PART II

Theoretical Reflection
Theological Translation and Transmission between China and the West

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Introduction

Some might suggest that Chinese Protestant theology in the past was essentially a translated theology, consisting of western theologies translated into the Chinese language, while innovations were out of the question. According to this view, the history of Chinese theology is nothing more than the history of the translation and transmission of western theologies in China. In the 1950s, Chen Zemin commented on the theological publications of “Old China” in this way:

If we examine the theological publishing in the pre-1949 Chinese church, we find little to recommend it. Most of the publications were translations, and most selections were made by western missionaries. Most theological books edited or written by Chinese authors were compilations rather than original works, or were general reviews. Genuinely creative works were rare. At such a time there could be no genuinely Chinese church, the Chinese church could not govern or support itself, and we had little authentic spiritual experience of our own upon which to draw for self-propagation. In such a situation, poverty of theological thought was only natural, and a theology able to transcend its times was an impossibility.

Chen mentions a few examples to support his judgment:

In the first decade of this century, American theologians wrangled endlessly over the issue of fundamentalism vs. modernism, and the fray was soon introduced into the Chinese church.

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1 This paper itself has undergone a process of theological translation. It was originally written in Chinese and presented at “Übersetzung und Rezeption: Begegung des Christentums mit der chinesische Kultur”, a conference co-organized by China-Zentrum e.V. (Sankt Augustin, Germany) and Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (Hong Kong), held in Berlin, 6-9 December 2001. An earlier English version of this paper was presented at “Faithful/Fateful Encounters: Religion and Cultural Exchanges between Asia and the West”, a conference co-organized by Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, USA) and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing, China), held in Beijing, October 22-24, 2002. The author would like to thank the participants of these conferences for their helpful comments.

Before most Chinese Christians had even figured out what fundamentalism and modernism were, and what these arguments represented in America, they had already fallen into blind, narrow denominational disputes, fighting vigorously and loyally for their western teachers, and causing divisions in the young Chinese church. After the First World War, when western nations sank into poverty, bitterness and despair, the western church turned from blind optimism to pessimism and bewilderment. The “crisis theology” was immediately exported to China, and China’s theologians took pride in quibbling over Kierkegaard’s “sickness unto death” and the paradoxes of “dialectical theology”.

The examples given by Chen highlight the influence of western theology on Chinese theology. In fact, evangelical/fundamentalist Christians constitute the most influential group among the Chinese Christian community, and their basic religious beliefs are not much different from the evangelicals and fundamentalists in western countries. However, it remains doubtful as to whether these examples adequately reflect the entire reality. Another important question is whether Chinese theology showed dramatic improvements after the Chinese Church had realized self-governance. Where is the watershed dividing Old China and New China? Is it the year 1949 as Chen suggests?

Considering the quantity alone, publications in the 1920s and 1930s were no less than that in the 1950s and 1960s. After 1949, there were fewer translated works in the publications of the institutional church in China, but then there were also fewer original works. If we think in terms of theological diversity, the theological publications during the 1920s and 1930s definitely demonstrate a greater degree of diversity than those of the 1950s and 1960s. The main reason behind this difference is that the issues facing Chinese theologians prior to 1949, such as interaction with traditional Chinese culture, religion and science, Christianity and revolution, etc., had all been reduced to a single question of how Chinese Christianity should accommodate herself to the new socialist system. Theological responses, especially among the Three-Self Church, were highly standardized with a view to implementing government policies and assisting in patriotic education and united front campaigns, etc. This standardization

4 Another form of Christianity commonly seen in the Chinese-language community is the charismatic tradition, which is more popular in rural areas and tends to be neglected in terms of theological contributions because of its emphasis on experience and practice rather than theological construction. See: Timothy Yeung Tin Yan, “Indigenous Chinese Church as an Offspring of Pneumatic Christianity: A Re-examination of the Development of Christianity in Modern China” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Chinese University of Hong Kong, July 2002 (in Chinese with an Abstract in English).
persisted until the Chinese government adopted the policy of reform and openness at the end of the 1970s. The revival of theological activities in Mainland China began to occur only from the 1980/90s. Meanwhile, theologians in Hong Kong and Taiwan were also actively responding to challenges arising from their respective contexts. In retrospect, therefore, there are two periods of flourishing development in Chinese theology during the 20th Century, namely the 1920/30s and the 1980/90s.

In the following discussion, I will review the development of Chinese theology in these two periods, with particular reference to the translation and transmission between China and the West. At the end of this paper, I will attempt to discuss the prospect of the relationship between Chinese and western theologies.

The Rise of Chinese Theology in the 1920/30s

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese Christian community was exposed to an extensive range of theological problems amid challenges on various fronts, giving rise to a diversified development of theological literature. On the one hand, it faced the issue of Christianity and traditional Chinese culture. On the other, the ideological impact of the new cultural movement, highlighting science and democracy and the rapid social and political changes, also constituted a serious challenge to Chinese Christianity. In response to criticisms of Christianity voiced by the Anti-Christian movement in the 1920s, Chinese Christian intellectuals endeavored to prove that Christianity was not contradictory to science and that, as a progressive and revolutionary religion, Christianity was set to make positive contributions to the nation’s urgent issues. Meanwhile, they also attempted to establish indigenous theology in response to the criticism that Christianity was a foreign religion.

The question of how Christianity is to be related to traditional Chinese culture is not a new one. Roman Catholic missionaries first encountered the problem in the late Ming Dynasty, while Protestant missionaries continued to face it in the 19th Century. In the early 20th Century, theologians endeavored to indigenize the external forms, institutions and theology of Christianity. Theological indigenization involves the adoption of traditional Chinese philosophical concepts, especially Confucian thought and terms, in constructing theology with Chinese characteristics. As far as this approach to theology is concerned, translation of western theological literature is dispensable and in fact might sometimes be seen as redundant. Elements or characteristics of western culture in Christian


theological traditions might be regarded as nothing but a burden that must be removed. This approach assumes that the trans-cultural gospel could be adopted without translating western theological literature into Chinese. From the 1930s, however, the rapid changes in the social and political situation in China made many Chinese theologians focus on the relevance of Christianity to contemporary political and social issues, to such an extent that the indigenous approach fell out of favor somewhat. The dominant position of indigenized theology was shaken and taken over by the contextualization approach, which focused on the relationship between theology and contemporary society. Some theologians continued to probe the question of traditional Chinese culture and indigenization while at the same time investigating contemporary social issues. Some works that appeared to investigate the relationship between Christianity and traditional Chinese culture were actually dealing with the question concerning Christianity and contemporary Chinese society.⁷

