PART I

Historical Review
The study of Christianity in universities and research institutes is nothing unusual. It is rather remarkable, however, that Christian studies have become established in the cultural and educational system of communist China and have been developing rapidly since the late 1980s. A considerable number of scholars are now pursuing the serious academic study of Christianity and publishing their findings, and are doing so not in seminaries or other ecclesiastical settings but in institutions of the social and human sciences run and financed by the state. Their research includes not only studies of Christianity from historical and sociological perspectives, which may often be considered value-neutral from a religious point of view, but also the production of confessional theology, although the latter is much smaller in quantity than the former. Some scholars who are interested in religion even become committed Christians. In this article I introduce the phenomenon of the production of theology in these circumstances, articulating the factors that make it possible, analyzing the nature of the theology produced in this situation and making a theological reflection on the orientation of theology relevant for Asian countries.

A Description of the Phenomenon
Apart from writings criticizing Christianity from the “advanced” communist perspective there was only scanty publishing on Christianity in communist China before 1980; it was all translated works that were usually closely related to the study of western philosophy. Since the 1980s publishing has been growing rapidly in terms of both quantity and quality. At the outset the publications were still mainly translated works on Christianity from the perspectives of history, cultural studies, sociology, religious studies and even theology. Later on articles, books and journals by Chinese scholars appeared in increasing numbers. In the higher education system religious studies departments and research institutions were established in some important universities such as Beijing and Nanjing. Nowadays some of these offer religious studies programmes from undergraduate level up to postgraduate level and publish

textbooks. Some distinguished scholars have emerged and have been playing important roles in the development of religious studies.\(^2\) Even in liberal Chinese societies like Hong Kong and Taiwan it is unusual to find Christian studies programmes offered and academic books published by the state education system. It is a significant fact that the academic study of Christianity has become a formal part of the communist cultural and educational system.

Following Liu Xiaofeng\(^3\) we can divide the research interests of these scholars into five types:

1. Religious studies: the study of Christianity as one of the world religions from the perspectives of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.
4. Arts and literature: the study of Christian arts and literature though the ages.

Most of these studies can be pursued without a commitment to Christian faith and most of the discussions are developed in the realm of the human and social sciences. However, some of the scholars involved agree that in certain circumstances to have a genuine understanding of Christian theology proper and to develop meaningful discourse about it may require a commitment of faith. It is important, therefore, to analyse the attitude of these scholars towards the Christian faith.

In their attitude towards Christianity the scholars in Mainland China can be divided into three groups:\(^4\)

(A) These scholars take Christianity as one of the world religions. They have no religious commitment themselves. They regard Christianity as a “foreign” religion and are concerned to identify those of its features that are different from Chinese culture. In a sense they are doing comparative study between Christianity and Chinese culture.

(B) These scholars are not committed to the Christian faith either; but they do not study Christianity from a cultural-nationalistic perspective: their approach is


more value-neutral. Their frame of reference is shaped by the academic standards of the social and human sciences. Some of them show an appreciation of the Christian faith, however.

(C) These scholars have a personal commitment to the Christian faith and comprise the only group committed to doing Christian theology proper. They do not do dogmatic theology in a traditional way, however, since they are working in the realm of the human and social sciences and have to adopt the so-called religiously unbiased approach required in these academic circles.

Needless to say, the divisions amongst these groups are rather fluid and their interaction means that people sometimes move from one group to another. Group A is the largest, then Group B, and Group C is the smallest. Group C is the most active, however, and includes the most prominent figures of the circle. They are sometimes called the “Cultural Christians” (wenhua jidutu) because although they have a personal commitment to the Christian faith many of them are not baptized members of an institutional church, nor do they have a direct relationship with any seminary or ecclesiastical institution. This is one of the reasons why several years ago vigorous debate arose between them and some scholars in Hong Kong, who mainly work in seminaries and institutions with an ecclesiastical background.5

A Historical and Sociological Analysis of the Phenomenon
In most Chinese societies Christian studies and especially theology are usually done in seminaries and institutions which are run by the church or at least have a Christian background.6 The special feature of the emergence of scholars studying Christianity in Mainland China is that they have no relationship with existing ecclesiastical institutions and are all located in the cultural and educational system run by the communist government. The development of this remarkable phenomenon is worth further analysis from the historical and sociological perspectives.

After the communist government was established in Mainland China in 1949, and especially during the ten years of the Culture Revolution, the Christian churches were forced to surrender all their educational institutions, including schools, universities and seminaries, to the state. Subsequently they had to struggle for their existence and accommodate themselves to their new

5 See Part II of Cultural Christians, pp.96-196, which contains all the articles of debate emerged in the year 1995-1996.
6 The Baptist University of Hong Kong, for example, was originally established by the Baptist Church and thus has a department of religion and philosophy; the Chinese University of Hong Kong has a department or cultural and religious studies (and a divinity school financed by churches as a constituent part) because Chung Chi College, one of the member colleges of the university, was formed by members of formerly Christian universities in Mainland China.
A situation under an atheist socialist government. The general repression of religion ceased over 20 years ago and religious freedom is now enshrined in the constitution. However, since the churches’ academic resources were completely abolished for such a long time the seminaries in Mainland China have until recently been struggling to produce clergy to meet the needs of the churches. They have therefore had no extra resources to devote to research and the institutional churches have not been able to produce high quality academic studies.

A humanities faculty is not complete without the study of religions, however. Ever during the Cultural Revolution, therefore, the study of philosophy, history and other subjects in secular universities included material on various religions, though this was usually present so that the religions in question could be “criticised”. Once ideological control was relaxed, however, this material began to attract the interest of scholars in its own right.7

Despite the atheist stance of the communists and their eagerness to impose their ideology on every area of the cultural and educational system, it was an undeniable fact that communism was a product of the history of western thought. Its origin therefore had to be studied in that context; and one of the essential constituents of western thought is Christianity. Indeed, the writing of Marx, Engels and even Lenin include discussions of creation, original sin, the Trinity and other elements of the Christian faith. As early as 1956, therefore, the communist government was already planning to translate 1630 western philosophical works over a period of 30 years. This was the beginning of the process of introducing a vast amount of western thought into the Chinese cultural and educational system. Some older-generation Mainland scholars learned about Christianity in this way. The more important point, however, is that it prepared the human resources and experience needed for the translation of a large number of Christian classics and a large quantity of developing Christian theology in recent years.8

The cultural and educational system nevertheless provides only a necessary but not a sufficient reason for the appearance of serious academic Christian studies in Mainland China. There are plenty of academic resources such as seminaries and even universities with a Christian background in other Chinese societies, but none of these societies has ever seen such a dramatic growth in Christian studies as that which has occurred in Mainland China over the last one and a half decades. There must, then, be other reasons for this exciting phenomenon.

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Liu Xiaofeng, a prominent figure in the circle, points out that although Chinese societies like Hong Kong and Taiwan have never experienced ideological control like that in communist Mainland China, they rarely produce writings that are widely transmitted in, and accepted by, the wider circle of the human and social sciences beyond the ecclesiastical institution; and the reason for this, in his view, is that Christian studies in these places are mainly conducted in institutions run by churches. Although the institutional churches enjoy complete freedom in these societies, they are to a large extent profoundly influenced by their fundamentalist and evangelical wings and have little intention of influencing the cultural and academic realms. What is more, although these liberal societies allow complete religious freedom, based on the political principle of the separation of church and state, the cultural and educational system is reluctant to let the institutional church have too much influence. A further consideration is that because of their Chinese cultural identity and their market-led economic orientation, these modern secular societies rarely listen to the voices of Christian intellectuals and they have limited audiences to make their discourse influential.9

Some Mainland scholars try to explain the phenomenon of which they are a part from a sociological perspective on the basis of their own experience. As noted earlier, communism is a product on the basis of western thought. More specifically, it is an heir of the Enlightenment and thus inherits its revolutionary character. It is critical of all kinds of tradition and its antireligious stance is only one of its may “anti” position.10 Early Chinese communist intellectuals were inspired by this spirit and succeeded in their political revolution. After the communist government was established communism was not only the directive of the political realm, it was also transformed into an intellectual discourse for justifying and establishing socialist China as a modern national state. As such it not only combated western imperialism but also took a critical stance towards traditional Chinese culture as a conservative spirit hindering the acceptance of “advanced” communist revolutionary thought by ordinary people; but it is in this way that communism as a stream of western thought has accommodated itself to traditional Chinese society and become an autocratic ideology with the help of political power.11

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10 The Enlightenment spirit is critical of religion but not necessarily antireligious. The antireligious stance of most communist governments may partly originate from their political motives.
There has been something of a foundational shift in the cultural and academic world in this communist state. Although some radical Marxists still resist the development of Christian studies, they have in a sense become the arena for the expression of an inner tension within western culture between communist and Christian thought rather than of an external tension between an eastern and a western religious tradition. Although it cannot be denied that at the grass-root level antichristian attitudes still arise mainly from national and cultural identity, among intellectuals nurtured by the communist government, who provide the major transformational force in the cultural and educational system, such attitudes arise more from an Enlightenment spirit than from an eagerness to sustain a cultural identity. At an earlier stage, when the communist government needed to strengthen its control, it tended to treat those who embraced traditional Chinese cultural thinking as resisting the politically orthodox position of communism by a form of cultural nationalism. Meanwhile although the tension between Christianity and communism can hardly be eased, communist thought can never completely prevent people from studying Christianity, as Christianity is in a sense the predecessor of communism in European intellectual history. Scholars studying Christianity are of course very unlikely to transform themselves into a dominant political power in the Chinese national state.

The communist government has thus completely transformed the ecology of the cultural and educational system for the sake of making communism an autocratic ideology in the modern national state of China. One side effect of this has been the suppression to a certain extent of the exclusivist stance of scholars embracing traditional Chinese culture in the academic realm. Meanwhile, through the communist cultural and educational system Christian thought has silently participated in the making of modern thought in this ancient country. Once the control of an autocratic ideology was relaxed in the academic realm, therefore, a wide variety of types of thinking had a more or less equal chance of developing and gaining popularity among intellectuals. This has been the scene since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping came to the political foreground and began gradually implementing his policy of “reform and openness”.

The above description may appear too idealistic, so let us look at the concrete situation. In 1952 all Christian universities and religion departments in

14 One of the reasons why Cultural Christians keep themselves distant from the institutional churches, although there is no bar to their becoming involved with them, may be that want to avoid being suspected of trying to gain popularity among the vast numbers of Christians in Mainland China.
Mainland China were closed. A few Christian classics were still being translated from the 1950s to the early 1970s, but they did not attract much attention because ideological control was severe in the academic realm. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, a new situation developed. The communist government admitted the errors of the Cultural Revolution, and the belief that all religions are antirevolutionary was criticized as an oversimplified dogma. All kinds of religious studies then began to re-establish normal development.

By now the scholars who had had formal academic training in religious studies and theology before the Cultural Revolution had either died or were very old. Religious studies could now rely only on intellectuals trained in other disciplines. Of the five areas of research in Christian studies (see the discussion in the previous section), the history of Christian thought (area 2) and the history of Christianity (area 3) have experienced the fastest growth. This was because although departments of religion had been closed for a long time some intellectuals were still able to receive training in philosophy and history even during the Cultural Revolution, and these people were now better prepared for study in areas 2 and 3 than in the other areas. Many of the Mainland scholars recently involved in Christian studies graduated from philosophy and history departments during the period form the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Some of them have gradually but successfully transformed themselves into scholars in the area of religious studies and a few in Christian theology. Some distinguished figures have had the chance to study overseas in religion and theology departments and have returned to reinforce the movement. Religion departments and research institutions thus began to be established in the state education system from the late 1980s after this generation of scholars gained sufficient research experience and acquired the relevant positions in the system. The number of translated works and even original writings they produced then increased dramatically. Now the younger generation nurtured since the late 1980s is becoming another major dynamic element in the circle.

An Analysis of the Nature of Theology
A special feature of this phenomenon is that most scholars involved do not learn Christianity from the institutional churches but mainly through their own

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16 Before 1949 the Second World War and the Chinese civil war meant that most people in Mainland China were unable to receive a formal education.
academic studies and experience in translating Christian classics. It is not surprising that some thereby develop a keen research interest in religious studies. A small proportion – though the actual number is very few – even has a commitment to the Christian faith and has developed high-quality theological discourse. Liu Xiaofeng points out the significance of this phenomenon as evangelization without missionaries.¹⁹ I would add that they in turn become missionaries and preach the Christian message to intellectuals without the aids of the institutional churches. Their writings are transmitted in the human and social sciences among Chinese intellectuals and the churches in Mainland China play no part in this process. This is a very special phenomenon in the history of Christianity, especially in the modern history of Christianity in Asia, and it directly affects the nature of the theology these people produce.

The importance of one point can hardly be overemphasized for the above phenomenon to occur: the lessening of ideological control in the communist state, which has led to a vacuum in both the public sphere and the individual mind and an openness to all sorts of ideas. In the academic realm a quasi-liberal situation has developed: all types of religious and cultural thought can be studied and appreciated, as long as this does not lead to the development of a social movement. Some scholars involved confess that they suffered from ideological control in the past and now find consolation in the studying Christianity in the new situation. As a researcher situated in Hong Kong I should admit that my interaction with the group of scholars studying religions in Mainland China is still limited. I can only try to predict the development of their studies, basing my conjecture on the assumption that ideological control in the academic realm will not revert to that of the Cultural Revolution. This conjecture is important, however, for an appreciation of the theological discourse these scholars are and will be producing, which is relevant for our theological reflection.

As I have stated repeatedly these scholars are working solely in the academic realm and have very little, if not none, interaction with the institutional churches. The result is that their studies and even their theology are produced in the realm of the social and human sciences and make use of the corresponding language. (Here I am mainly referring to Group C, the “Cultural Christians”) They are therefore experiencing a great tension as they construct their theology. On the one hand, if they overemphasize their confessional stance they run the risk of losing their place in their institutions, as these are supposed to be religiously unbiased. On the other hand they acknowledge that it is because of their personal conviction that they are able to produce genuine Christian theological discourse rather than religious studies discourse. If they withdraw from this position, they will become members of Group B. This explains why

Group C is few in number. They may be criticized by Group A from a cultural-national position and by Group B from a supposedly religiously unbiased position. Nevertheless Group C is the most active and influential of the groups. Indeed it sometimes happens that members of Group A who withdraw from their cultural-national position and members of Group B who are drawn from the Christian faith become members of Group C.\(^\text{20}\)

Regardless of the changing inner dynamics amongst the groups and the number of scholars they comprise one thing is quite certain: they have to pursue their studies and do their theology in the realm of the human and social sciences and using the appropriate language. This is not their own choice but a given condition. Some of their works are “exported” to other Chinese communities, and scholars working in seminaries and other ecclesiastical settings have detected the difference in nature in their works. As communication between scholars in different regions increases rapidly and in view of the fact that the objective of some of the Mainland “theologians” is to establish a global Chinese theological circle, some theological reflection on the phenomenon is relevant. I believe that such reflection will also have significance for theologians in other Asian countries where Christianity is a religion of foreign origin rather than indigenous.

