenment – a Proposal of the Focus of Sino-Christian Theology” by Lin Hong-Hsin (Lin Hongxin) may be an example showing Sino-Christian theology’s becoming more reflexive and critical of oneself: Lin’s essay reviews the Chinese Enlightenment – the May 4th movement – in light of an examination of the European Enlightenment. According to Lin, a lesson to be learnt from the historical development in Europe is that the once revolutionaries may turn to anti-revolutionaries, the supposedly enlightened ones to those barred from light. When the cultural Christians began to introduce Christian thought into China, they themselves or the others might consider them as the enlightened ones who might bring enlightenment to China. However, if Sino-theologians are really concerned with the contemporary situation of China, Lin reminds, they should always take a critical stance towards themselves and keep on asking: Are we really enlightened? In what aspects shall one continue to further develop the present state of Sino-Christian studies?
Concluding Remark

In view of these recent developments, the intellectual, cultural or theological movement, which took “Sino-Christian theology” as its flag in the 1980s and 1990s, may better understand its own task in terms of “Sino-Christian studies” which may better reflect the future direction of the movement. This is not to give up the study of Sino-Christian theology as such, but to place this “hard-core” in a wider framework of Sino-Christian studies, which includes the studies of all the aspects of Christianity, including theology, social institutions, scriptures, history, and even the material cultures. This move, to a certain extent, may help the scholars already involved in the movement to avoid some unnecessary controversies concerning whether and how Sino-Christian theology is Christian theology, to rally more participants (especially those engaging in non-theological studies of Christianity) to this academic forum or platform, and to exercise greater influence on the academic studies of Christianity in the Chinese speaking world.

Although it is repeatedly stated in this introductory essay that Sino-Christian theology is still in an infancy stage of development, new ideas and perspectives are expected to appear from time to time in this burgeon field of discussion. It is hoped that the theological discussion in China will make distinctive and significant contribution to the international theological discussion. To this end, the present volume may be regarded as a very little first step forward.35