Apart from writing original works, Chinese theologians also attempted to translate western theological works to tackle the problems Christianity faced in modern China. Certain publishing houses became centers for producing original Chinese theologies and translating western works. One example is the Chinese Christian Literature Society (Zhonghua Jidujiao Wenshe, 1925-28), which emphasized the origination of indigenous theology and published far more original works than translations. Unfortunately, it lasted for only a very short span of time for financial and other reasons.⁸ Another noteworthy institution was The Association Press of China (Qingnian Xiehui Shuju), founded in 1902. It was a publishing house managed by Chinese editors throughout without any interference from foreigners. It published works of famous Chinese theologians including Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao, 1888-1979), Liu Tingfang (Timothy Tingfang Lew, 1891-1947), Xu Baoqian (P. C. Hsu, 1892-1944) and Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu, 1893-1979). By the end of the 1940s, it had published more than 500 monographs and pamphlets, among which only a small portion were translations and books originally written by Chinese authors.⁹

These translated works were more often than not a reflection of the concerns and orientations of contemporary Chinese theologians at that time. For example, many Chinese theologians were concerned with the accusation that religion in general and Christianity in particular was unscientific, so much so that they

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⁷ An illustrative example can be found in Wu Lei-chuan (= Wu Zhenchun), Jidujiao yu Zhongguo Wenhua [Christianity and Chinese Culture] (Shanghai: The Association Press of China, 1936).
translated some western works on this issue in response. Jian Youwen (Timothy Jen Yu-wan, 1896-1978), for example, pleaded for “a Christianized China by a Chinatized Christianity”. However, he also translated some materials on the subject of religion and science, and, according to his explanation, such translation was for the purpose of responding to the critique of religion based on the scientism implied in the Anti-religious movement. This attempt to answer critics by translating foreign works was quite understandable and inevitable. This is because modern China has been subject to the influence of more than a few Chinese translations of foreign writings. Many popular criticisms of Christianity voiced by Chinese intellectuals at that time were based on western ideologies such as the theory of evolution, materialism and scientism. We might even say that Chinese Christians at that time faced challenges from communism / socialism / nationalism / authoritarianism not unlike Christians in the modern western society. Translating western theology to respond to challenges of Christianity that originated from the West seemed to be an appropriate thing to do. At that time, there were very few Chinese Christians who could write on the issue with comparable quality.

Another interesting example is Wu Yaozong, who translated into Chinese *A Common Faith* by John Dewey (1859-1932). As it is widely known, Wu Yaozong was inclined to socialism and therefore could not possibly identify himself with Dewey’s liberal stance. In fact, Wu criticized Dewey’s thought and its capitalist ideology in the preface to the translation. Wu’s purpose in translating the book is clearly illustrated in the Chinese title he chose for the Chinese version. Instead of translating “a common faith” directly and literally, he named the Chinese version *Kexuede zongjiaoguan* (A Scientific View of Religion).

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Religion). Wu says: “Dewey advocates a scientific religion, which means a religion being liberated from the mystical ‘supra-naturalism’.” Wu further clarifies,

Our purpose of introducing this book of Dewey could be summarized as follows: firstly, because of its substantial metaphysical elements, religion can easily become superstition, a danger which could be alleviated by adopting a scientific attitude; secondly, religion in the past tended to be alienated from daily life, and a scientific view on religion, which starts from reality, can help to correct this problem.

Chinese Christians at that time also faced the question of responding to social and political issues amid rapid changes. Some Chinese theologians introduced the theology of the social gospel, as they became aware of how this theology could be related to the contemporary Chinese situation. Chinese translations of *Theology for the Social Gospel* and *Social Principles of Jesus* by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), the champion of the social gospel, were published as early as 1923. During more or less the same period, works of Harry Frederick Ward (1873-1966), also an advocate for the social gospel, though less prominent than Rauschenbusch in the United States, were also translated into Chinese. Particularly noteworthy is the publication of Ward’s *Gemingde Jidujiao* (*A Revolutionary Christianity*). Rather than a translation of a book already published in English, it consisted of a compilation and translation of Ward’s speeches during his visit to China in 1925 and some other writings. Jian Youwen stated in his foreword to the book:

This is a time of revolution, which is especially true for China in transition. The crime of “anti-revolution” charged by revolutionaries or revolutionary governments is more serious than

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18 *Theology for the Social Gospel* is translated as: *Shehui Fuyin de Shenxue*, Lin Hongfei, Dai Kuan yi & Jacob Shi trans., Mao Yun-hsuan rev. (Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, 1923). *Social Principles of Jesus* is translated as: *Yesu di Shehui Yuanli*, Zhang Shizhang trans. (Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, 1923). Zhao Zichen wrote in the preface to the Chinese translation of *Theology for the Social Gospel*: “As Christianity grows in China, the social gospel is also being preached throughout the nation. In recent years, cultural movements at home have been expressing interest in understanding Christianity and intentions to reform the society radically. At this moment, the translation of *Theology for the Social Gospel* by my friend Lin Hong-fei is indeed a laudable act of ‘feeding the hungry and giving water to the thirsty’.” See Zhao’s preface to the Chinese translation of Rauschenbusch’s *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p.3.
the crime of being Marxist charged by reactionaries and imperialists. The first and foremost reason for non-Christians’ opposition to Christianity is the latter’s “anti-revolutionary” nature. Thus it should indeed be appropriate and timely to publish a book on the revolutionary nature of Christianity in this era of revolution.20

Following Ward, Jian Youwen attempted to emphasize that the ethos of Christianity was purely ethical, social and revolutionary. After introducing Ward’s views, Jian went on to say:

If all members of Chinese Christianity continue to proceed in this direction, then critics of Christianity could no longer charge Christianity as “anti-revolutionary”. Positively speaking, Christianity might even play a role in the great movement of social reform in the nation’s renaissance. By that time, people may talk about religion as the stimulant of the people rather than religion as the opium of the people. And the life of Christianity will last forever in tandem with the Republic of China.”21

Liu Tingfang, who explicitly acknowledged his indebtedness to Ward, also endeavored to argue that it could meet the needs of the Chinese context.22

These translations of western theology by Chinese theologians reflected the Christian responses to the issues derived from the modern Chinese context. The translation of the theology of the social gospel was criticized by certain evangelical/fundamentalist Chinese theologians, giving rise to the contention between the theologies of liberal theology/social gospel on the one hand and fundamentalist/evangelical theologies on the other. However, the dispute between liberal and fundamentalist Christians was not only due to the introduction of western theology, but was also shaped by the Chinese context.