### A Theological Reflection on the Typology of Theology

As a matter of fact, theological discourse produced in the realm of the human and social sciences using corresponding languages are not something new in the western world. Most traditional universities in Europe and private universities in the USA still have a divinity faculty or theology department. Nonetheless theologians working in such institutions since the time of the Enlightenment (for example Friedrich Schleiermacher, John Henry Newman, Edward Farley) have at times felt the need to produce a discourse of justification for the presence of their discipline in the modern university system. While theological seminaries run by Christian denominations operate outside the state education system, relatively value-neutral religion departments form in new universities, and here theologians find it difficult to involve a confessional stance in their academic discourse in the modern secular cultural and educational system. Therefore, although scholars in divinity faculties and even religion departments continue to produce Christian theology this has its own distinctive quality and is sometimes regarded as a type of “theology” different from the traditional confessional discourse.

In most Chinese societies there is a long tradition of the study of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, in university departments of philosophy.

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history, literature, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and of course religious studies. In such departments these religions are studied differently from the way they are studied in institutions run by the respective religious communities. In the latter case scholars can develop confessional discourse freely; but scholars working in the former institutional settings need to adapt their discussion to the rules of the above-mentioned university disciplines and may be required to justify the involvement of their confessional stance. As Liu Xiaofeng points out, if the study of traditional religions is to occupy a proper place in the modern cultural and educational institution it has to undergo transformation. Nevertheless, regardless of their own faith commitment, scholars of traditional Chinese culture and religions in universities in Chinese societies can still produce high-quality discourse accepted by intellectuals. The same thing can apply to the study of Christianity.21

The question of the transformation of the study of religion is a crucial one for Christian theologians in Mainland China. It also has significance for theologians elsewhere. Liu Xiaofeng has articulated the importance of producing this kind of Christian theology in the modern world. In any modern secular state, whether it is socialist or liberal democratic, the cultural and educational system (including universities, research institutes and the like) is the major environment where a religion or culture can find intellectual disciples and form intellectuals and even produce academic discourse. Nevertheless they are considered to be private sectors and it is difficult for them to extend their influence beyond their own religious communities. If the influence of Christian theology is not to be restricted to the institutional church, then, its discourse must be of a kind that is acceptable in the academic realm of the modern secular world system, we can see that Christian studies in the West and the study of traditional Chinese culture and religions in Chinese societies have constantly been adapting themselves to that system. Thus they can survive in the system as studies of ancient cultural heritage and continue to exert influence on intellectuals.

Some Chinese scholars have pointed out that the changes which have occurred in the last half century in Mainland China are basically a drastic form of modernization in a relatively short time-span. The communist government is attempting to domesticate a form of modern political thought (communism) in order to construct the “orthodox” cultural discourse of the national state in China (see the descriptions of this phenomenon by Liu Zongkun and Liu Xiaofeng). Although we are often reminded that we have already entered a post-modern age, the global project of modernization is still constantly influencing the social, political and cultural context. We should of course not unreservedly welcome this process, since it may conceal various forms of colonization. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not we are facing a situation in which local contexts,

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cultures, traditions and identities are more readily transformed than ever before. Christian theologians should be conscious of this changing context so that theology may be able to play a part in the process.

The challenge for theologians working in academic circles in these circumstances is to produce genuine Christian theology in the realm of the human and social sciences which does not lose its confessional stance. If we accept the need to produce this kind of theology, then we need to examine how this is to be done. The discussion so far seems to give the impression that theology produced in ecclesiastical settings and theology produced in the academic realm should exhibit completely different qualities. The former starts form a confessional stance while the latter must originate in a so-called religiously value-neutral context. However if theology is to be genuinely “Christian” it must be based in faith in Jesus Christ. It seems, therefore, that producing a confessional “Christian theology” in the academic realm is basically impossible. Do we need to insist on a dichotomy between these two types of discourse, however?

At this point I would like to refer to Hans Frei, a theologian who has spent a lifetime grappling with this issue. Frei points out that the status of Christianity in the modern western world has become ambiguous, such that two mutually exclusive views of Christian theology have emerged. On the one hand,

Christian theology is an instance of a general class or generic type and is therefore to be subsumed under general criteria of intelligibility, coherence, and truth that it must share with other academic disciplines.

while on the other hand,

Theology is an aspect of Christianity and is therefore partly or wholly defined by its relation to the cultural or semiotic system that constitutes that religion. In this view theology is religion-specific, and whether or not other religions besides Christianity have theologians or something like them would have to be adduced case by specific case.

In addition Frei points out that the first view sees theology as a cognate discipline to philosophy while the second sees it as closer to anthropology and sociology.22

Both types of theology exhibit problems by their very nature. Since the first type makes use of some existing philosophical system and its corresponding language to express Christian thought, it is not speaking first from the point of view of a believer but tries to describe Christian faith from a perspective that

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may not be commensurable with that faith. The second type, however, commits itself to the confessional stance and produce genuine Christian discourse. The problem here is that people outside the confessional circle may not be able to understand the language of the religious community concerned. Cultural Christians in Mainland China get into both types of trouble. They want to produce discourse from a confessional stance but must use the language of the human and social sciences. They thus suffer from a great intellectual tension.

Frei’s unfinished project *Types of Christian Theology* may shed light on the matter. He thinks that Christian theologians in the West as well are continuously struggling to do theology in the tension between these two poles. Instead of simply dividing their works into two opposing categories, however, he finds that it is more appropriate to arrange them into a continuous spectrum with the two supposedly mutually exclusive positions at the two ends. In his system Frei articulates five typologies, with type one representing those approaches that are closer to philosophical disciplines and type five those that are characterised by a confessional stance. If one is anxious both to maintain one’s own convictions and produce a discourse that will be understood, then the optimal choice would probably be the middle point, type three, which would be likely to produce the most balanced discourse between the two poles.

Christian theologians have in fact from the very beginning been faced with the challenge of encountering the context they are living in. theology addressed itself to the Greek and Latin cultures of the Roman world, and then to the Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism of the medieval period. In recent times it has been addressing itself to modernism and postmodernism. One of the challenges to theologians today may be that theology needs to appropriate the language of the human and social sciences. In other words academic theology may need to introduce history, sociology, linguistics, philosophy and so on into its discussion, or even restructure itself to fit the discussion of these disciplines into itself as a kind of modern science (to use Ernst Troeltsch’s term becoming a *Wissenschaftliche Theologie*). The traditional way of doing dogmatics may not be an appropriate option in some circumstances. The mission of this type of theology is as follows:

Theology as academic enterprise and as Christian self-description in the Church must be correlated. Philosophy and theology must be correlated. External and self-description of Christianity must be correlated, and in each case, two factors are autonomous yet reciprocally related, but that reciprocity and mutual autonomy is not explained by any more basic structure of thought under which the two factors would be included.23

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In line with this aim, Frei points out that the correlation envisaged in type three must not rest on a tight method, but always remain an experiment and an imperfect one. Hence this type of theology must endure an ever-present tension, risking contradiction and confusion but trying to be hermeneutically consistent. A theology of this type is “a carefully modulated way of articulating the faith philosophically but therefore fragmentarily, even though in a fit, descriptive fashion. At some point, though not too quickly, philosophical agnosticism has to set in the interest of full-blooded Christian theology.” Nevertheless, “if you’re not a theologian of type one or two – that is to say, if you are not systematic in your correlation between general meaning and academic criteria and the specific self-description – you are not too worried about cutting your philosophical losses.”

Although the academic situation in Mainland China is unique, it is a worthwhile enterprise for theologians in other Asian countries to consider the issues arising; they are often neglected in Asian countries where Christian studies are conducted mainly in Christian institutions. If this were to continue, Christianity might be doomed to play a role only in the private sector but never in the public sphere affecting the making of modern culture. The churches might continue to grow, but Christianity might well remain with the status of a popular religion, unable to assume its full responsibility for transforming culture. Not only would it lose its role in the world, but the power of Jesus Christ would become irrelevant. If the period of communist rule has accidentally and paradoxically created an appropriate situation for Christian study to become a formal part of the cultural and educational system of the state, this implies that the Christian faith already possessed the potential to influence the construction of modern Chinese thought in Mainland China. Liu Xiaofeng claims that this is a chance Chinese Christian intellectuals cannot afford to miss. Are Asian theologians aware of the changing context in which and with which we are doing theology under the agenda of modernization and are we prepared to give of our best to the Master? I believe that this is a relevant and important question.

24 Hans Frei, Types of Christian Theology, pp.77-78.
25 Hans Frei, Types of Christian Theology, p.91.
26 Hans Frei, Types of Christian Theology, pp.89-90.
“Sino-Christian theology” (Hanyu Shenxue) has now been in existence for ten years, and has become a notable movement within theology. On the one hand, because its declared aim is to develop Christian theology, it has attracted attention in the religious sphere, particularly in that of Protestant Christianity; on the other hand, because it advertises its humanistic and scholarly content, it has attracted the attention of academia. In its ten-year development, “Sino-Christian theology” has given rise to a number of issues which are worth reflecting on.

The Origin and Development of Sino-Christian theology

In June 1994 the first (biannual) issue of Logos & Pneuma: Chinese Journal of Theology appeared, published by the Research Department of Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre in Hong Kong (which later became the autonomous Institute of Sino-Christian Studies). Logos & Pneuma was originally started in 1934 by the Norwegian missionary Dr. Karl Ludvig Reichelt, the founder of the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre. In addition to spreading Christian culture, the publication primarily focussed on the cross-over between Christian thought and culture and Chinese traditional culture, and on the integration of academic research on religion with religious culture. After its 57th issue, it ceased publication in 1979. Logos & Pneuma is the revived form of the original journal, and is obviously intended as a continuation of Karl Ludvig Reichelt’s original purpose. But what is noteworthy is that the words “Sino-Christian theology” were added to the Chinese title in the beginning; this was the first time that the term “Sino-Christian theology” appeared in print in Chinese, and thus it can be seen as the birth of Sino-Christian theology.¹ In the foreword to the first issue of the revived

¹ Sino-Christian theology should prima facie mean all Christian theology expressed in Chinese, or Sino-Christian theology in a broad sense. If so, then even disregarding the historical documents of Nestorian Christianity in the Tang dynasty, there was plenty of Sino-Christian theology at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and any Chinese-language Christian writing thereafter could be included in its scope. But fundamentally, the great majority of these documents were simply a rendering into Chinese of Western writings on Christianity, without any intention to represent a ‘Sino-Christian’ form of theology. It is precisely this to which the proponents of Sino-Christian theology in the sense in which it is used in this paper are opposed and which they endeavour to avoid. See Liu Xiaofeng, Hanyu Shenxue yu Lishi Zhexue [The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History] (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), pp.3-4, 7-8.
journal, the publisher gave the following interpretation of Sino-Christian theology:

The subtitle “A Journal of Sino-Christian Theology” has been added to the revived *Logos & Pneuma*; the implications of Sino-Christian theology are, firstly, to 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; secondly, to develop the subject of theology within the academic field of Chinese-language thought, and to establish a scholarly dialogue with Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist thought as well as with modernist schools of thought; nowadays, Chinese-language academia (especially in philosophy, sociology, history, politics and cultural studies) is actively developing its own academic space and models, and not following US and European academic paths; Sino-Christian theology should also develop its own academic space and academic models, so that Christian theology can become an integral part of Chinese-language culture and thought, and a component within humanistic scholarship; thirdly, it is the shared enterprise of Chinese-language religious studies scholars from all social areas within the Chinese-speaking world (the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Chinese communities of North America).²

As for the intention behind Sino-Christian theology, according to the recollections of Daniel Yeung (Yang Xinan), an active proponent and promoter of Sino-Christian theology, who at the time was Deputy Head of the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre and Director of the Research Department of the Christian Centre, and became the Executive Director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies at its foundation, it clearly emerged from the strategy of Liu Xiaofeng, the leading proponent of Sino-Christian theology and later the long-serving Special Researcher and Academic Director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies. The foreword to the first issue of the revived *Logos & Pneuma* quoted above was obviously penned by Liu Xiaofeng. But it was the serendipitous meeting, mutual understanding and cooperation between Liu Xiaofeng and Daniel Yeung, as controller of an operating budget, which ultimately allowed Sino-Christian theology to emerge. Daniel Yeung’s memoirs can help us to understand better the aims of Sino-Christian theology. After recalling his meeting and discussion with Liu Xiaofeng, he writes:

What surprised and amazed me at the time was his suggestion that the development of Chinese theology – in addition to the traditional church route – could, in China’s particular

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circumstances, combine the shared endeavours of Chinese academia, and the development of humanistic scholarly research into Christianity, with the aim of systematising and rationalising Christian religious studies, so that it would be recognised as part of the contemporary Chinese humanist tradition, and could thus have a fundamental effect on society and culture.

From then on I kept pondering on the relationship between scholars outside the church and the development of church theology. Considered from the angle of the history of the development of theology, how had ordinary believers within the church or indeed scholars outside the church reformed the traditions of church theology, and how had they acted as a progressive force at theological turning points in each historical period?

How could church theology and such humanistic Christian religious studies advance their mutual understanding and cooperation? That contemporary Chinese academia should spontaneously reconsider the essence and value of Christianity was, from the point of view of missionary history in China, an unprecedented historical moment: how should we respond to it?

What are the points of contact between the understanding of Christianity among Chinese academics from the 1980s onwards and intellectuals in the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing and the 20th century?

When some Chinese scholars take part in translating canonical Christian works, through their Chinese and Western humanistic training together with their specialisation in Eastern and Western languages, will they become the interpreters of these classics, and restructure Sino-Christian thought? When the rich philosophical resources of the Chinese language meet the non-indigenous thought system of Christianity, how will they adopt, change or create new ideas, thus enriching Chinese thought itself? 3

The appearance of Sino-Christian theology was undoubtedly an attempt to respond to these questions. But it is evident that it is by no means the “Sino-Christian theology” in the broad sense which can be understood by looking at the surface meaning of the Chinese phrase literally “Chinese-language theology”, namely Christian theology expressed in the Chinese language. In the thinking of the two creators of Sino-Christian theology, these obvious characteristics should be apparent:

1. A new understanding of Chinese language: “Chinese language” when combined with “theology” no longer denotes merely a system of linguistic symbols, but also includes the rich historical cultural resources which it expresses.
2. The humanistic and academic nature of Sino-Christian theology: although Sino-Christian theology is still the theology of Christianity, it no longer

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insists on the precondition of belief, but emphasises the academic study of Christian theology from a humanistic starting-point; coinciding with new developments in the study of Christianity in mainland Chinese academia, it can even be regarded as a friendly invitation extended to mainland scholars.