The responses of Chinese theologians to these issues did not stop short of translation but while they attempted to do their own theology, they were not entirely immune from western influence of some sort. This can be seen in the theological development of Zhao Zichen, arguably the most famous Chinese theologian at that time.23 Zhao’s Jidujiao Zhexue (Christian Philosophy) was

basically a response to challenges made against the Christian faith by contemporary Chinese intellectuals from the perspective of scientism, especially scientific positivism. Although the book was written in the form of a dialogue and many of the sources of its arguments were not well documented, it was quite apparent that he had made extensive use of western theologies. Zhao acknowledged particularly his indebtedness to Borden Parker Bowne, William James and Henri Bergson, among others. Some years later, Zhao made some critical reflections on his previous works after he had been exposed to and apparently influenced by Karl Barth’s work. Apart from writing what was probably the first Chinese monograph on Karl Barth, many other later works by Zhao, such as Jidujiao de Lunli (Ethics of Christianity), were also influenced by Barthian thought, highlighting God-centered ethics, God’s transcendence, Christian ethics as being distinct from other types of ethical thought, the Word of God as being distinct from other cultures without confusion or compromise, etc. However, it is noteworthy that the evolution of Zhao’s thought was not only due to the influence of Barth, but was also derived from his experience in prison during the Japanese invasion of China.

The Revival of Chinese Theology in the 1980/90s

From 1949, theologians in Hong Kong and Taiwan parted company with their counterparts in Mainland China in their approach toward theological construction. However, a revival of Chinese theology emerged almost simultaneously in the Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan during the period between the 1980s and 1990s. This revival can be seen clearly from both the quality and quantity of theological journals founded during this period. While the revival in Mainland

China appeared to be more dramatic, the revival in Hong Kong and Taiwan was more gradual.

The Chinese churches in Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1950/60s were basically still pre-occupied with indigenous theology and, probably because of the efforts and influence of contemporary Neo-Confucianism, this approach to theological indigenization enjoyed some support until recent years. However, generally speaking, because of the rise of the awareness of the local identity, the dominant position of indigenous theology has gradually been replaced by contextual theology since the 1970s. Indigenous theology has even been subject to severe criticism in recent years. The contextual theologies proposed by theologians in Hong Kong and Taiwan have been inspired by the Asian theological movement to a significant extent. Unlike indigenous theology, contextual theology emphasizes theological reflections and construction in the here-and-now socio-cultural context in close association with the fight for equality or liberation by the local people. For example, Homeland Theology and Chut-hau-thi (Chu-tou-tian) Theology in Taiwan emphasize the Taiwanese identity and the self-determination of the people. This type of theology often assumes the irrelevancy between Asian realities and western theologies and highlights the need for Asian theology to be independent of western theology in order to develop a theology that meets local needs. According to this approach to theology, western theological literature could only serve as an ambiguous “other” for the purpose of comparison and critique instead of adoption.

The development of theology in Hong Kong followed a slightly different trend from that in Taiwan, given differences in the political and social contexts of the two places. In the 1980s, issues surrounding the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty gave rise to contextual theology related to the reunification, among which the theology of reconciliation, proposed by Yang Mugu (Arnold M. K. Yeung, 1945-2002), is worth special attention. Yang abandoned the indigenous approach and turned to contextual theology instead, although he was highly critical of Asian theologies that were based largely on Latin American liberation theology. His theology of reconciliation differed from them both in its motif and

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30 This model is similar to the “praxis model” suggested by Stephen B. Bevans. See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, pp.63-80.

methodology. Similar to most Asian theologies, Yang integrated contextual analysis with biblical studies. However, he parted company with most of the Asian theologies by massively citing western theological works, ranging from classical theologians such as Ireneaus, Tertullian and Augustine to modern ones including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Karl Barth, Frederick D. Maurice and Reinhold Niebuhr.32

The political reforms in Mainland China, starting from the very end of the 1970s, created a relatively more liberal environment for theological constructions. By the 1980s, while theologians within the institutional church were actively engaged in theological construction, theological activities outside the Church were also thriving with dazzling variety. Many intellectuals, notably Liu Xiaofeng, attempted to translate works of western philosophies/theologies and introduce them to Chinese readers, and some among them were focused on the study, translation and construction of Christian theology. Their approach to theology was different from both the dominant models within the institutional church and the indigenous approach still popular in the theological communities in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Their theological endeavors even sparked off a controversy involving theologians from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.33

Since the 1980s, theology produced by the institutional church in China has been focused on the affirmation of humanity, the present world and human history. Chen Zemin, in one of his papers, summarizes the concerns and highlights of contemporary Chinese theology as follows. In terms of the doctrine of God, agape is emphasized as the essential nature, rather than just one of the attributes, of God, expressed in His work of creation, providence, redemption and sanctification. The immanence of God is also stressed, affirming that all good things come from God and therefore Christians should learn to appreciate all good things including those outside the Church, because they too are borne from God’s love.34

In Christology, the tenor is on the notion of the “Cosmic Christ”. The doctrines of incarnation and reconciliation should be interpreted in the light of the Cosmic Christ. The overall emphasis lies in the doctrine that Christ is God incarnate and that human beings may seek redemption and renewal in him. The vicarious and exemplary death of Christ perfectly manifested the love of God. The corresponding pneumatology is basically consistent with the doctrine of the Cosmic Christ, affirming that the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Almighty God, is in all and through all in human history. Rather than being limited to the visible Church only,

32 Arnold Yeung (Yang Mugu), Fuhe Shenxue yu Jiaohui Gengxin [Theology of Reconciliation and Church Renewal] (Hong Kong: The Seed, 1987).
it is a universal life-giving spirit. As to the theory on human nature, the emphasis is on the doctrine of the image of God rather than original sin. It upholds that the image of God, despite being corrupted in the fall, has not been totally lost in humanity. Concerning Christian living, glorifying God and serving fellow human beings is to be upheld as the guiding principle; and devotional life should be integrated with Christian love and justice. The doctrines of *sola fides* and *sola gratia* are important, but the danger of upholding faith at the expense of works should also be avoided. It is apparent that this theology is designed for the institutional church in Mainland China in response to its socio-political environment, in an attempt to assert God’s work for all humanity beyond the Church, explaining the value of non-Christians and groups other than the Church (not least the Communist government and its members). It also calls on Christians to take part actively in social development.