(3) “The aim of Sino-Christian theology”: the establishment and development of Christian theology remains the aim of Sino-Christian theology, but it is noteworthy that this aim is no longer that of “bringing China to Christ” so familiar in the history of Christian proselytising, but that of the entry of Christian theology into mainstream Chinese culture; it is the enriching of the resources of Chinese-language thought by means of Christian theology, and Christian theology’s incorporation into Chinese humanistic scholarship.

Somewhat later, in the second issue of Logos & Pneuma (spring 1995), Liu Xiaofeng published an article entitled “Sino-Christian Theology in the Modern Situation” (Xiandai Yujingzhong de Hanyu Jidu Shenxue), which he subsequently expanded into the book The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History (Hanyu Shenxue yu Lishi Zhexue). He Guanghu, who had been a visiting scholar at the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in 1995, while he was a research fellow at the Research Institute on World Religions of the China Academy of Social Sciences, published two successive articles in the Canadian Chinese-language Regent Chinese Journal (Weizhen xuekan), entitled “The basis and significance of Sino-Christian theology” (Hanyu shenxue de yi ju yu yi yi) and “The methodology and approach of Sino-Christian theology” (Hanyu Shenxue de Fangfa yu Jinlu). In these articles, which were later included in Modernity, Change in Tradition and Theological Reflections and Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology respectively, He Guanghu undertook a quite comprehensive discussion of Sino-Christian theology.

Although the emphases of Liu Xiaofeng’s and He Guanghu’s arguments were different, their basic line of thinking was identical, particularly in their discussion of the basis of Sino-Christian theology. In their view, the foundation of Christian theology is the word of God itself (the Word), but the Word can only become known through its inspiration of human language. Thus, language is the vector of theology, and the inspiring Word of God must be expressed through human language in order for it to be accepted by man. In principle, all languages can equally express Christian theology. Liu Xiaofeng used the

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following diagram to explain the tripartite relationship between the Christ event, Christian theology in its ideal form, and historical Christian theology:

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The Christ event
↓
(ideal) Christian theology
↑
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In this diagram, the central position is held by “Christian theology in its ideal form”. According to Liu Xiaofeng’s interpretation, this is “the Word of God itself, and only God himself is in possession of theology in its ideal form”; “the Christ event” is “the historical revelation of God in person”; any ethno-historical Christian theology is predicated on the Christ event, and is “the concrete historical expression within the parameters of ethnic cultural-linguistic experience” of Christian theology in its ideal form.⁶ Thus, theologians of Sino-Christian theology should not view Christian theology, along the lines of “indigenous theology”, as Western theology, and merely aim to substitute the Chinese language for a Western language;

As regards the possibility of Christian theology in Chinese, the basic issue is that if the cultural-linguistic experience of Chinese-language thought is to accept and express the Christ event and to acknowledge Christ, Sino-Christian theology must, after a delay of several hundred years, consider the re-foundation of its expression, and emerge from the ideological straitjacket of indigenisation or sinicisation, to face directly the Christ event.⁷

In this sense, the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and other historical Christian theologies is one of equal “co-existence”.

From the point of view of the vertical relationship (the faith relationship) between Christian theology in its ideal form and in its historical forms, the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and other theologies in history is one of co-existence. There are no early- or late-comers to the Word; all Christian theologies in history are faith events, and their co-existence achieves the shared accumulation of the cultural-linguistic experience of Christian thought.⁸

He Guanghu’s argument further increased the emphasis on language. In this connection, he put forward the concept of “mother-tongue theology”. In his

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⁶ For the diagram and quotation, see Liu Xiaofeng, *The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History*, p.89.
view, “In general, theologians mostly use the language of their native land, or at least the language that they mainly use in particular situations, to carry out their theological writing.” This language can be referred to as their “mother-tongue.

Virtually all theological writing is in the theologian’s own mother-tongue, or in other words, theology is basically all “mother-tongue” theology.9

What is known as mother-tongue theology is a theology expressed through the theologian’s own mother-tongue, which has as its material the existential experience and cultural resources expressed in this language, and principally serves the users of this language.10

In this sense, the equality of Sino-Christian theology with other theologies becomes reality. “What is known as Sino-Christian theology is no more or less than a member of the great family of ‘mother-tongue theologies’, just like English-, German-, French- or Spanish-language theology.”11

Additionally, He Guanghu has also pointed out the significance of using the term “Sino-Christian theology”, and defined the methodology and future direction of Sino-Christian theology. For example, in comparison with indigenous theology, contextual theology etc., Sino-Christian theology’s “inclusivity is greater and it is more neutral in its values”, and it is better able to embody “the richness of the cultural content borne by the Chinese language over millennia”, and so on. Methodologically, Sino-Christian theology should maintain the “instrumental principle” that language “is always simply a vector and a material, and cannot be used to alter religion”; the “openness principle” whereby it “must not only create but even more must absorb, must not only produce original writing but also translate, must not only develop but also collate, must not only be retentive but also be open”; and the “contextual principle” whereby “the ‘existential experience’ and ‘cultural resources’ of which Sino-Christian theology is formed should have no temporal or spatial limits, and should not be limited to the past while rejecting the present, nor limited to mainland China while rejecting overseas elements.” The future direction of Sino-Christian theology should be “from inward to outward”, “from general to particular”, “bottom up” and so on.12

The Sino-Christian theology championed by Liu Xiaofeng, He Guanghu, Daniel Yeung and others is still fundamentally a form of Christian theology, and not Christianity as an object of study. However, the humanistic and academic status emphasised in Sino-Christian theology has much in common with the

10 Daniel Yeung ed., Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology, p.27.
academic study of Christianity in Mainland China, and this has done much to call attention to Sino-Christian theology. In the rise or revival of the study of Christianity taking place in Mainland China at the present time, apart from a few scholars who have received specialist education and training in religious studies, most researchers have come to the study of Christianity from philosophy, history, literature or other humanities subjects. Many mainland scholars may be indifferent to the rallying-cry of “Sino-Christian theology”, and may not approve of applying the label of Sino-Christian theology to their research, but they can acknowledge and even accept the advocacy of Sino-Christian theology. They have no intention to establish or develop a theology for Christianity, but are endeavouring to carry out objective research into Christian belief, doctrine, theology, and history, and into the influence of Christianity on various areas of society, to explore the possibility or paths of dialogue, exchange or even integration between Christian thought and Chinese culture, and so on. This is precisely what the proponents of Sino-Christian theology also advocate. Thus the work of the two parties may to a great extent overlap, providing a foundation for further cooperation. The academic study of Christianity in the Mainland at present is scattered and inadequately resourced; its links with the outside world are limited, and research materials are in short supply. The introduction of Sino-Christian theology has had an obviously beneficial effect on this situation, and the cooperation between the two parties has been mutually stimulating; this has led some people to include within the scope of Sino-Christian theology the study of Christianity in mainland academia. Therefore, the account of Sino-Christian theology which follows will also inevitably incorporate, with reservations, some research into Christianity currently being carried out in the mainland.

After its introduction, with the active encouragement of its proponents plus the positive response of Mainland academia, Sino-Christian theology can be said to have borne remarkable fruit.

The Hong Kong Institute of Sino-Christian Studies does not have its own corps of researchers, but has hosted several dozen invited scholars; from a small-scale start, the number of researchers invited to Hong Kong as short-term visiting scholars or guest lecturers currently stands at 10 a year, so that there is an ever-increasing contingent of academics cooperating in Sino-Christian theology. Moreover, the Institute also subsidises Mainland master’s and doctoral students doing research on Christianity to come to Hong Kong on short-term courses, providing them with bursaries; there are now as many as 18 higher

13 In fact, the original intentions of Sino-Christian theology included making use of the ideas of academics in China; see Daniel Yeung’s memoirs quoted above.

14 Indeed, if we understand “theology” as the study of a god or gods, the objective study of the Christian faith can also be called a kind of theology. In so far as it is research carried out into Christianity from outside the organised Church and in an academic manner, it is basically compatible with Sino-Christian theology.
education institutions in the mainland which are in receipt of such subsidies, and about 75 bursaries are awarded every year. Many of these research students will be future co-workers on Sino-Christian theology.

The Institute of Sino-Christian Studies has been active in organising and participating in international conferences exploring the development of Sino-Christian theology, such as the 3 round tables on Sino-Christian theology held in 1985, 1987 and 2005, and it actively promotes cooperation between Mainland academia and Christian academic institutions in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan and in other countries, to widen the influence of Sino-Christian theology. The Institute has also established the “Tao Fong Academic Awards” for the study of Christianity in the mainland (consisting of the “Xu Guangqi Prize” for an original scholarly publication and the “Karl Ludvig Reichelt Prize” for a scholarly translation) and a prize for an outstanding thesis by a research student in Christian studies, in order to encourage academic research into Christianity at different levels and of different types.

The outstanding product of the Institute is its massive Chinese Academic Library of Christian Thought (CALCT), comprising the “Ancient Series”, “Modern Series” and “Research Series”, with translations of and introductions to classical works of foreign Christian scholarship through the ages, of which more than one hundred have already appeared. The great majority have also been published in simplified-character editions in the Mainland to great acclaim, and most of the translators are Mainland scholars. In addition the Institute has published collections such as the Tao Fong Translation Series. The Institute’s periodicals such as *Logos & Pneuma* and the *Bulletin of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies* provide a forum for Chinese scholars of Christianity in the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, North America and elsewhere. They are the leading periodicals in Sino-Christian studies, and under the banner of Sino-Christian theology they cover subjects ranging from the Bible and the ideas of theologians through the ages to all sorts of hot topics in the modern world; in fact they are quite comprehensive in their coverage.

All these activities have greatly advanced Christian studies in the Mainland, and have attracted wide attention and had positive effects both in China and overseas. The term “Sino-Christian theology” has even been accepted by some churches. Naturally, as well as positive acclaim and participation, some doubts have been expressed. In 1995 and 1996, a debate took place in the pages of Hong Kong’s *Christian Times* (Shidai Luntan) under the heading of “cultural Christians”, relating to research on Sino-Christian theology, in which eight scholars from Hong Kong, the mainland and Taiwan took part; subsequently the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies invited more than twenty scholars to write about this debate for collective publication in 1997 as *Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument* (Wenhua Jidutu: Xianxiang yu Lunzheng). In 2000, the Institute again invited twenty scholars to contribute articles discussing the
advocacy of Sino-Christian theology and the resulting debate, which were published in *Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology*.

However that may be, in a certain sense, the aims which Sino-Christian theology set for itself at the outset, namely “to 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” and “to develop the subject of theology within the academic field of Chinese-language thought… so that Christian theology can become an integral part of Chinese-language culture and thought, and a component within humanistic scholarship” are gradually becoming reality.

**Reflections on Sino-Christian Theology**

In 1993 the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre was simply one of many private academic institutions in Hong Kong, with no special status, and its Research Department, later (in 1995) to become the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, rarely had any particular academic influence in Hong Kong, with its many theological colleges. Although Liu Xiaofeng had made something of a mark academically before he raised the topic of “Sino-Christian theology”, his authority in the theological field was limited. But that the rallying-cry of Sino-Christian theology, once issued, could elicit such an immense response, have a number of noteworthy aspects.

In the first place, “Sino-Christian theology” responded to a social need. From the 1980s onwards, China entered on an era of reform and opening up. Specifically as regards Christianity, the policy of freedom of religious belief was gradually reinstated and improved, normal church activities were revived, there was a sharp increase in the number of believers, the average educational level of believers rose, and a strong desire to understand Christian theology emerged. From another angle, China’s opening up was, in a certain sense, in actual fact an opening to the West, and in these circumstances, cultural exchange between China and the West reached an unprecedented height; it was inevitable that Christianity, as the basis for Western culture, should be seen as something which people not only wanted but needed to understand. In other words, the interest of Chinese society at large in getting to know and understand Christianity increased day by day. This interest went far beyond anything that could be satisfied by the preaching of ministers in church. Moreover, in the particular social and historical situation of the Chinese Church, there was a severe shortage of clergy and particularly of religious theorists; with the rapid increase in the number of believers, the clergy were fully occupied in pastoral work and were quite unable to satisfy the demand of society at large for knowledge of Christianity. To some extent this demand stimulated the revival of research into Christianity in Chinese academia from the 1980s onwards in response. The development of
Sino-Christian theology at this point and its focus on the Chinese mainland can be described as extremely opportune and appropriate.

Secondly, the fact that Sino-Christian theology was not predicated on belief, but aimed to undertake humanistic, academic research into Christianity, lessened to some extent the opposition between Church and non-Church, believer and non-believer, and also between different denominations within Christianity; it provided a platform for scholars of different beliefs and viewpoints to explore issues together. Fundamentally, belief is arbitrary and exclusive. Innumerable religious conflicts and even wars in the past have arisen from articles of faith which were unacceptable to one side or the other, as well as from underlying political and economic interests. Even within the same faith, different interpretations could still give rise to sharp controversies, even to ferocious strife. Religious tolerance is a modern phenomenon in the West, and inter-faith dialogue is an even newer event. The rise of Sino-Christian theology is an embodiment of this zeitgeist. It not only encourages dialogue among the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and other branches of Christianity, but also promotes dialogue between Christianity and other faiths, and even dialogue between people of faith and those of none. This broad inclusively is a fundamental reason for the rapid increase in the numbers of those cooperating with it.

Thirdly, Sino-Christian theology advocates making full use of the historical-cultural resources of the Chinese language, to understand Christian theology from a basis of the existential experience of Chinese-speakers; this is obviously helpful in reducing the gulf between the Christian and Chinese cultures. The Chinese and Christian cultures are two different cultures which have developed separately with their own characteristics in two distinct geographical areas, whose ways of thought and values are in some ways incompatible. Since the introduction of Christianity into China, there have been frequent clashes between the two. The Jesuit missionaries in the late Ming – early Qing attempted to interpret the Christian faith through certain concepts from traditional Chinese culture, and did a lot to advance their integration, but the subsequent “Rites Controversy” brought all their efforts to nought. After the beginning of the modern period, Christian culture became the culture of power; although its spread in China was obviously successful in a purely cultural sense, further alienation was engendered by its forcible propagation. The “indigenisation” movement commenced by the Protestant church in China from the end of the 19th century was an attempt to reduce this alienation. Liu Xiaofeng has said that “the ‘indigenised’ theology of which he is a critic is of course also a type of Sino-Christian theology”, but from another angle, Sino-Christian theology can also be seen as a form of “indigenised” theology, although what it “indigenises” is not just the church’s surface organisation, liturgy and language, but its inward thought and existential experience.