Central to this theological discourse is the concept of the Cosmic Christ, an idea to which Ding Guangxu (Bishop K. H. Ting) attaches special importance. Ding has mentioned more than once the Cosmic Christ as the central concept of Chinese theology, and his view has been echoed by more than a few Christian intellectuals. According to his article “The Cosmic Christ” (*Yuzhou de Jidu*), the concept of the Cosmic Christ asserts the unfolding of historical events as part of the process of Christ’s creation and redemption, which is in continuity with creation. Christ has redeemed not only Christians, but also all humanity and the entire universe. In Ding’s words, “Christ is guiding the entire creation towards the goal of unity of all in God. Within this redemptive work of Christ, all human movements fighting for progress, liberation, democracy and universal love are bonded together.” Chinese Christians will come to appreciate that the lordship, care and providence of Christ extend over the entire universe with love as their essence. These concepts will help Christians understand the “truth, goodness and beauty outside the Church,” especially the honorable virtues of certain Communist officials.

The concept of the Cosmic Christ is indeed based on Biblical foundations, and Ding also points out the specific Chinese context in which this concept originates. However, it should be noted that this concept is in a number of ways similar to foreign theological schools cited by Ding. In his article “The Cosmic

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38 Ding Guangxun, “Preface”, *Jinling Shenxue Wenxuan*, p.4.
39 Ding Guangxun, “Yuzhoude Jidu”, p.27.
41 Ding Guangxun, “Yuzhoude Jidu”, p.22.
Christ,” Ding quotes Alfred Norton Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, which rejects the idea of God as a Caesar-like ruler, unsympathetic moralist or emotionless prime mover.\(^{42}\) On closer scrutiny of Ding’s interpretations in “The Cosmic Christ”, views of Whitehead can readily be rediscovered. For example, Ding says that God should be defined in the light of Christ’s love. God is not a tyrant but a loving person who sympathizes and identifies with human sufferings.\(^{43}\)

In fact, Ding has written specific articles to introduce the tenets of liberation theology, the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and process theology and has affirmed their values.\(^{44}\) Ding basically appreciates these theologies and his exposition of the concept of the Cosmic Christ bears close resemblance to these theologies. For example, Ding is especially concerned with the Cosmic Christ in de Chardin’s thought and the latter’s attempt to integrate creation, redemption and sanctification into a continuum. This is not to say that Ding adopted these theologies without reservation, for he has also made critical reflections on these ideas in the context of the Chinese Church. For example, he points out that China has already been liberated, so for her the more important issue is reconciliation, not liberation.\(^{45}\)

Since the 1980s, *Nanjing Theological Review (Jinling Shenxuezhi)* has been publishing articles that introduce foreign theologies mainly through translation. Although some of them were devoted to the translation of non-western theologies,\(^{46}\) the bulk of them have remained focused on western theologians such as Paul Tillich, John Macquarrie,\(^{47}\) Reinhold Niebuhr,\(^{48}\) Karl Rahner,\(^{49}\) Rudolf

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42 Ding Guangxun, “Yuzhoude Jidu”, p.29; also Ding Guangxun, “Zhongguo Jidutu Zhenyang Kandai Shengjing” (How Chinese Christians treat the Bible), *Jinling Shenxue Wenxuan*, p.10.
49 Shi Yongshang, “Yinming Jidutu - Rannuo de Chaozai shenxue” (The anonymous Christian - Karl Rahner’s Transcendent Theology), *Nanjing Theological Review* (New
Bultmann, Martin Buber and Søren Kierkegaard etc. While some of these translations were done in accordance with the governing principle of the institutional church, the majority of them were apparently not. These alternative theological discourses broke, deliberately or not, the monopoly of the theological discourse approved by the official church. An even more significant work among these was Liu’s article entitled “shangdi jiushi shangdi - jinian kaer bate shishi ershi zhounian” (Let God be God — commemorating the 20th anniversary of the death of Karl Barth), formerly published in a magazine called *Dushu Zazhi* (*Reading Books Magazine*) under the pseudonym of Mo-Mo. While the title of the article is about Karl Barth’s theology, the following passage from this article seems to suggest that the article has its own contemporary political implications:

The practices of deifying secular authorities, idolizing historical politicians and mystifying secular regimes are not only western, but are also eastern. They are not only to be found in the past. They could still be found today… Issues pondered by Karl Barth are not just concerned with certain times or certain people; they are concerned with all times and all people… If Chinese are first and foremost human beings, then these issues are of course concerned with Chinese people, too.

The political implications, or rather explications, of this passage are too apparent to miss. As such, Chinese theologians, whether those within the institutional church or those who fall under the category of “cultural Christians”, do not fail to relate their theologies with concerns for the contemporary Chinese context while drawing inspiration from various western theological traditions. The approach to

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54 For details see Ye Jinghua (Francis Yip), *Xunzhen Qiuquan: Zhongguo Shenxue yu Zhengjiao Chujing Chutan* [Seeking the Truth and Keeping the Integrity: A Preliminary Study of Chinese Theology and Church-State Context] (Hong Kong: CCSCRC, 1997), pp.133f.
constructing Chinese theology adopted by Liu Xiaofeng and many other cultural Christians, though significantly different from Chinese Christians in the 1920/30s, especially with regard to their assessment of indigenous theology, is quite similar in their dual-emphasis on original theological construction and translation of western theology.

The brief review above shows that the development of Chinese theology has been closely related to the translation and transmission of western theological literature. Indeed, translation has played a positive role in contributing to the development of Chinese theology. The two most active periods of Chinese theological innovations coincide with massive translations of foreign theological works as well as rich productions of original Chinese theologies. The construction of original Chinese theology and the translation of western theology should thus be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Chinese theology to date has not been based solely on the translation of western theology. Generally speaking, Chinese theologians are neither indiscriminate towards nor prejudiced against western theology. Most of them tend to select, translate and adopt western theology by taking off from their personal situation, reflecting upon issues in the contemporary Chinese situation and identifying applicable resources in western theology. With these resources to hand, Chinese theologians have also attempted to construct theology with their own Chinese cultural resources and religious experience to respond to challenges from traditional culture as well as from the contemporary social context.

Prospect of Bilateral Translation and Transmission

In the past, the relationship between Chinese and western theologies was one-sided or unilateral, involving the translation of western theologies into Chinese but not vice versa. Chinese theology has yet to make any visible impact on western theology, as in the case of liberation theology in Latin America. It is true that some western language periodicals are now regularly publishing translations of Chinese theology. 56 They, however, are largely aimed at introducing the present situation or history of Chinese Christianity, rather than seeking resources for enriching or improving western theology. The foremost criterion for selection is concerned mainly with whether the theological work can reflect the Chinese situation rather than its inherent theological merits. Eventually, there is translation, but not significant transmission. At present, there are no grounds to reprove such a situation, but, admittedly, it leaves a lot to be desired.