Fourthly, Sino-Christian theology advocates the introduction of Christian theology into mainstream Chinese culture, so that Christian theology can become an integral part of Chinese-language culture and thought, and a component within humanistic scholarship; this is in line with the current open spirit of Chinese society. Over all, Chinese culture is an open system, and Chinese culture today is in practice the outcome of multi-ethnic cultural integration. The absorption of an external culture is bound to introduce new life into Chinese culture; the introduction of Buddhism is often cited as a successful example of this. From the beginning of last century, China has been on an ideological roller-coaster; an important feature of this was the concept of the “orientalisation of Western learning”. But the interesting thing is that while China gradually accepted Western ideas such as science, democracy and so on in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, it still excluded their root, namely Christianity. China today is once again in a period of ideological adjustment. Whether Christian thought, values and indeed theology can assist the spiritual development of Chinese society today is indeed an issue worth exploring and also a direction worth pursuing.

The development and achievements of Sino-Christian theology should be affirmed. However, Sino-Christian theology in itself exhibits some problems which deserve further consideration. These problems derive not only from the original intention of the founders of Sino-Christian theology, because the development of Sino-Christian theology is still being affected by these original intentions, but also from Sino-Christian theology’s subsequent course of development, because this course cannot after all be constrained by the original intentions of the founders.

First is the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and the “tradition” of Christian theology.

The origin and development of Sino-Christian theology are largely inseparable from Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu’s theoretical views on its legitimacy, direction, methodology etc. However, in the views of these two thinkers, we may detect a common problem, which is that they have “deliberately” evaded the “tradition”.16

In arguing for the legitimacy of Sino-Christian theology, Liu Xiaofeng has put forward the concept of “Christian theology in its ideal form” which is “the Word of God itself, and only God himself is in possession of theology in its ideal form”, while the Christ event is “the historical revelation of God in

16 This “evasion of tradition” refers purely to Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu’s views on Sino-Christian theology. In practice, they have both organised a large-scale compendium of Christian theological works in translation, as well as both carrying out a great deal of detailed research on the Christian theological tradition.
person”, and all theologies in their historical forms are “the concrete historical expression within the parameters of ethnic cultural-linguistic experience” of the Christ event. To put it another way, they are the expression of the Word of God through human language. Therefore, there is no need for Sino-Christian theology to use one form of human language to replace another form, nor to “sinicise” or “indigenise” the expression of another form of human language; the Word of God should rather be directly received and expressed in the form of human language known as Chinese. Thus, the rich historical tradition of Christian theology has been lightly set aside by Liu Xiaofeng. Proponents of Sino-Christian theology must “directly face the Christ event” in the light of their own existential experience.

He Guanghu’s argument is based on language being the vector of theology. If language is the vector of theology, the revealed Word of God must be expressed through human language, in order to be received by man. Any language may equally express Christian theology. Since “virtually all theological writing is in the theologian’s own mother-tongue”, then Sino-Christian theology “is no more or less than a member of the great family of “mother-tongue theologies”, just like English-, German-, French- or Spanish-language theology”. In fact, this line of argument has no fundamental distinction from that of Liu Xiaofeng; their underlying theoretical basis is that of the Platonic “idea”. The Word of God is the single, ideal, unchanging, pure “idea” of theology, and the historical, actual theologies are varying manifestations of this idea. Relative to the idea, all manifestations are deficient, and the manifestations differ among themselves only quantitatively. In the same way, the “tradition” of Christian theology has no particular status either.

However, “directly facing the Christ event” is merely a fine ideal, which can never be realised.

“Christian theology in its ideal form”, as the Word of God itself, can only be possessed by God, and therefore can never be grasped by man. In order to be understood by man, the Word of God must “become flesh”. In a certain sense, in Liu Xiaofeng’s logic, we can understand “the Christ event” as the “incarnation” of Christian theology in its ideal form. However, this “incarnation” of the Word is not abstract flesh but entirely specific flesh, that of the Aramaic-speaking Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ event took place in a specific language environment, and without this language environment we would have no knowledge of the Christ event. When we “face” the Christ event today, we must do this through the New Testament, which took shape in a specific language environment. The process whereby the New Testament became canonised as part of Holy Scripture lasted for several centuries; in this process, the Christian “tradition” was decisive in determining which writings became canonical. The Bible did indeed form the scriptural basis of the Christian tradition, and in a certain sense the Bible itself was also a product of this “tradition”. In later times, while Chinese-speakers
remained unaware or barely aware of the Christ event, Christianity had already
developed a rich tradition, and amassed a vast quantity of literature; this is a fact
which today’s Sino-Christian theology cannot and should not avoid in “facing”
the Christ event. The present writer pointed out in a previous paper:

Language is the cradle of existential experience; the Christ event is no exception but
must also exist within language. In other words, in actuality there has never been a “general”
Christian theology; from the start, some form of human language has always been the vector
of theology. To take this further, Sino-Christian theology is not the result of Chinese-speaking
Christians “facing the Christ event”, but the result of Latin-, English-, German-, French- or
Spanish-speaking theologians preaching the gospel in China. Alternatively one may say that
the Chinese initially received the revelation from God not directly but indirectly through
Westerners. Certainly “there are no early- or late-comers to the Word”, but the “Word” which
we hear is initially not the Word of God but of man.17

In expanding his article “Sino-Christian theology in the modern language
environment” into the book The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of
History, Liu Xiaofeng added the following passage:

Of course, the Word of God is not outside the realm of language; it is the living, vibrant
Word, the Word of the Holy Spirit itself, the Word which has uncovered the sinful nature of
all historical words (writings and traditions).

“Language” here seems not to mean human language, because it has the ability
to “uncover the sinful nature of all historical words”. But Liu Xiaofeng does in
fact give some affirmation to the Western Christian theological tradition:

There are no early- or late-comers to the Word, but there are early- or late-comers in
preaching the Word; the history of Western and Eastern Christian theology is the prehistory of
Sino-Christian theology. Sino-Christian theology must enter into this history, and inherit its
multiple strands. The starting-point of Sino-Christian theology’s history of ideas lies of course
in the New Testament and the Greek and Latin fathers of the church, and not in the Six
Classics and the pre-Qin philosophers. To reject the cultural-linguistic experience of Western
Christian theology as belonging only to the West may be a “rational trick” played by the
national soul of Chinese thought with the help of indigenisation.18

Obviously, Liu Xiaofeng is here making some concessions to the Christian
theological tradition, but he is still as hostile as ever to indigenisation.

Next comes the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and
traditional Chinese culture.

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17 “Some thoughts on Sino-Christian theology”, in Daniel Yeung ed., Preliminary Studies
on Chinese Theology, pp.192-193.
In Liu Xiaofeng’s thinking, the position of traditional Chinese culture is even more hopeless. Logically speaking, since he emphasises that Sino-Christian theology is expressed in the Chinese language, and states that “Chinese language” refers not merely to a system of linguistic symbols but also includes the “existential experience and cultural resources” which it expresses, it should therefore be implicit in Sino-Christian theology that it values traditional Chinese culture. However, while on the one hand Liu Xiaofeng praises the fact that Chinese-language thought has amassed an extremely rich cultural-linguistic experience, providing unlimited prospects for Sino-Christian theology, on the other hand he also stresses that ideological resources are not concentrated in the ethnic system of thought. In his view

Christian theology is faith-based rational reflection on and expression of the Word of God; this reflection and expression, as an act of belief, takes place within a particular ethno-historical and cultural-linguistic experience; considered in its historical form, it takes no more than two basic forms: either to base Christian theology on the ideological system and its expressive concept(s) which the ethnic language/culture already has, or else to seek the linguistic expression of the existential experience of the recognition of Christ outwith the existing ethnic system of thought.19

The first form, Liu Xiaofeng describes as follows: “From the first group of scholar-official theologians to the present, many Chinese-language theologians in succession have expressed their belief in Christ through a combination of the ideological system of Confucianism, Taoism or Chinese Buddhism with Western-language Christian theology”; he calls this the “ethnic principle” form. The second form “breaks through the ethnic system of thought and religious tradition, and directly expresses awareness of the Christ event in the language of existence”; he calls this “the embodied interpretative form”. It is the latter which Liu Xiaofeng advocates.

The good news of the Christ event is proclaimed to the primordial existential experience of the individual; salvation through the Word of God in Christ comes to individual lives in an ethno-historical context, and not to an ethnic “principle”; an understanding of the Christ event must be rooted in the direct, primordial existential experience of the individual, and not in an ethnic world view or view of life. Christian theology should be the outcome of the encounter of the Word of God with the existential experience of man and not with an ethnic system of thought.20

Here he clearly exhibits a rejection of the traditional Chinese culture represented by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. At the same time, because of his rejection of the “ethnic”, “man” here is not “Man” with a capital letter, but man as individual, and it is the existential experience of the individual which

encounters the Word of God.

It is indeed true that, as Liu Xiaofeng says, the ideological resources of the Chinese language “are not just concentrated in the ethnic system of thought”, but “tradition” is not necessarily maintained simply through a “system of thought”; it can equally well show its great strength through the everyday psychology and way of thinking of a people. In a certain sense, “tradition” is precisely an organisation and summarising of “existential experience” in different periods, which is also imperceptibly present in contemporary “existential experience”. It is certainly unacceptable wilfully to force a comparison between the Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist systems of thought and Christian theology in this way, but proponents of Sino-Christian theology, born and bred in this tradition, neither can nor should cast aside their “ethnicity”, nor cast aside the influence which tradition exerts on them by various means, and “directly” face the Christ event purely in the light of their own individual existential experience. Individual existential experience will inevitably bear an ethnic stamp. In a certain sense, the legitimacy and vitality of Sino-Christian theology lies precisely in this “ethnic tradition”. In this sense, the proponents of Sino-Christian theology can only turn their backs on their own cultural tradition, and face the Christ event through the medium of the Christian tradition and in the light of their own individual existential experience. This may form something of a constraint on Sino-Christian theology, but it is also a valuable strength of Sino-Christian theology.

Third is the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and the universality of Christianity.

Christianity is a religion which emphasises its universality and which is also a universal religion. The Christian God is not a national god but the god of the whole world; He is not a god who blesses a particular people to make them superior to all other nations, but one who wishes to save the entire human race. Although Christianity had a particular geographical origin, right from the start it “went out over all the world”, “preaching the gospel to all nations”. In this sense, Christian theology ought to make use of the cultural resources of all peoples, and should serve every member of every race.

But this is just an ideal Christian theology. One may say that such a theology has never existed. What has existed and continues to exist is a specific form of theology which makes use of the cultural resources of a particular ethnic group and serves a particular ethnic group, or, as He Guanghu describes “mother-tongue theology”:

What is known as mother-tongue theology is a theology expressed through the theologian’s own mother-tongue, which has as its material the existential experience and cultural resources expressed in this language, and principally serves the users of this language.
Though one might say that the historical “Greek-language theology” and “Latin-language theology” were relatively “universal”, today’s “mother-tongue theologies” already form quite a large family.

However, the particularity of “mother-tongue theology” has never obscured the universality of Christian theology. On the contrary, Christian theology, in the course of its spread, has generally been able to integrate successfully with local cultures, thus giving birth to “new forms” of Christian theology, while at the same time ensuring its own universality. It is in this that the great vitality of Christianity lies.

As a relatively new member in the great family of “mother-tongue theologies”, the particularity of Sino-Christian theology is that it is a theology which primarily serves Chinese-speakers, with the Chinese language as its “vector” and with “the existential experience and cultural resources expressed in the Chinese language as its materials”. However, it should be noted that this particularity of Sino-Christian theology equally cannot obscure the universality of Christian theology. The fact that it has the Chinese language as its vector is the fundamental characteristic that makes Sino-Christian theology Sino-Christian theology, but although Chinese is one of the most widely-spoken languages in the world, the number of non-native speakers who can use Chinese is extremely limited. If its only vector is the Chinese language, that is bound to affect the influence and currency of Sino-Christian theology. Therefore, Sino-Christian theology ought to try to use other languages apart from Chinese as vectors. Use of the existential experience and cultural resources expressed in Chinese as its materials is the basis on which Sino-Christian theology is founded, but to give due attention to the existential experience and cultural resources expressed in other languages is equally vital to the development of Sino-Christian theology. Particularly in the circumstances of globalisation, when the world has become a “global village”, human existence is becoming more and more unified, and the cultural-linguistic particularity of existential experience is becoming weaker and weaker, this point is even more important. Primarily serving Chinese-speakers is the objective of Sino-Christian theology, but it should also look further a field: as a Christian theology, Sino-Christian theology should also serve the whole human race. Sino-Christian theology ought also to pay attention to the ever more urgent issues affecting the whole human race, such as environmental pollution, the crisis of natural resources, peace, cloning, etc. Sino-Christian theology should not just be talking to itself within a closed circle of Chinese-speakers, but should speak out in all form on all matters with which Christian theology should be concerned.

Fourth is the relationship between Sino-Christian theology and the organised Church.

Sino-Christian theology emphasises academic research, and advocates inter-denominational, inter-faith, and inter-doctrinal dialogue; it believes in the
encounter between the existential experience of the individual and the Word of God, so it will inevitably keep a fairly large distance from the organised Church. However, as a result of the particular situation of the Chinese Church at present, and against the social background of the substantial growth in the number of Christians in China, many believers have become aware of Christianity not through the Church but through Sino-Christian theology, and the influence of Sino-Christian theology is all the greater among Christians of a higher educational level. This is the reason both for the wide acceptance of Sino-Christian theology, and for the anxiety of some people from the organised Church. How to ensure that its own development can be acknowledged or accepted by the organised Church and how to have an influence on the organised Church are issues worth paying attention to for the development of Sino-Christian theology.