Ecumenism or the communion of saints should be realized in the exchange of

theological reflections rather than upheld as a mystical doctrine. The ecumenical spirit is manifested in mutual and two-way communication rather than unilateral translation or sole dependence on one party. It is my dream that in the future Christians from all corners of the world can have theological dialogue and exchange on equal footings with one another, including the case that western theologians may find inspiration from the Chinese theological writings. Perhaps it might sound overly complacent as well as impractical to make such a proposal in the presence of some of the most brilliant western theologians. Nonetheless, I am convinced that my dream for the future of Chinese theology is not totally utopian. There are several reasons for my dream - if not hope.

First of all, because of the distinctive characteristics of Chinese culture, it is quite possible for Chinese theologians to develop markedly different theologies from the West, which might furnish new insights into traditional issues. With regard to the linguistic aspect, John McIntyre’s study of recent process Christology suggests that even those who reject the substantialist approach to thinking are ready to accept the authority, principle or spirit of the Chalcedonian definition, even if they have problems with its wording. This reflects the far-reaching impact of Chalcedon Christology, which might have to do with the structure of western languages, especially the substantialist bias in Indo-European languages. According to the famous Sinologist Jacques Gernet, the Chinese language is very distinctive for its syntax and thus way of thinking, which has no such bias. This may create difficulties in translation, but it also gives rise to the possibility of re-interpretting the traditional doctrine in a novel way. Take Chalcedonian Christology, for example, again, one may tend to render humanity and divinity mutually exclusive, if adopting the framework of Aristotelian logic. But in the Chinese language and way of thinking, there is no reason why humanity and divinity might not be considered two complementary models characterizing Jesus Christ. Another interesting case is about the sexist language in western

58 According to Gernet, “Of all the languages in the world, Chinese has the peculiar, distinctive feature of possessing no grammatical categories systematically differentiated by morphology: there appears to be nothing to distinguish a verb from an adjective, an adverb from a complement, a subject from an attribute. The fact is that, in Chinese, these categories only exist by implicit and arbitrary reference to other languages which do possess them. Furthermore, there was no word to denote existence in Chinese, nothing to convey the concept of being or essence, which in Greek is so conveniently expressed by the noun *ousia* or the neuter *to on*. Consequently, the notion of being, in the sense of an eternal and constant reality, above and beyond that which is phenomenal, was perhaps more difficult to conceive for a Chinese.” See Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, Janet Loyd trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1986), pp.238-247, esp. p.241.
theology. While many contemporary western theologians attempt to overcome the sexist bias in the Christian doctrine of God, some pre-modern Chinese theologians, notably Yang Tinyun (1562-1627), had already employed a non-sexist term da-fu-mu (Great-Parent; more literally: Great-Father-Mother) to refer to God. 60 With regard to the philosophical aspect, the Chinese emphasis on harmony, especially that with nature, may also contribute to the development of ecological theology worldwide. 61

Secondly, there are Chinese theologians who have the ability to interpret the significance of Chinese culture for Christian theology to western theologians. Since the 1990s, there has been a growing number of Chinese scholars from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland teaching theology in domestic or overseas institutions after earning doctoral degrees from famous western universities. They are both well-versed in Chinese culture and western theology and sometimes publish their theological writings in western languages. Although these are not numerous in volume, they are rightfully an integral part of western theology. 62 Unlike the indigenous or contextual theologians in the previous generation, they do not entirely disregard western theology as irrelevant. Rather, they attempt to reflect critically on western theologies and to relate them creatively to the contemporary Chinese context. 63 Even when they seek to engage in dialogue with contemporary Neo-Confucians, they do so by citing western theologians rather than quoting directly from the Bible, as did indigenous theologians in the past. 64 In other words, Chinese theologians of the new generation have both the ecumenical vision and local concern as well as the language capabilities and theological training to engage in disciplined academic exchanges with western theologians. The rise of contemporary Chinese theologians reflects the maturing

60 For details see Nicholas Standaert, Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
62 To name a few of them: Pan-chiu, Lai, Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Study of Paul Tillich's Thought (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994); Siu-kwong, Tang, God's History in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996); Wing-kong, Lo, Das Werk des Menschen und die Gnade Gottes in Karl Barths Sakramentstheologie (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994); Benedict Kwok Hung-biu, Von der historisch zur trinitätstheologisch begründeten Christologie Wolfhart Pannenberg (Ammersbek bei Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek, 1997).
of Chinese theologians. Their relationship with western theology is neither one of
dumb infantile reliance, nor of rebellious adolescent independence and isolation.
Rather they seek to establish a relationship of mutual respect and
inter-dependence in partnership.

Thirdly, there is growing concern among western theologians that expressions
in Indo-European languages are not requisite and a small number of western
theologians have adopted a more open attitude to other religions and cultures. For
example, in recent discussions on ecological theology, Jürgen Moltmann, while
ultimately resorting to the Judeo-Christian tradition for resources, at least admits that
Chinese Taoism has its own ecological wisdom worthy of attention and appreciation
by Christian theologians, and he himself is definitely inspired.65 When the Chinese
translation of his *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* was
published, he visited Hong Kong and I had the chance to ask him in person his views
on Chinese theologians using resources in Taoist philosophy for the development of
a Christian ecological theology. His response indicates that he is basically open to or
even supportive of the idea. In the English-speaking theological community, Robert
Neville and John Berthrong, leading figures of Boston Confucianism, combine
Christian and Confucian traditions in their theological works. This more or less
shows that western theologians are capable of appreciating the significance of
Chinese philosophy for Christian theology.66 In other words, it is not entirely
inconceivable that western theology might draw inspiration from Chinese theology,
an “emerging” member of ecumenical theology, just as liberation theology in Latin
America could have an impact on western theology.

**Concluding Remarks**

In order to make their encounter not just faithful but also fruitful, both Chinese
and western theologians may need to have not just a local concern but also a
global vision. Chinese theologians should be ready to interpret the significance of
Chinese culture for theological development in the West. Similarly, western
theologians should also pay more attention to developments in Chinese theology,
adopting input from Chinese resources with openness rather than just translating
them. My challenge to my Chinese colleagues is: “Don’t just ask what western
theology can do for you; ask also what you can do for western theology.” My urge
to my western friends is: “Don’t just ask what you can do for Chinese theology;
ask also what Chinese theology can do for you, and what together we can do for
the ecumenicity of the Christian tradition.”