In 1995-1996, when Sino-Christian theology was still in its infancy, a debate around the study of Sino-Christian theology took place in the pages of the Hong Kong Christian Times. The starting-point of the debate was the fact that some Christian scholars expressed mixed feelings about the enthusiasm for an understanding of religion which was growing day by day in Chinese society and the study of Christianity which was just gathering strength. They had observed that “an interest in and desire to know more about Christianity” had appeared in contemporary Chinese society, and the response to this appeal came “not from the Church or the theological colleges in the mainland but from a group of academics teaching in universities or working in research institutes”, and these scholars were graduates of distinguished universities and had been trained or were grouped in Beijing and other centres of culture and scholarship; some had even been awarded Ph.D.s from universities in continental Europe. They are highly educated, able speakers, cultured, capable writers, and have a deep knowledge of theology, but this knowledge does not derive from the Church or from the seminary. For all sorts of different reasons, they admire Christianity, and are keen to increase understanding of Christianity among Chinese people, so they have translated many canonical works of Western theology and have written books explaining Christianity. But, because they have never had much contact with the Church, I am afraid that their understanding of the Christian faith, though correct, is not complete. They pore over works of theology, but seldom read the Bible; they engage with other academics, but have no church life; they discuss Christian theology, but distance themselves from the Christian flock; they are devoted to theology but not necessarily to God; God is an object of study for them rather than an object of prayer and worship.
Objectively speaking, the situation described here corresponds to reality, it continues largely unchanged to the present day, and those involved in Sino-Christian theology have no intention to change it. Sino-Christian theology is a field of study and not a belief; this is the original point of Sino-Christian theology. But after all, what is studied in Sino-Christian theology is Christian theology, and the many Christian believers are the main readership for Sino-Christian theology. Sino-Christian theology ought to pay more heed to the voices coming from the Chinese Church and from Chinese Christians, and should give more consideration to those issues which exercise the Chinese Church and Chinese Christians, so that their own ideas can be more readily acknowledged and accepted by the Chinese Church and Chinese Christians; this should be beneficial to the growth of Sino-Christian theology.

Sino-Christian theology is a unique phenomenon in the history of Christian theology. The scholars who work on Sino-Christian theology are mostly unconnected with the organised Church, and some of them are not even Christians. Sino-Christian theology’s pulpit is not in the churches, seminaries or theological colleges, but in universities and research institutes. The audience for Sino-Christian theology is not confined to Christians, but includes anyone who is interested in Christianity. However one may regard this phenomenon, its growth and success have become incontrovertible facts.
The “Cultural Christians” Phenomenon in China: A Hong Kong Discussion

Peter K. H. LEE

From the fall of 1995 to the spring of 1996 a series of articles appeared in the Hong Kong weekly newspaper Christian Times, exchanging views on the phenomenon of “cultural Christians” in the People’s Republic of China. The participants included four Hong Kong theological educators, three Chinese scholars speaking on behalf of the “cultural Christians” in China, and one theological worker from Taiwan.

This article attempts to recapture the salient points at issue; it will show how the so-called “cultural Christians” phenomenon is seen through the eyes of some representatives of the Hong Kong theological world and how the spokesman for the cultural Christians explain or defend themselves. The writer of this article took part in the exchange, so that he writes with a sense of involvement, but he will try his best to be as fair as possible.

How the Controversy Got Started

The controversy was started by Dr. Lo Ping Cheung (Luo Bingxiang), then Chairman of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at the Hong Kong Baptist University. He wrote an article (in two parts) entitled “The Chinese Apollos and the 1997 Crisis of the Hong Kong Theological World”.

The article began by referring to the “Macedonian call” and the religious fervor in China. The “religious fervor” is seen in the masses as well as in the intellectuals’ study of religion in general and Christianity in particular. The author was impressed by this outburst of energy, especially in academic circles. He then said that this is a “Macedonian call” to the Hong Kong theological world to respond.

Dr. Lo used the expression “The Chinese Apollos” to represent those Chinese intellectuals who have developed keen interest in Christian thought, borrowing the reference in Acts 18:24-28 to Apollos, a learned Jew from Alexandria, who became an eloquent preacher on behalf of Jesus as the Messiah, but apparently with imperfect understanding. Liu Xiaofeng is a prototype “Chinese Apollos”. He studied foreign languages in Sichuan University and philosophy, he was drawn to Christianity through Dostoyevsky and Christian existentialist writers. He later went to Basel University, Switzerland, to study theology and was awarded a Doctor of Theology degree. Though he received baptism somewhere along the way, he has had little connection with the
institutional church anywhere. A prolific writer, Liu then did his research and editing work under the sponsorship of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong.

Lo Ping Cheung in his article introduced other Chinese Apollos like He Guanghu, Zhuo Xinping, and Tang Yi, all of the Institute on World Religions of the China Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and Zhuo translated books on Christian philosophy, but none is a baptized Christian.

What is “the Macedonian call” issued by these Chinese Apollos or cultural Christians? According to Lo Ping Cheung, it is a call to the Christian theologians at a place like Hong Kong to rise up to respond to the challenge of religious-intellectual ferment in China.

But alas! the Hong Kong theological circles will find themselves in a crisis, come 1997, the year Hong Kong will revert back to China. There are four reasons for the crisis:

Firstly, the Hong Kong theological worker will lose their right to speak as theologians, because they will be no match for the Chinese Apollos due to the latter’s academic output and erudition. Those Chinese who are caught up in the religious fervor will turn to the Chinese Apollos rather than the Hong Kong theological writers, if they write at all.

Secondly, the position of the Hong Kong theological spokesman is precarious. While Hong Kong is not without Christian believers who are in intellectual quest, they are unlikely to find nourishment from the Hong Kong theological institutions and Christian publishing houses; and instead they will have access to the publications put out by the Chinese cultural Christians, whose understanding of Christianity has certain impediments, however.

Thirdly, forced to the sideline, the Hong Kong theological workers will forfeit the golden opportunity of introducing Christian thought to the Chinese intelligentsia who are open to the spiritual quest, and that opportunity will be taken over by the Chinese Cultural Christians. Thus the Hong Kong theologians will lose their leadership role in the Chinese theological world.

Fourthly, the Hong Kong theological community is really ill-equipped to heed the Macedonian call from the intelligentsia in China: the theological output from Hong Kong is feeble; the theological workers mostly lack a broad cultural outlook and are unprepared for dialogue with culture, most of the theologians in Hong Kong are not fluent enough in Mandarin to speak to the Chinese intellectuals.

What can be done to meet the crisis? Dr. Lo appealed to his Hong Kong colleagues in theological work to expand their intellectual horizon beyond the institutional church, to broaden their cultural outlook, and to increase the depth of their writings.
The Hong Kong Theologians’ Response

The first Hong Kong theological worker to respond to the challenge posed by Lo Ping Cheung was Leung Ka-lun (Laing Jialin), then lecturer and now president at the Alliance Bible Seminary. He wrote also a two-part article entitled “Is it a Debt We Owe?”

Dr. Leung welcomed the phenomenon of religious interest among the ranks of the Chinese intelligentsia and commended the rise of the cultural Christians. Yet he was more guarded in his estimate of the intensity of the so-called religious fervor and the numerical strength of the scholars and writers on religion. Further, he pointed out that these intellectuals are rarely steeped in the historical development of Christian thought and are likely to be attracted to certain isolated theologians or bits and pieces of theological learning.

Dr. Leung did not think that the appearance of cultural Christians is an uncommon phenomenon in history. The rise of the Chinese Apollos should not pose a threat to the more thoughtful Christians in China or Hong Kong. But he reiterated that some of the Chinese intellectuals who are interested in the study of Christian thought approach the subject totally out of context, so that they cannot really make an impact on Chinese culture. Leung Ka-lun took note of Lo Ping Cheung’s appeal to the Hong Kong theological workers to broaden their cultural base and to open themselves up. But he felt that the Hong Kong theological educators really have enough in their hands in preparing people for service in their church. To ask them to assume the added responsibility of evangelizing the one billion Chinese on the Mainland is unrealistic. Besides, why should that be a debt owned by the Hong Kong theological educators?

Next, Joseph T. W. Kaung (Jiang Dahui) of the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, made a brief response. He was highly appreciative of the contributions of Liu Xiaofeng and the other Chinese cultural Christians through their research and translation work. But he could not see how they would pose a threat to the Hong Kong churches and seminaries. Most of the church leaders couldn’t care less what these intellectuals are saying, and the Hong Kong theological spokesmen, assuming they have something to say, cannot presume to address theological issues for the whole of China.

Then I, the writer of this paper, submitted a piece (in two parts), entitled “The Self-reflection of the Hong Kong Theological Workers and the Appearance of the Chinese Apollos”. The first part of my article began by rejoicing in the emergence of the Chinese Apollos. The “cultural Christians” have done considerably much by translating writings from abroad into Chinese and by writing down some thoughtful reflections, though I thought the Western “China watchers” tend to over-project their excessive enthusiasm. I was not as worried as Dr. Lo Ping Cheung about what he saw as the crisis facing the Hong Kong theological world. I shared Leung Ka-lun’s concern not to add an extra burden to
the Hong Kong co-workers beyond what they could carry. Yet I felt that they should look beyond the cloistered walls of the seminary; and in recent years more and more well-trained theologians are returning to Hong Kong so that Hong Kong now has no small gathering of Christian intellectuals. I concurred with Joseph Kaung’s point that the Hong Kong theologians cannot really speak for all of China.

The second part of my paper turned to encouraging my Hong Kong theological colleagues to re-orient their thinking and task, thanks to Dr. Lo Ping Cheung’s warning of an imminent crisis looming in the horizon. I would rather turn such a crisis into an opportunity for creative response at a critical moment. I would not down-play the theological seminaries’ responsibility to equip people for the ministry and to prepare them for evangelistic outreach. Evangelism, however, need not be confined to preaching the Gospel to individuals to save their souls or mass-evangelism American-style. It is essentially proclaiming the Good News to those who have not heard it before – and the potential audience includes the intelligentsia, a group who are Dr. Lo’s primary concern. I, too, share this concern, except that I am more modest in my expectation from the Hong Kong theological co-works than he. Apart from their heavy burden with responsibilities for the Hong Kong churches, I happen to take the contextualization task seriously, so that I believe that the Hong Kong theologians should begin their theologizing task in the Hong Kong context. Granted, increasingly it is a Hong Kong-China context; but, nevertheless, being situated in Hong Kong, they should begin there, and then expand the horizon toward greater China. Of course, if it is authentic contextual theology, it will speak the Word of God in the given context; even then, however, the Hong Kong people should be humble and modest.

I really meant to offer a word of encouragement to my Hong Kong comrades-in-arms. I know their impediment – e.g. sectarianism, parochialism and institutionalism – but I would like to see them break out of their confines, and I believed that they could, collaborating and upholding one another more than before. Supporting Dr. Lo Ping Cheung’s interest in dialogue with culture and in interdisciplinary endeavors. I said that his university, the Hong Kong Baptist University, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, have within their respective structures ample opportunities for faith-culture dialogue and cross-disciplinary studies. Moreover, the religion/theology departments of those universities can act as links between secular learning and the church/seminary. I concluded by saying that, if the Hong Kong theologians have the authentic Word of God to say, they have every right to be theological spokesmen, even if there are few star soloists, but they can sing as a chorus. Then, perhaps, a few of the cultural Christians or intellectuals for Mainland China will listen in too.
The Chinese Scholars Speaking for Themselves

Dr. Li Qiuling, Professor of Philosophy at the Renmin University of China, Beijing, who happened to be visiting Hong Kong at the time, read the discussions by the Hong Kong theological workers. Before returning to Beijing, he offered his comments, printed in a four-part article entitled “So-called ‘religious Culture-Fervor’ and ‘Christian Culture-Fervor’”.

In the first part, Dr. Li admitted that in recent years there is indeed considerable interest shown by Chinese intellectuals in the study of religious phenomena in general and in the understanding of Christian thought in particular. He said that that is a healthy phenomenon, following the collapse of the Marxist dogma which condemns religion as opium of the people. There are those of the intelligentsia who begin to realize that religion need not be opium but can be nourishment for the human soul. Li would not go so far as to say that China now witnesses a religious revival; with a good many of the intellectuals the quest is for knowledge rather than for religious faith.

In the second part of his article, Dr. Li gave a delineation of three types of scholars who might be called “cultural Christians”. The first type includes those who pursue objective research on religions, including Christianity, with no religious commitments. They form the largest group, and their researches cover a wide range of topics in historical, cultural and social phenomena. The second type consists of those who, while approaching the study of religious with objectivity, show varying degrees of sympathy with Christianity, without necessarily calling themselves Christians. They form a smaller group (Dr. Li includes himself in it) than the first. The third type of scholars confesses their Christian faith. A few of these scholars have come to the Christian faith as they pursue their studies, while others have already received a theological education and then have decided to follow an academic career. The third group (of which Liu Xiaofeng is an eminent representative) is even smaller than the second. Li Qiuling questioned the suitability of the expression “cultural Christians” for all three types of religious scholars; he also feared that the term “China Apollos” has connotations which are too ambiguous.

The third part of the Li paper goes into a technical discussion of the issue involved in the academic study of religion. Dr. Li thought that religion can certainly be a valid object of scholarly study and that the scholar has no accountability to the religious authority for his/her research as long as the research is conducted in accordance with the canons of scientific study. The question of the subject of belief, that is, the believer as subject, came up. Li then quickly shifted to the Hong Kong scene where he saw the tendency on the part of some Christian believers to confine themselves to a narrow framework. He allowed for the possibility of inter-subjective communication, and he made room for the believer to critique scholarly research. However, he was wary of self-styled orthodoxy which shuts off communication or dialogue.
In the last part of the paper Li commended the indigenization/contextualization/inculturation work that is being advocated or attempted in some circles. He seems to have suggested that in the process the persons involved in the theologizing or study or reflection can carry on meaningful dialogues. He concluded by a reference to Liu Xiaofeng’s work as the editor of *Logos & Pneuma* (published in Hong Kong), which is devoted to the development of “Sino-Christian theology” as an instance of the contextualization process. By the way Li’s paper echoes my concern for dialogue and interaction.

At the next turn, in chimed another Chinese scholar, Zhang Xianyong, who, having taught theology at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, is presently pursuing a Doctor of Theology degree at Basel University (without the endorsement of the leaders of the church in China) and teaching at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou.

Mr. Zhang’s paper, entitled “Response to the Chinese Apollos Problem”, looks at the problem in terms of three “circles”. A circle, in Zhang’s use of the image, has an inner and an outer ring.

The first circle is the “sacred-secular double ring”. Just as in the Acts account of Apollos, the apostles, including Paul, belonged to the inner, sacred ring, and took Apollos to be in the outer and less sacred ring, so the institutional churches in China and Hong Kong tend to look upon the Chinese Apollos as belonging to the periphery and as being less spiritual.