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65 See Moltmann, “Preface to the Chinese Translation”, *Chuangzaode Shangdi [Gott in der
Schöpfung]* (Hong Kong: Institute for Sino-Christian Studies, 1999), pp.xvii-xix.
66 See Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism* (Albany: SUNY, 2000); *Behind the
Mask of God* (Albany: SUNY, 1991); *The Tao and the Daimon* (Albany: SUNY, 1982);
and John H. Berthrong, *Concerning Creativity: A Comparison of Chu Hsi, Whitehead and
Speaking from the perspective of a non-believer, the legitimacy of Christianity in China’s context remains an unresolved issue. One key issue in the study of Christianity is whether – in the introduction, delineation and presentation of its theological thinking, its history of propagation and its tangible social-cultural influence on China – Christianity would lose its significance apart from any religious confession, pre-existing religious bearing and it being a representation of a foreign culture. In other words, does Christianity still hold any value apart from the zeal of faith and zeal of evangelisation while being discussed in a completely secular discourse context removed from its cultural medium?

To answer this question, it may be necessary to draw upon three categories of discussion on the significance of Christianity in humanities, namely to explore theological hermeneutics through “reason”; to search for the meaning of theological ethics through the “will”; and to develop the hopes of humanity expressed in theological aesthetics though “affection”.

This choice is not because “reason”, “will” and “affection” represent three basic dimensions of humanities, nor because one aims to arrive at a synthesis of truth, goodness and beauty using the Christian value system. It is simply that these three theological approaches address the following issues. Underlying a so-called theological hermeneutics is a confession of one’s limits of understanding, reasoning and truth. It calls for a renewed probe into the question of the verification of meaning. Theological ethics strives to practice claims of goodness even as one realizes the partial, relative and contradictory nature of human values. Theological aesthetic goes beyond its enculturation objective and its assessment of beauty into a conversation with human’s ultimate experience and self-redemption. Basic to all three approaches is the “interpretation” of meaning. Furthermore, confidence in theological hermeneutics is a prerequisite to prevent a recurrence of “ideological distortion”.

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The Theological Dimension of “Hermeneutics”

The term “hermeneutics” is believed to originate from the messenger Hermes in Greek mythology. Hermes does not send messages between two equal entities. Instead, lord god sends him to speak a divine message to the public. This seems to hint at the special relationship between hermeneutics and the “divine word”. Theological hermeneutics originating from biblical hermeneutics of Judaism and early Christianity holds the same view: the Bible is considered a divine text, and the task of an exegete is to illuminate the will of God for humanity in the Bible. Thus, the term “hermeneutics” inherently presupposes a theological dimension.

However, to understand “interpretation” in this light, one encounters a basic dilemma. On the one hand, the mystery in the divine word needs to be interpreted. On the other hand, interpretation necessarily involves “misreading”. In fact, the underlying problem of hermeneutics, which we now face, already manifested in that kind of ancient mythology and theological discourse context. It may be possible to solve the above difficulties in interpreting human speech through many expedient methods, but further questions remain in expedient methods to interpret “divine speech”. Thus, it is in the theological dimension that hermeneutics is pushed towards an ultimate resolution.

If one traces the history of hermeneutics to early biblical hermeneutics, one notices two main tendencies.

In Judaism, the literatures of rabbinic schools, Qumran community and Philo of Alexandria reveal four methods of early hermeneutic activity: literalist interpretation, Midrashic interpretation, Pesher interpretation (a form of ancient Syriac biblical commentary) and allegorical interpretation. Many Christian exegetes see the four methods implying multiple ways of interpretation. Although these four methods were all employed in Christian biblical hermeneutics of the Medieval Ages from Clement, Origen, through to the “multiple senses” of Thomas Aquinas, the allegorical tradition remains the most popular.

Similarly, Augustine does not approve of literalistic or historical interpretations. Rather, the thrust of biblical hermeneutics Augustine represents is understood as based on Plato’s dualism, namely, “the ontological priority of the

3 Pontificia Commissio Biblica, Jiaohuinei de Shengjing Quanshi (The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church) Xian Jiayi trans. (Hong Kong: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1995), p.32.
unchangeable eternal to the changeable and material”. 6 From this stems a basic hermeneutical principle:

What is of primary importance is not so much our knowledge of the material sign that enables us to interpret the eternal reality, but rather it is our knowledge of the eternal reality that enables us to interpret the material sign… The central problem of hermeneutics is much more basic. It is the problem of understanding the transcendent referent.7

Moreover, there are seven stages in understanding the “transcendent referent”: “the fear of God”, “piety”, “charity”, “fortitude”, “mercy”, “purification” and “wisdom”.8

We thus see that the issues of hermeneutics belong inherently to issues of faith.

Post-modern times reveal further difficulties to this kind of hermeneutics based on the ontology of “revelation”. This results in a need to re-interpret it. Yet the hermeneutics based on “proof” as an epistemology emphasis, though supported by the Reformation and appears more connected to modern thinking, is also challenged by the epistemology of experientialism9 and also requires re-interpretation. It was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who recast the theological dimension of hermeneutics, made prominent by hermeneutical activity, into a hermeneutical theory of greater universal significance. As such, the possible contributions of theological hermeneutics to humanities become more influential in secular scholarship.

The “hermeneutical theory” of Schleiermacher stemming from his “Pietistic theology” is commonly categorised under “historical hermeneutics”.10 Whether this is an apt categorization shall not be discussed here. The fact is, Schleiermacher is called “the father of modern hermeneutics” because his theory of hermeneutics is not restricted to exegesis but applies broadly to universal human interpretation. As a result, hermeneutics is redefined as an “art of interpretation”.11 In other words, not only are divine texts interpreted, all objects that require interpretation, even the act of interpretation itself, are believed to consist inevitably of a series of interpretation and misreading.

9 Cf. my Zhuwen Shangdi, pp.175-178.
He first identifies two basic dimensions of the interpretative process that are close to Kant’s interpretative method: the subjective / psychological and objective / grammatical dimensions. The former seeks to take hold of an object entirely; the latter finds “the particular sense of a certain discourse in the language… with the help of the language”. 12 Later Western researchers strengthen further the modern hermeneutical implications of Schleiermacher’s distinction:

Schleiermacher considered this linguistic nature of human communication in more detail. All understanding presupposes language; in language we think and through language we communicate. There is no understanding without language, and therefore hermeneutics and rhetoric, however distinct, cannot be separated… As every text-production is the result of a particular or personal application of conventional linguistic rules, every act of text-reception is based on an individual application of conventional modes of understanding texts… He sees text as an individual universal where a network of individually applied conventions and rules work together in order to create a new and meaningful whole.13

An interpretive activity determined by the two above dimensions necessarily involves two basic hermeneutical issues: first, the openness of meaning; and second, the circular nature of interpretation.

Schleiermacher makes a rather advanced “interpretation” of the openness of meaning in his manuscripts on interpretation: the essence of interpretation lies in “the historical and divinatory, objective and subjective reconstruction of a given statement”.14 To humans who search for meaning through interpretative activities, this kind of reconstruction implies an ever closing up, but not an eventual grasp, on the interpreted object; this means that “meaning” is not the meaning itself, but merely an interpreted meaning.

Corresponding to Schleiermacher’s dimensions of the “interpretive process”, the “historical/objective” factor in a “reconstruction of meaning” are none other than the extension of the “objective/grammatical dimension” that place emphasis on “regularity” in the generation of meaning. While the “divinatory/subjective” factor stems from his “subjective/psychological dimension”, which emphasizes “selectivity” in the generation of meaning. This latter category is clearly more significant because it describes “the necessarily courageous risk taken by an interpreter who approaches a text… that no approach will ever exhaust the individuality of the text”.

13 Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, pp.45-6.
14 Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, The Hermeneutics Reader, p.46.
Understanding is a never-ending task and challenge... On the one hand that divination must not be understood as an individualistic escape from given semantic facts, and on the other hand that no (objective) knowledge of the text’s linguistic composition can ever replace the interpreter’s obligation to grasp the text’s overall sense, although such a grasp will at best lead only to an approximate reconstruction.15

The analysis of the “hermeneutical circle” is an ancient business.16 Firstly, one requires a certain kind of pre-understanding to enter a text. Without pre-understanding and questions, there will not be understanding and answers, and thus no meaning can be attained. Secondly, one requires the parts to understand the whole, and it is through the understanding of the whole, that one can accurately understand the parts. Consequently, Schleiermacher points out two interrelated methods, namely, the “divinatory” and the “comparative”, which function simultaneously in this cycle. In his concrete analysis, the “divinatory” and the “comparative” modes are representations and extensions of the two above dimensions. Some researchers simply distinguish two methods: the former as a divinatory sense of the “text”; and the latter as a discernment and understanding of its context and its grammatical dimension.17 Though Schleiermacher’s “textual comparison” is understood also to deal with a later issue of “intertextuality”, his emphasis is on the following aspect:

[T]he explanation of words and contents is not in itself interpretation but provides only aspects of interpretation, and hermeneutics only begins with the determination of the sense, though with the help of these aspects.18

Following this line of argument, psychological divination becomes the ultimate determinative factor to grapple with meaning in a hermeneutical circle.

From the description above, we see Schleiermacher promoting an “interpretation” that derives from “biblical interpretation” as a universal kind of interpretative activity. He first demarcates the complementary subjective and objective dimensions. He next replaces meaning itself with “reconstructed meaning”. Subsequently, he takes charge of the “reconstructed meaning” by “divination” of the interpreter, and to some extent guide understanding within a hermeneutical circle through the “sensitivity” of “divination”. In the process, the Kantian objective of “the bonding of the object and subject” is clearly reflected.

15 For the two above citations, see Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p.47.
17 Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p.48.
18 Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p.48 n.188 and p.103.
Along this line of logic, he sets a far-reaching goal for “understanding” and “interpretation”, which is to “understand the text… better than its author did”.  

When such thoughts of Schleiermacher pertain specifically to literature and text, one sees the direct effect of Schleiermacher contribution to “Athenaeum” and his influence on the early theories of Romanticism that is espoused by Schlegel brothers and others. Of which, one proposition is:

Romantic poetry is progressive… still in the state of becoming… never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory… It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free…

This statement in fact does not exceed Kant and Heidegger’s definition on the “infinite nature” and “freedom” of aesthetics. It also indirectly encompasses Foucault’s idea of “the disappearance or death of the author”, Gadamer and Jauss’s “horizon of expectation” and the “fusion of horizons”, Iser’s “indeterminacy” and “gaps or blanks”, Hirsch’s debate on “meaning” and “significance”, Dufrenne’s concept that “an author’s original meaning is but a determinable X”, and so on. In a restricted sense of text and literature, these are but emanations of German classical aesthetics, and do not represent the import of modern day hermeneutics. A more basic reading of the significance of Schleiermacher’s theory lies in relating his idea of interpretation back to his religious perspective. When the same principles of hermeneutics are applied on theological interpretation, theological interpretation has to relinquish its privileged status. This magnifies the revolutionary implications of modern hermeneutics and the value of humanities.

Though Schleiermacher did not specifically engage in the study of theological interpretation, he maintained,

Incidentally, the question arises whether on account of the Holy Spirit the Scriptures must be treated in a special way. This question cannot be answered by a dogmatic decision about inspiration, because such a decision itself depends on interpretation.26

Similarly, in the Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study published in 1810, he set forth that theological interpretation should be in accordance with the principles of universal hermeneutics.27 Worthy of note, though he denies the special privileges of theological interpretation, he nevertheless does not speak more against it. This clearly has to do with his pietistic religious attitude. This is to say, his suspicion of the “authority of biblical hermeneutics” and “authoritative biblical hermeneutics” in the church tradition may have been redirected against the act of human understanding that is limited by the logic of language itself. This is inline with his description in A Dialogue on the Celebration of Christmas, “To me all forms have become stiff, and all discoursing too tedious and cold.”28

If one can use Schleiermacher’s perspective of religion to make up for “indeterminacy” and “gaps”, we may say that Schleiermacher desires to desert the restriction of speech logic and open up an alternative way: namely to relinquish theological meaning and share the experience and feel of beauty. After a few gentlemen, who are keen thinkers and debaters but who lacked artistry and feelings,29 offered their great discourses, Schleiermacher conveyed his ideal through a character who had been silent until then—an ideal that perhaps can be called “theological hermeneutics”:

Ladies… would have sung to you, with all piety of your discourses dwelling in them far more inwardly; or how charmingly, from hearts full of love and joy, they might have chatted with you, saying what would have otherwise pleased and enlivened you in a better way than they can have been by these solemn speeches of yours!... The unspeakable subject demands and even produces in me an unspeakable joy…30

26 Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, The Hermeneutics Reader, p.80; Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p.49.
30 Schleiermacher, Christmas Eve, p.73; Schleiermacher, Religion and Feeling, p.516.
In his works *On Religion* and *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher speaks constantly of religion in terms of “a pious feeling” and “a feeling of absolute dependence”\(^{31}\) et cetera to explicate the essence of religion, and “poetic” and “passion”\(^{32}\) to describe the contents of the Bible, so much so N. Z. Zia (Xie Fuya) points out the synonymous meanings of “religion” and “piety” in the German language.\(^{33}\) In a similar way, “religious” and “pious” are quite similar in English. Even though this experiential-expressive model is later criticised by George Lindbeck,\(^{34}\) it has already left a deep impact on contemporary Christian thinkers, such as “Tillich, Bultmann, Macquarrie, Kaufman of Protestantism…, as well as Bernard Lonergan,… Hans Küng, David Tracy, etc., who all support the experiential-expressive perspective to religion”.\(^{35}\)

With regard to the interpretative limits of linguistic-logic, one sees the exasperation of the language medium in face of the absolute “holy word” as Schleiermacher’s “universal principles of hermeneutics” is applied onto the field of theological interpretation.