The second circle reveals the “Hong Kong-China divide syndrome”. Zhang’s reading of the Hong Kong theological world was that there are those who consider the Hong Kong churches to be the inner circle (Lo Ping Cheung and Leung Ka-lun) and the Chinese intellectuals (Christian or otherwise) on the outside periphery (although Lo and Leung differ in their strategic response to the “outsiders”). Zhang didn’t see the same Hong Kong-China divide in Joseph Kaung and I, who seemed to him to maintain an “ecological balance” or call for inculturation as a step toward dialogue between Hong Kong and China.

The third circle intimates the “Han-barbarian tension”. Zhang thought that some of the Hong Kong “inner circle” people still consider Liu Xiaofeng and the other Apollos to be on the fringe because the latter’s contributions lie mainly in the translation of foreign works. Zhang thought that to be a misjudgment of Liu Xiaofeng, who, he maintained, has the commitment to write, and encourage others to write, Christian theology in the Han (Chinese) language for the Chinese people. If that puts Liu on the periphery, so be it, because being in such a boundary situation facilitates dialogue between the Chinese Christians (Han) and the Christians abroad (barbarians).

**Sharp Hong Kong-China Tit-for-Tat**

Leung Ka-lun, who was the first Hong Kong theological educator to respond, in a tempered tone, to Lo Ping Cheung’s article on “Chinese Apollos”, now
because more outspoken in his retort to Zhang Xianyong. Zhang’s piece is clever but ambiguous at points, and Leung was impatient. In an outburst the latter reacted sharply to a remark made by someone from China that Liu Xiaofeng’s showing up in Hong Kong is like entering a “no-man’s land”; Leung said that he could show a long list of able theologians in Hong Kong. Leung reiterated the importance of the Christian tradition for the theological schools, which are different from research institutes carrying on research in a vacuum. He reacted against those intellectuals who look down upon the scholarly level of the theological professors and students, and accused them of “intellectual hegemony” and being out of touch with the masses. Leung was not against interdisciplinary studies but said that is easier said than done. The high-flying intellectuals may take delight in hovering from discipline to discipline but if they are Christians they should have roots in the Christian tradition.

Leung’s article provoked a four-part response under the general title “Whose Christ? Which tradition?” from someone with the pseudonym “Po Fan”, who is apparently from China. From the sub-titles it can be inferred that the article sets up straw-men to be knocked down: “Pride and Prejudice”, “Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy” and “Which Tradition?” The whole piece is long and wordy but does not really speak to real issues and falls prey to *ad hominem* arguments. That would have been a sorry ending to a spirited exchange of views but for a thoughtful message from Taiwan.

**An Analytical Resume from Taiwan**

Chin Ken Pa, a theological worker from Taiwan (a Ph.D. student in National University of Taiwan graduate school of Philosophy then; now Professor in Graduate School of Religion at Chung Yuan Christian University), sent a piece entitled “Conflicts in the Hermeneutics of the Chinese theologians’ Linguistic Turns”.

At the outset the author noted linguistic ambiguities in the expressions “Chinese Apollos”, “Cultural Christians” and “Sino-Christian theology”. All these terms are associated with Liu Xiaofeng, actually the central figure in the whole controversy, who, curiously enough, never spoke a word in person in the exchanges back and forth. Chin then, Wittgenstein-style, analyzed three conflicts in linguistic usage by the Chinese theologians (Hong Kong and China):

1. **Hong Kong languages. Beijing language.** From the start Lo Ping Cheung called attention to the Hong Kong theologians’ ineptness with the Beijing language (Mandarin), and behind that fear is the perceived superiority of the Mandarin-speaking intellectuals. Other from Hong Kong, however, have a different view of “the right to speak as theologians”, fluency to speak Mandarin or not. The Beijing scholars’ language is indeed of a different style, as may be seen in Po Fan’s analysis of the Hong Kong theological world.
2. Churchly language vs. Scholarly language. Those who are immersed in the institutional church speak a language totally different from the scholars’. The former can hardly tolerate the latter, and vice-versa.

3. English-American language vs. Continental language. Whereas the Hong Kong theological educators have mostly received their higher degrees from universities in America and U.K., some of the Chinese scholars have been absorbed in the works of continental European and Russian writers. I might note, in parenthesis, that the European and Russians writings are less familiar than the English-language writings, and that for that reason the interpreters of the former seem to have a certain mystique.

Chin Ken Pa contended that the various languages cannot remain static and must undergo changes, or “make turns”, but when the Chinese theological writers, whether in Hong Kong or China, cannot adapt themselves to the changes, they get into a jam.

Chin then devoted the second half of his presentation to the conflict between church-oriented theology and humanities-oriented theology. He used the label “radical hermeneutics” to characterize Liu Xiaofeng’s theological stance. From Chin’s characterization, Liu’s radical hermeneutics is under the influence of Karl Barth’s insistence on the absoluteness of the Word of God as the “Primal Origin” of the life of faith. Does it mean that Liu can rise above tradition and context? In his brief comments, Chin did not take up the question. Chin did suggest that Liu not so much extracts himself from culture as he takes an open attitude toward culture, i.e., the humanities. (Parenthetically, when I have the opportunity I would like to dialogue with Liu Xiaofeng more on the viability of inculturation or contextualization of Chinese theology from a Barthian perspective.) In contrast, Leung Ka-lun is seen by Chin Ken Pa to be a representative of church-oriented and tradition-bound theology. Actually Leung, too, pleads for going back to the original source of the Christian faith, but, nevertheless, if Chin’s reading is correct, Leung frequently finds himself falling back on an apologist’s position. To me, such a characterization of Leung Ka-lun is at best half-truth. From my acquaintance with him as a church historian and theological educator, he is keenly interested in examining the indisposed to interreligious dialogue and bold theological explorations. At any rate, Leung is definitely much more church-bound than Liu.

Whether or not Liu Xiaofeng and Leung Ka-lun are the prototypes of humanities-oriented theology and church-oriented theology respectively, these two theological orientations do exist in Hong Kong. I do not think that they need to be mutually exclusive; rather they should be brought into complementary interaction.
Chin Ken Pa paid me the compliment for being the most clear-headed of the Hong Kong theological spokesmen. I wish to thank him for it. Let me return my compliment that Chin’s article is seminal at two points: (a) his Wittgensteinian “linguistic analysis” helps to clear up a picture that was getting murky, and (b) his invoking of Barthian thought opens up the question of a viable theology of inculturation (the question of “the freedom of culture for the Praise of God”).

Concluding Remarks
Looking back, in my initial response to the controversy, I probable painted too rosy a picture of the Hong Kong theological scene. On the one hand, I may have underestimated the entrenchment of the church-oriented mentality in Hong Kong (and China); on the other hand, I may have overestimated the capacity of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Baptist University to blaze trails for faith-humanities dialogue (even as some of the Western “China watchers” of the intellectual scene in China may have over-stated the vibrancy of the intellectual scene in China may have overstated the vibrancy of the religious-cultural ferment there). Lo Ping Cheung’s warning on the crisis facing the Hong Kong theological community should not be lightly dismissed. Nevertheless, I repeat, I would like to see 1997 as a kairos for greater things to come. I still believe that there are enough talents in the Hong Kong theological community as well as the secular academia to act as catalysts for faith-culture dialogue and inculturation of Christianity in the Chinese soil. At the same time I am of the opinion that in the post-1997 era Hong Kong can serve as a theological interactions rather become a cul-de-sac (as Lo Ping Cheung feared). That makes me an incurable optimist, a compliment or an accusation I have received before. Ironically, Liu Xiaofeng was then located in Hong Kong, and I have heard both him and He Guanghu (another cultural Christian) saying that Hong Kong is a place conducive to theological and cultural dialogue because (a) in one place there is a concentration of talented minds, and (b) it enjoys freedom of thought. After 1997 Hong Kong will be “Hong Kong, China”, meaning Hong Kong will be a part of China, and if tiny Hong Kong is really a good place for dialogue, then let the Hong Kong theological and academic communities open their doors more widely to welcome scholars and cultural Christians from the Mainland – and Taiwan too! – to come to exchange views, so all may challenge one another and learn from one another and enrich one another’s faith and understanding.

Conceptual Differences between Hong Kong and Chinese Theologians: A Study of the “Cultural Christians” Controversy

Shun-hing CHAN

Introduction

A debate on the subject of “Cultural Christians” was sparked off in September 1995 in Christian Times, an independent Christian weekly published in Hong Kong, and lasted for ten months until May 1996. Eight scholars had spoken on the issue. Four of them are scholars from Hong Kong, three of them are from Mainland China, and one from Taiwan. The group of Hong Kong scholars included ecumenical as well evangelical theologians. Among the Mainland Chinese scholars, one was an academic involved in the study of Christianity, the other a theologian within the Chinese Church community and the third one a theologian not associated with the Church. The background to the debate was the rise of a number of Chinese scholars who were interested in the study of the Christian culture, as well as a group of Christians who were not formally associated with church establishments and who became Christian through reading Christian works rather than going to church. Among those scholars who actually professed to be Christians, Liu Xiaofeng was the most prominent one with the “Sino-Christian (Hanyu) Theology” that he advocated. The theological community in Hong Kong called these scholars who studied Christianity and Christians who were converted through reading Christian works “Cultural Christians”. This is apparently a rather generalized allusion. Lo Ping-cheung (Luo Bingxiang), a Hong Kong theologian, compared these “Cultural Christians” in China to Apollos, a biblical character described in the Acts of the Apostles, and went to call on Hong Kong theologians to “play the parts of Agirppa and Priscilla to correct any inadequacies” Apollos might have. Lo’s article invited response from a few Hong Kong theologians, before sparking off a rather heated debate between Mainland and Hong Kong scholars on the subject of “Cultural Christians”. Peter K. H. Lee has given an elaborate account of the views of each of the scholars involved in Ching Feng.1

I believe that the “Cultural Christian” debate has been one of the most significant events in recent years for the theological community of Hong Kong, which has become a special administrative region under the People’s Republic

of China after its reunification with China on July 1, 1997. While the Chinese government has made a pledge that Hong Kong will remain unchanged for fifty years, increasing cultural interaction between Chinese and Hong Kong churches are inevitable. The conceptual differences between Chinese and Hong Kong theologians will have a definite impact on the development of Christianity in China as well as Hong Kong. Against such a background, the “Cultural Christian” debate serves as a reader-text for us to analyze issues arising from such differences. Although the ideas expressed by the scholars involved in the debate were not necessarily well-defined and some arguments were simply emotional, I believe that the debate was a genuine, conceptual interaction between Chinese theologians and Hong Kong theologians. An analysis of the arguments and values presented would serve to clarify misunderstandings and shed light on the possibility of future conflict or cooperation. This effort is crucial for the future development of Christian theology in both Hong Kong and China. Hence, this essay represents the reading and interpretation of the “Cultural Christian” debate by a Hong Kong theologian.

The Theological Ideas of Hong Kong Theologians Revealed in the “Cultural Christian” Debate

In the course of the debate, the Hong Kong theologians’ understanding of the ideas, tasks and methodologies of Christian theology are revealed. A careful reading shows that there is diversity or even conflict of views among the Hong Kong theologians. Meanwhile, we do not fail to read some similarities in ideas between Chinese theologians and Hong Kong theologians.

1. Lo Ping-cheung

Lo Ping-cheung, Professors, Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, is the one who started off the debate. He expresses concerns and worries that the Cultural Christians have yet to “know more accurately about the Christian faith, because they are not closely associated with the Church. They are well-versed in theology but not the Bible; they are in close association with academics but they are hardly members of the Christian community. They have a passion for theology but not necessarily for God. They study about God but may not be praying to Him.” Although Lo does not explicitly mention his theological methodology, he does mention some

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2 Lo Ping-cheung, “The ‘Apolloses’ of the Contemporary China: Chinese ‘Cultural Christians’ and the Post-97 Crisis for the Hong Kong Theological Community (Part I)”, Christian Times 419 (September 10, 1995), p.10. (Editors’ note - The articles published in Christian Times are in Chinese, but due to the limit of space, no transliteration of the titles of the articles will be provided in this chapter.)
normative rules: the theologian should lead a pious life (reading the Bible, going to church, being part of a faith community, loving God, praying to God, etc.) apart from the normal academic life (reading academic works, associating with academics, teaching theology, etc.). Scholarship goes with piety. Lo suggests, “Hong Kong theologians should play the parts of Agrippa and Priscilla to correct any inadequacies of Apollos.”

Lo also proclaims what he sees as the task of Christian theology in Hong Kong: (1) “While serving the Church community is the primary task of theologians, the intellectual class who shows interest in the Christian faith should not be ignored. There are plenty of such intellectuals in China. Theologians in Hong Kong should look beyond the walls of the Church and try to reach the academic group.” In this respect, “theologians at the Baptist University and the Chinese University should share the work with their counterparts who teach in independent seminaries.” (2) Theologians in Hong Kong “should be engaged in more dialogues with academics of other disciplines and enrich our general knowledge in contemporary disciplines such as social science and natural science.”

Lo’s criterion on “scholarship and piety” raises the objection of Li Qiuling, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Renmin (People’s) University of China. Commenting from an academic point of view, Li maintains that “the academics in China and the theologians in Hong Kong do not have a common set of criteria. The criteria of the academic are the criteria of culture, while the criteria of the theologian are the criteria of faith... The academic community is not accountable to the Church or the theological community. The ultimate criterion in evaluating any study is whether it is scientific. The study should be based on factual evidence and be logically viable. Sometimes we may add social accountability as an additional norm, to see whether the study brings benefits to the society as a whole.” However, he also maintains that this does not mean the theological community has no right to criticize the studies of the academic community. If academics have the right to discuss the faith of the theologians, then of course theologians have the right to comment on the validity of these studies. But neither party should impose its own standards on the other.” As a response to the subject of “scholarship and piety,” Li’s views are that the common criteria for theological dialogue between Hong Kong and Chinese theologians could only be criteria relating to scholarship, not these relating to piety. Li’s views are later accepted by Lo, who clarifies his views by saying that

3 Lo Ping-cheung, “The ‘Apolloses’ of the Contemporary China (Part I)”, p.10.
4 Lo Ping-cheung, “The ‘Apolloses’ of the Contemporary China (Part I)”, p.10.
his ‘scholarship-piety’ requirement applies only to theologians who profess the faith but are not associated with the established Church,” not to those scholars in Christianity in general.\(^6\)

Lo’s first plea for the cultural mission of Christian theology is related to Bo Fan’s discussion of the “culture orientation” of the “Sino-Christian Theology.” According to Bo Fan, “the confession of faith (I believe) is based on experience and reflections of the self, and therefore has a natural link to forms of literature and philosophy... Hence the theology of ‘I believe’ is necessarily a (secular) cultural theology”.\(^7\) Lo’s “cultural mission” seems to echo with Bo Fan’s “cultural orientation”, but in fact Lo is more concerned with the evangelical mission of theology among the academics, while Bo Fan is discussing the subject matter of theology. Although both emphasize cultural mission of Christian theology among academics, their basic beliefs are quite apart.

Locally, Leung Ka-lun (Liang Jialin) is not very enthusiastic about Lo’s cultural mission. “I am perfectly aware that the present ‘ideological vacuum’ in China, emerging as a result of the waning of the official ideology, offers a golden opportunity for Christianity to strive for a greater presence in China. Having said that, however, I believe that the task of shaping the future of Chinese and Hong Kong cultures is too immense for the Hong Kong Church and its theological community.”\(^8\) Leung’s response indicates the differing views on the tasks of Christian theology in the developments in Hong Kong and China between a seminary theologian and a university theologian.

Lo’s second cultural mission is also related to the basis for the “Sino-Christian Theology” proposed by Bo Fan. “The future Chinese Language Theology will be a theology with the Chinese Language (\textit{Hanyu}), one of the secular languages in the broad sense (the ‘cultural-existential

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\(^6\) Lo Ping-cheung subsequently accepted the criticism of Li Qiuling and admitted that the allusion of “Cultural Christians” should not include all Chinese scholars of Christianity generally. Three types of scholars should be differentiated: 1) scholars with no personal affiliation to Christianity; 2) scholars who do not profess to be Christians but who nevertheless show a certain degree of approval and favour; and 3) scholars who profess to be Christians but who are not associated with the established churches. Lo further pointed out that the second type should be regarded as Apollos in an early stage who has been “not yet corrected by Agrippa and Priscilla”, whereas the third type would be Apollos at a later stage. Lo Ping-cheung, “Jingda Pipingzhe” (Reply to Critics), in Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (ed.), \textit{Wenhua Jidutu: Xianxiang yu Lunzheng} [Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument] (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997), pp.202-203.


\(^8\) Leung, Ka-lun, “Must We Apologize? (Part II)”, \textit{Christian Times} 422 (October 1, 1995), p.10.
context’) as its resources and modern philosophy, poetry and social theories as its means of expression.” Both Lo and Bo Fan stress the interaction between Christian theology and Chinese culture, philosophy, natural science and social science. However, Lo believes that theologians should have knowledge in classical Chinese. Chinese culture, social science and natural science because only in this way could they engage in dialogue with scholars of other disciplines. His concerns are purely a technical problem. Bo Fan, on the other, wants to draw upon the Chinese Language, modern philosophy, poetry and social theories as the resources or means for theological construction. Lo and Bo Fan have great differences in the basic concept of the subject matter of theology and in the choice of elements in constructing theology. This difference apparently underlies the reason for the conflict between Chinese and Hong Kong theologies, and is worth further investigation.

2. Leung Ka-lun
The second Hong Kong theologian involved is Leung Ka-lun of the Alliance Theological Seminary. Coming from an evangelical tradition, Leung criticized the “Cultural Christian” of “two breakaways in methodology”. First they do not follow the traditional approach of theological studies which begins with biblical hermeneutics and biblical theology, goes on the historical and systematic theologies and develops into applied or pragmatic theology. “They typically neglect biblical studies in analyzing the ideas of various theologians.” Second, they tend to break away from historical contexts. The “Cultural Christians” have little regard for the religious communities or theological tradition of the theologies under study… and tend to paraphrase their ideas.”

In another article, Leung further explains his understanding of the task of theology by quoting Emil Brunner as follows: “The intellectual enterprise which bears the traditional title ‘dogmatics’ takes place within the Christian Church. It is this that distinguishes it from similar intellectual undertakings, especially within the sphere of philosophy, as that is understood… We study dogmatics as members of the Church, with consciousness that we have a commission from the Church, due to a compulsion which can only arise within the Church.” Here, we see Leung revealing his own approach to theology. He believes that a theological study is an integral part of dogmatics, a duty commissioned by the Church.

Zhang Xianyong (Richard X. Y. Zhang), formerly lecturer of the Nanjing Theological Seminary and currently teaching at Sun Yat-sen University, agreed

with Leung’s criticism of the two “breakaways”, saying that “those within the circle [of the Church]” will have no problem agreeing with Leung’s criticism.\(^\text{12}\) Note that the “circle” here refers to the Church circle. The implication, I guess, is twofold. First, Leung’s criticisms are valid as a common ground only for Chinese and Hong Kong theologians within the Church circle, but not those “Cultural Christians” outside the circle. Second, Zhang Himself is speaking from the inside of the circle. Zhang’s position is crucial, especially when compared to Bo Fan’s position.

Bo Fan explicitly states that he cannot accept Leung’s theological ideas. He accuses Leung of “unconsciously ascertaining the priority of ‘orthodoxy’ or ‘mainstream’ theology and the position of Church dogmatics, the authority of which he does not prove (or deem any proof necessary), is more privileged than others in the study of theology.”\(^\text{13}\) Bo Fan points out that while there are certain limitations in the types of knowledge and methodology that Chinese scholars are acquainted with, their “non-ecclesiastical” nature is unlikely to change. He mocks at Leung’s comments by saying: “Even if the ‘mainstream’ or ‘orthodox’ theological community could afford a supervisory role, what more can it do besides ‘monitoring’ the errors of these non-orthodox scholars, ‘making orthodox views available’ and ‘refraining from pouring out excessive praise’? How do we differentiate between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘minority’? How do we define ‘orthodoxy’ against ‘non-orthodoxy’? May be we need to rethink about it.”\(^\text{14}\) Bo Fan’s comments correspond with Zhang’s, and highlight the fundamental difference between Chinese and Hong Kong scholars in their attitude towards theological studies: some Chinese scholars reject the ecclesiastical and dogmatic norms for theology to which Hong Kong theologians attach great importance, and actually propose to redefine such norms.

Meanwhile, there is also diversity among the views of the Chinese scholars. While Zhang looks at the issue from the inside of the church circle, and accepts the ecclesiastical and dogmatic tradition of theology, Bo Fan radically rejects such norms. This difference is worth our attention.

3. Joseph Kaung
When we compare the third speaker from the Hong Kong theological community with Lo and Leung, the situation is even more complex. Joseph T.

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W. Kaung (Jiang Dahui), the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, comes from an ecumenical (or liberal) tradition. He belongs to one of those to whom Lo’s pleas to “look beyond the walls of the Church and try to reach the academic group and engage in more dialogues with academics of other disciples” and to “correct the inadequacies of Apollos” is directed. However, Kaung maintains that he welcomes the rise of “Cultural Christians” in China and proposes they should not be asked to follow the norms of the Hong Kong theological community, because any such requirements would deprive them of their characteristics. Kaung believes that “it was necessary for a scholar to keep a distance from the subject of study. As theology represents reflection on faith, doing theology should be a second order activity. A theologian studies religious faith but does not engage directly in religious activities.”\textsuperscript{15} This concept in methodology is strictly different from Lo and Leung, who emphasize the role of Church and dogmatics.

Kaung’s idea on doing theology reflects heritage of Professor Philip Shen, one of the founders of the ecumenical theological tradition of Chung Chi. According to Shen, theology is the believer’s purposeful reflection by reason. Such reflection can be distinguished into different orders. The first order is reflection on humanity, life and the world (ultimate realities) based on faith or the elements given or presupposed by faith (such as the Bible and traditions). The second order is reflection on faith itself and its given or presupposed elements (including the ultimate basis of faith). Theological studies may be regarded as a second order activity.\textsuperscript{16} In other words, theological studies are not a part of dogmatics. Rather, the Church and the dogmas are the objects to which theological reflection is directed.

Kaung further points out that the theological community of Hong Kong has been dominated by British and American theologians, playing the role of a “distributor”. Kaung believes that the threat of western theologians is more serious than the threat of the “Chinese Apostles”, more likely to “stifle the development of the local theological community”. In fact, Kaung is a proponent of the “de-colonialization” of theology, and has made this comment on the idea and task of Christian theology: “All theologies are contextual theologies, constructed by theologians living in a particular time and space in an attempt to understand, respond to and provide a context for the substance of the faith on a contemporary basis. Hong Kong Christians living in this particular time and space should also renew their efforts in theological

\textsuperscript{15} Joseph Kaung, “Chinese Apolloses: A Crisis?”, \textit{Christian Times} 423 (October 8, 1995), p.10
reflection in an attempt to construct a Hong Kong theology.” The claim that “all theologies are contextual theologies” is diametrically different from Leung’s proposition that “theology is dogmatics”. Rather, it is comparable to the “cultural-existential context”, the basis for the Sino-Christian Theology as suggested by Bo Fan.

In Bo Fan’s opinion, human beings receive the grace of God in a “cultural-existential context”. The existence of a person is first rooted in a culture, not in a church. The cross exists only in the “cultural-existential context”. Therefore the theology of “I believe” is necessarily “a (secular) cultural theology but not an ecclesiastical theology.” Although both Kaung and Bo Fan lay emphasis on the idea of context, to the broader cultural and philosophical realms in which one exists but not the particular social, political, economic and cultural contexts, as underpinned by Bo Fan’s statement: “The existential and intellectual contexts of that ‘one person’ (Kierkegaard) render geographical division (between China and the West or between Hong Kong and Mainland China) irrelevant – essentially they are part of context of the self.” This is the key difference between the “Sino-Christian Theology” proposed by some scholars from Mainland China and the “Contextual Theology” proposed by ecumenical Hong Kong theologians.

4. Peter K. H. Lee
The fourth Hong Kong theologian speaking in the debate is Peter K. H. Lee (Li Jingxiong), former director of the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and professor of theology and culture at Hong Kong Lutheran Theological Seminary. As a veteran ecumenical scholar, Lee comments on the problem of “Theological spokesmanship”, that is the question of authority: “Who is the spokesman for theology?” Since what is to be spoken is the knowledge from God, so whoever is able to teach this knowledge is a spokesman for theology. There could be different classes of spokesman for theology. A genuine professor of theology is one who has made an effort rationalizing the knowledge from God and teaching theology in his or her own right or as a successor of a tradition. Others, such as priests, church leaders, Christian intellectuals and professionals and theological scholars, may also speak on theological issues as long as they are able to produce discourses which show the light of revelation in a rational manners.” Are the “Cultural Christians” qualified to speak on theological matters then? Lee goes onto point out that

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“the ‘Cultural Christians’ have yet to meet the necessary conditions for such authority to speak. There are indeed a number of outstanding ‘Cultural Christians’, but I do not see how they could speak comprehensively on behalf of orthodox theology. Besides, their major tasks are only translating and introducing foreign theology.”

Here, Lee has spoken on revelation, the Christian community and orthodoxy of theology.

Lee’s ideas are in significant conflict with Bo Fan’s idea of the “Sino-Christian Theology”. Bo Fan’s concepts of the “direct confrontation with the Christ-event”, “the confession of the individual”, and the “denial of the orthodoxy defined by the Hong Kong theological community” are in sharp contrast to Lee. This will be dealt with further in the next section on the ideas of the Chinese Cultural Christians.

Although Lee is an ecumenical theologian by tradition, his idea on the subject matter and methodology of theology is obviously different from Kaung, another ecumenical theologian. In response to Lee’s description of “a genuine professor of theology” as “one who has made an effort rationalizing the knowledge from God and teaching theology in his or her own right or as a successor of a tradition” and the right of others to speak on theology “as long as they are able to produce discourses which show the light of revelation in a rational manner”, Kaung is likely to point out that rationalizing the light of revelation from God into proper discourses is reflection by reason in the first order. The work of a professor of theology should be to study these discourses, namely to engage in a second order reflection. Lee and Kaung are in apparent disagreement even as they both come from an ecumenical tradition.

Lee also comments on the evangelical and ecumenical traditions. He points out that the evangelical churches in Hong Kong are all “imported” from the West, and he also notes that “denominationalism which refuses to be open to new ideas has little future”. On the ecumenical tradition, Lee names the Chung Chi Divinity School as the most open-minded among seminaries in Hong Kong. “There is a negative side to this openness: the lack of commitment. There is also a positive side: faithfulness accompanied by a broad vision. Both sides are seen at Chung Chi.”

Lee’s remark gives further evidence to the contrary of theological traditions in Hong Kong, and proves to the contrary of a view expressed in the debate to the effect that Hong Kong theologians are excluding Chinese scholars from the intellectual circle.

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22 Peter Lee stopped short of further elaboration on his comment on Chung Chi Theology of “lack of commitment”. Nevertheless, his comment did confirm the diversified nature of theological traditions in Hong Kong. See Peter K. H. Lee, “Reflections of Hong Kong Theologians and the Rise of Chinese Apolloses (Part II)”, Christian Times 429 (November 12, 1995), p.10.
More importantly, Lee also expresses his views on the future task of theology in Hong Kong. Lee points out that the context of Hong Kong would be linked to the context of China after reunification in 1997. By that time, what Hong Kong theologians should be working on is neither a “Hong Kong Theology” nor a “Chinese Theology,” but rather a “Hong Kong-Chinese Theology”. He proposes a direction which may be called theology of “inculturation”. Lee further explains “inculturation” as “a theologian inculturating and turning the gospel that he/she and the Christian community manifest into the spiritual strength for a new life, ultimately transforming the culture, the society and the people.”

Lee’s concept of inculturation is concurrent with Li Qiuling, who also proposes the “the infiltration of theology into culture and culture into theology”. To put it simply, it is “the Sinification of theology, whereby theology can be expressed in natural Chinese language and discuss and resolve the problems of China. It is theology entering the mainstream culture of China and vice versa.” Here, we see a Hong Kong theologian and a Christian scholar on Christianity in China have similar expectations for the future task of theology in the context of China and Hong Kong.

The Theological Ideas of Chinese Scholars Revealed in the “Cultural Christian” Debate

In the first stage of the “Cultural Christian” debate, all those involved are theologians from Hong Kong. They are mainly concerned with how the theological community of Hong Kong should respond to the rise of “Cultural Christians” in China. However, when the Chinese scholars joined the debate, the discussion develops towards another area. The views of the Chinese scholars have not only enriched the arguments of the debate, it also allows Hong Kong theologians to look at Chinese understanding of Christianity from a closer range and to learn about their feelings for the theological community of Hong Kong.

1. Li Qiuling
The first speaker from the Mainland Chinese camp is Li Qiuling, the aforesaid professor of philosophy at the Renmin University of China. Li explains his understanding of Christianity from an academic point of view. In his opinion, “the Christian faith represents the entire process in two thousand years’ history

in which Christians from different ages experience and understand Jesus in each of their own unique cultural-historical context. It is also a process in which Christianity encounters, clashes with and amalgamates with other non-Christian philosophies. This process will continue while Christianity prevails. No sect or individual could lay claim to the correct understanding of the faith. People of each nation have the right to understand the Christian faith in their own cultural context. Every individual could rightfully have his or her own understanding shaped by a particular heritage.” Li continues to express his appreciation of Christianity in more religious terms: “A Hong Kong theologian has once said that God is the God of the Chinese people as well as the God of westerners, because he loves the world and all people therein… I would rather understand the statement as underpinning the right of the Chinese people to learn about God. God will be the God of the Chinese people only when he is a God of the Chinese people’s own understanding. By virtue of the same rationale, God is the God of all people, not just the Christians. And every individual, Christian or otherwise, has the right to have his own understanding of God.”

Putting Li’s understanding of Christianity in the light of the “Cultural Christian” debate, the immediate observation is the difference between Hong Kong and Chinese scholars on certain theological ideas. While Li proclaims that “no sect or individual could lay claim to the correct understanding of the faith”, Leung Ka-lun maintains that “theology is dogmatics”, suggesting an obvious gap in understanding. Meanwhile, Li thinks that “the Christian faith represents the entire process in two thousand years’ history in which Christians from different ages experience and understand Jesus in each of their own unique cultural-historical context”, in significant correspondence to Joseph Kaung’s idea of “contextual theology” and “decolonization of theology”. A more profound comparison, however, presents itself between Li and Peter Lee. For many years, Lee has been widely respected in the academic circle for his efforts in promoting the dialogue between Christianity and Chinese culture. As quoted earlier, Lee thinks that most Christian denominations [in Hong Kong] are “imported from the West”, and that “denominationalism which refuses to be open to new ideas has little future”. This is actually akin to Li’s view that “God will be the God of the Chinese people only when he is a God of the Chinese people’s own understanding”. However, Lee would probably not agree with Li’s proclamation that “no sect or individual could lay claim to the only correct understanding of the faith”. Of course, Lee would not “lay claim to the only correct understanding of the faith”, but I doubt whether he would agree that “no

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Li, on the other hand, is quite sensitive on the issue of orthodoxy, and is ready to speak out his mind. “The theological community itself has naturally become an object of study for the academics, so the latter is quite sensitive to what theologians have to say. However, if theologians insist that they are the orthodox people who have an exclusive right to studying the faith, and maintain a protective instinct against the ‘trespass’ (?) of the academics, then any resulting comments can hardly be valid ones.”26 Li is commenting on the communication problem between Hong Kong theologians and Chinese academics here, but Lee’s requirement for “orthodoxy” in the theology is directed towards the “Cultural Christians”.27 I believe that Lee will probably agree with Lo Ping-cheung that the orthodoxy requirement in theology applies only to those scholars who actually confess the faith but not the scholars in general who study about Christianity. Hence the communication problem between Hong Kong theologians and Chinese academics here is settled. But the problem of orthodoxy between Hong Kong theologians and Chinese academic-theologians remains, and the tension breaks out in Bo Fan’s response to Leung Ka-lun.28

2. Bo Fan
Bo Fan, nom de plume of Wu Bofan, Assistant Research Fellow, Institute of Social Science Documentation Institute, China Academy of Social Science, is apparently an academic-theologian who confesses to be a Christian. Now Liu Xiaofeng, obviously the figure at the centre of the controversy, never speaks out in the debate. Rather, Bo Fan’s view on the “Sino-Christian Theology” largely reflects what Liu has been advocating.29 It looks like that Bo Fan is speaking on behalf of Liu.30

26 Li, Qiuling, “The Interaction between Theology and Culture: Part III”, p.10.
27 See the section on Peter Lee’s views.
28 Zhang Xianyong was the second Chinese scholar to have taken part in the debate. Zhang’s concern was more with the theological conflict between the Hong Kong and Chinese churches. His article does not reflect much of his theological thinking, and he is thus omitted for a detailed discussion in the present chapter.
30 The following quotation from Bo Fan is telling of the capacity which Bo Fan considers himself: “The future Sino-Christian Theology will be a theology with the Chinese language (Hanyu), one of the secular languages in the broad sense (the “cultural-existential context”) as its resources and modern philosophy, poetry and social theories as its means of expression. It is also the study of secular (as opposed to ecclesiastical) Christian culture, namely an encyclopedic study of theology. It does not exclude but necessarily includes all schools of theology in the geographically diverse
It has already been pointed out that Lee and Bo Fan are in extreme disagreement in their concept of theology, resulting from differences in three main areas: “revelation versus direct confrontation of the Chris event”, “Christian community versus individual confession”, and “orthodoxy in theology versus rejection of orthodoxy defined by Hong Kong theologians”. Bo Fan’s views are presented in repudiation of Leung’s arguments. Hence we have yet to grasp a fuller picture of what he stands for. Nevertheless, Bo Fan’s article is a useful reader for any understanding of the difference in Chinese and Hong Kong theologians.

Pivotal to the Bo Fan-Leung debate is the relationship between theology and the church tradition. Leung criticizes the “Cultural Christians” of breaking away from contexts, and further questions whether “(Cultural Christians) should be allowed to interpret Christianity as their discretion, having no regard for a Christian community who inherits a two thousand-year tradition?” Bo Fan’s answer is “For a mortal such as I (or we) who barely live up to one hundred years, why is it necessary and indeed how is it possible to inherit and embrace two thousand years of tradition? In order to “inherit” we must first choose (those elements that are beneficial). Hence, “Cultural Christians” suggest the “direct confrontation with the Christ-event” and “highlighting on the importance of the words of Jesus and Paul”. Bo Fan also draws support from Martin Luther’s proclamation of “scripture alone”, “Christ alone”, “grace alone” and “faith alone”.

The “direct confrontation with Christ” is closely related to Bo Fan’s concept of “individual confession”. Lo, Leung and Lee from Hong Kong are concurrent in their emphasis on the inseparability of theology from the Christian community and the Church. Leung lends a rather sharp criticism to the “Cultural Christians”: “Can a person who never goes to church nor accept any of the ideas and patterns of behavior handed down by the traditions of Christian faith calls himself a ‘Christian’ just because he is attracted to one single quote of Augustine?” To this query Bo Fan answers: “The meaning of the Cross (the Way, the Truth, the Life) is realized in the ‘I believe’ confession, Chinese Language world. However, any theology that rejects the modern context on the grounds of geographical differences (between China and West, the Mainland and Hong Kong and the Mainland and Taiwan, etc.) shall themselves be excluded from the modern language context.” See Bo Fan, “Who’s Christ and Which Tradition? Part II: Orthodoxy and Heresy”, p.8.

31 See the section on Leung Ka-lun.
not the ‘we believe’ one bound by the Church. As far as ‘I’ am concerned, the fundamental question is to ‘be’ a Christian (as opposed to ‘becoming’ a Christian within the church institution).”

He then quoted Kierkegaard: “The Christian faith could only be established in the continued relationship of the direct confrontation of the lone self with God. It cannot be established on a once-and-for-all basis by assuming certain external organization.”

From his concept of “individual confession” Bo Fan advances further to proclaim his understanding of Christian theology and gives an exposition of the fundamental concerns of the “Sino-Christian Theology” in response to the orthodoxy concern raised by Hong Kong theologians.

The confession of faith (I believe) is based on the experience and reflection of oneself, and therefore has a natural link to the forms of literature and philosophy… Literature is concerned with the primary origins of the Cross (the ‘cultural-existential dimension’). It has to do with the existential judgment of the individual. Philosophy means epistemology, the reflection on knowledge in the context of a particular era. It has to with the epistemological judgment of the individual. Hence the theology of ‘I believe’ is necessarily a (secular) cultural theology, but not an ecclesiastical theology. The modern man is not based on the authority of the Church, but rather the common confession of faith in Christ shared by each Christian.

Contrary to Leung’s understanding of the study of theology as inseparable from dogmatics and a mission entrusted by the Church, Bo Fan’s views are also in conflict with Zhang Xianyong’s position from within the Church.

Moreover, Bo Fan is doubtful about Lee’s “inculturation”, and, probably further to, Kaung’s “contextual theology”.

Those who favour indigenized theology say that God is the God of Chinese people as well as westerners. To a large extent that is true. But the key issue is that we are the “people” in China, not any people in “China”. The “God” of Christian theology (especially contemporary theology) is not the God of Isaac, Jacob and Abraham who received the grace of God in the capacity of the leader of a nation or a clan. God is the God who was persecuted, mocked and humiliated by unknowing sinners, abandoned after crying to God in desperation,

and left dying on the Cross. God is “my God”, the God with a “self”. God in a context of [absolute paradox].

Bo Fan’s theological ideas are quite different from both the ecumenical theologians in Hong Kong and Li Qiuling’s idea of the “sinolization” of theology.

Towards the end of his article, Bo Fan quoted S. N. Bulgakov, an Eastern Orthodox theologian:

Tradition is the vivid memory of the Church that contains orthodox doctrines, as its history shows. It is not a museum of archaeology or a catalogue of science, nor is it a ‘resort’ for faith. It is the inherent vitality of any living, organic body. It exists in its own stream of life, with all that were in its past. All that were in the past are inherent in the present. So they are the present, too… The history of the Church develops by manifesting and historically realizing the supra-historical substance. It translates the language of eternity into the historical language of human beings, and provided the substance remains unchanged, this translation reflects the characteristics of these languages and their times.

The above is obviously quoted with the intention of establishing the rationale for the “Sino-Christian Theology”. I guess none of the Hong Kong theologians in the debate would object to Bulgakov’s discussion of church tradition and church history quoted above. I suspect that while it is not surprising that “Cultural Christians” like Bo Fan would like to benefit from the heritage of the Eastern Church, to quote from an Eastern theologian might also be a deliberate, strategic attempt in counteracting the British and American theological traditions to which most Hong Kong theologians are adhered. If that be the

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38 Bo Fan’s words suggested that he had some misunderstanding of the “indigenization of theology”. The ideas of “claiming God’s grace in the capacity of a national or clan leader” does not exist in the proposal of “indigenization of theology”. See Bo Fan, “Who’s Christ and Which Tradition? Part II: Orthodoxy and Heresy”, p.8.
40 Bo Fan has made the following remark on scholars in Hong Kong: “Compared to Chinese scholars, scholars in Hong Kong have a certain deficiency in the Chinese Language and knowledge in humanities, which is not likely to be overcome in the near future. Their inadequate knowledge of the languages, philosophies and cultural context of Europe as a whole will represent a major obstacle to their understanding of contemporary western theology (to which British and American theologians have made very little contribution).” See Bo Fan, “Who’s Christ and Which Tradition? Part I: Pride and Prejudice”, *Christian Times* 450 (April 14, 1996), p.9. If we compare the way that Bo Fan quoted Bulgakov and Leung’s Brunner, we can tell that both were trying to resort to the authority of traditions.
case, it means that the debate might have extended from pure conceptual differences to ideological strife.

**Conclusion**

My conclusion after reading the “Cultural Christian” debate is fourfold:

1. The conceptual differences among Hong Kong theologians and among Chinese scholars are no less than those between the Hong Kong camp and the China camp. This suggests that diversity, rather than singularity, has been governing the development of theology in both the Church of Hong Kong and the Chinese academic community. Therefore I doubt the validity of comments on the debate which suggests that “Hong Kong theologians are excluding Chinese scholars from the intellectual circle” or that “the language of Beijing is overwhelming the language of Hong Kong in anticipation of 1997.” On the other hand, we actually find Chinese scholars and Hong Kong theologians in agreement on a number of issues, such as the inculturation between Christian theology and Chinese culture and the way theology would contribute to Chinese society and culture. Despite their diversity, there are some values and vision that Chinese scholars and Hong Kong theologians do share.

2. The debate also brings out some trends of theological development in Hong Kong. Traditionally, the evangelicals place a high priority on church and dogma, while ecumenical scholars are more focused on academic studies. For example, Chung Chi Divinity School of the Chinese University of Hong Kong is frequently criticized by evangelicals as being too “liberal”. More than often, Chung Chi’s theology has been labeled “modernist”. Even Peter K. H. Lee, himself an ecumenical scholar, describes Chung Chi’s theology as “lacking commitment”. Therefore, it is quite extraordinary that Lo Ping-cheung, an evangelical, should call for theologians to “look beyond the walls of the Church and try to reach the academic group” and “theologians at the Baptist University and the Chinese University” to be committed to the

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42 Bo Fan’s comment. See section on Leung Ka-lun.
cultural group and share responsibilities with their counterpart in independent seminaries”. Here, I see a trend towards professionalism in the development of theology. Social changes in Hong Kong result in a more complex social structure, which makes division of labour necessary. The challenge from “Cultural Christians” in China will only accelerate the trend.

3. Turning to China, the debate indicates that the rising group of “Cultural Christians” are generally alienated from established churches, and their theology is developing along a “non-ecclesiastical” line of thinking. I believe that theology in China will develop in two extremes in the future: The socio-cultural approach should have good prospects, given the positive responses from Chinese scholars seen in the debate. The traditional, church-affiliated approach, on the other hand, would be expecting a difficult time. The development of socio-cultural theology is less than likely to benefit traditional church-affiliated theology. Here I see an opportunity for the theological institutions and diversified cultural traditions of Hong Kong to serve as a cross-regional infrastructure for theological education and the development of traditional Christian theology in China after 1997.

4. In the debate, there are issues related to “mainstream versus non-mainstream tradition” or “orthodoxy versus non-orthodoxy”, and opinions suggest that such divisions need to be re-defined. In addition, a critic points out that the humanistic approach to theology and ecclesiastical approach to theology are “incommensurable.” Despite the polemical views that sometimes exist between different theological traditions, I believe that dialogue on the conceptual level is always possible. Theology stresses not only scientific and objective criterion in ideas and methods, it is also a highly normative discipline. We can put “mainstream” and “non-mainstream” theologies on the same level and review them under scientific and objective criterion. The present paper, which is a comparative analysis of the ideas of various Chinese and Hong Kong theologians, is an example of how dialogue between different theological thoughts can be achieved. I suggest that critical discussions of different theologies could be developed further based upon the ground of descriptive-analytical findings.

43 Chin’s comment, see Chin Ken Pa, “The Language Diversion of Chinese Theology and Conflicts in Its Interpretation: The Dispute between Ecclesiastical Theology and Humanistic Theology (Part I)”, Christian Times 455 (May 19, 1996), p.8.  
particularly in the realm of meta-theoretical discourse. Only after comparative studies and critical reviews on theological ideas, concepts and methods, Hong Kong and Chinese theologians could possibly achieve genuine understanding and cooperation.