In face of such a unique interpretative object that does not allow differing meanings, the concept of the “fusion of horizons” in the poetic romanticism and literary hermeneutics becomes ineffective. Theological hermeneutics needs to make a fundamental choice between the definitive meaning of the “divine word” and the logic that underlies an interpretive activity. Schleiermacher’s turn towards the experience of feelings is an attempt to escape the “bonds of language”.

Schleiermacher, speaking of interpretation in terms of subjective selection, meaning reconstruction and intuitive feeling, erodes the truth perspective of traditional churches. He breaks new ground for modern hermeneutics, but he himself wanders off this path to allow the fulfilment of the “divine word” through pious feelings. He may likely have realised that the pursuit of interpretation this way leads ultimately to ever-receding meaning. He thus uses feeling and poetic experience as a point of departure, carrying considerable shade of romanticism, but at the same time differentiates from it. Romanticism does not concern with the certainty of meaning. It instead advocates poetic expression and the indeterminacy of meaning in the reading process. Schleiermacher, however, makes “interpretation” appeal to a universal religious experience, in order to prevent “interpretation” from destroying the foundations

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of faith. From this, we again see that “hermeneutics” escapes real malice in the theological dimension, and the difficulty that theological hermeneutics poses cannot be explained in the same way as can literature and texts.

Consequently, another problem arises. Even if theological hermeneutics breaks away from the authority of the church and the bonds of language, and practice a new kind of religious experience, can there be an identical and universal “religious experience”? How would one then distinguish such an experience? Here lies the brunt of George Lindbeck’s criticism of the “experiential-expressive” model.36 Logically, a universal “religious experience” is similar to Kant’s “common sense” based on the “free play of our cognitive powers”.37 It can be assumed, but cannot be proven. In terms of theological significance, Schleiermacher’s “piety” seems to return to Augustine’s seven steps of “understanding the transcendent referent”. In this, “real understanding” becomes “spiritual” and “moral purification”.38

Yet there has to be a way to explain theology, even if the explanation is one based on religious faith.

The Nature of “Theological Hermeneutics”

Theology is practically an interpretation of the Bible, creeds, religious traditions and experiences.39 At a basic level, all theological schools of thought embody the nature of hermeneutics. Christian theology after Schleiermacher can generally be classified in terms of George Lindbeck’s “experiential-expressive” and “cultural-linguistic” distinction. The difference between the two models lies in the difference between “experience” and “language”.

The former is akin to “piety” in Schleiermacher’s thinking. Religious experience is seen as the basic component of religious faith. Creeds are but the linguistic expression of this “experience”. Accordingly, the equivalence of religions derives from the universality of experience (a different explanation is of course necessary for the “linguistic” model).40 One natural implication is a theology that inherits Gadamer’s language of hermeneutics. The “radical plurality of language” exposes the “radical ambiguity of history”.41 The interpretation of the nature of theology following the “experiential-expressive” model may become a radical one. Tracy forthrightly uses “hermeneutics” to define “theology” in a manner akin to Gadamer, who expresses that

40 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Systematic Theology”, p.43.
interpretative reading is a participation in history.\textsuperscript{42} Tracy defines “systematic theology primarily as hermeneutical and proposes that the task of Christian systematic theology is the interpretive retrieval of the meaning and truth claims of the Christian classic”\textsuperscript{43} Correspondingly, Ott applies the “holistic nature of interpretation” to the interpretation of the Bible, its theological content and contemporary missions. He states similarly that the “essence of theology is hermeneutics”, but he qualifies that the central component of theology is made up of these three aspects. These aspects form a “theological hermeneutical circle”, and render the “hermeneutical circle” a “detailed interpretation” of these three “consecutive circles”.\textsuperscript{44} The double meaning of “circle” and “circularity” was also a foremost question Paul Tillich dealt with in \textit{Systematic Theology}. What Ott appropriated was mainly his “methodological consequence”,\textsuperscript{45} namely, the interdependency of every aspect of theological interpretation. So, Ott actually recourses to a position of faith and confirms the “meaning-content experienced in religious faith” through the “experiential nature of thinking” and the “objectification tendency of speech”.\textsuperscript{46}

The latter “cultural-linguistic” model carries with it a similar affinity to the nature of hermeneutics. As its proponent George Lindbeck suggests, the general significance of linguistic symbols and the explanation of dogma lie not in the “external word” but in “heavily ritualized” and “comprehensive interpretive schemes”. “Religion… comprises a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed”, which in turn also “molds” or “shapes” religious experience.\textsuperscript{47} In comparison with the former “experiential-expressive” model, Lindbeck “internalizes” the external categories of language and creed into religion itself. In terms of Schleiermacher’s “hermeneutics”, this “internalization” in effect severs the connection between text and world, and text and the interpretative process.\textsuperscript{48} This is comparable to Karl Barth’s interpretative paradigm of “\textit{sola Scriptura}” or “\textit{solus Christus}”.\textsuperscript{49}

\begin{itemize}
\item Ott, “What is Systematic Theology?”, pp. 229-230.
\item George A. Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}, pp.32-34.
\item “The greatest contribution...of Lindbeck should be in his affirmation of the religious tradition and his steadfast belief in the self-instructing nature of tradition… However, he reverts religion back into a linguistic-symbolic system, and as such promotes religious
\end{itemize}
Karl Barth emphasizes, “Word ought to be exposed in the words”. He suggests that Bible is to be read as an “enigma” of “substance” and not an “enigma” of “document”. Therefore, to a certain extent, there is also an “internalization” and “construction” of “language”. However, Barth does not view such method as “exclusive” to the Christian faith. For example in his introduction to the second edition of the commentary on Romans, he posits clearly, “My ‘Biblicist’ method… is applicable also to the study of Lao-Tse and Geethe.” To illustrate the correspondence of Barth’s paradigm and Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic model”, and to understand Barth’s pursuit of “real substance” in interpretation, which is not done in a “closed” perspective of interpretation, we analyze his three separate introductions the Romans commentary in 1918, 1921 and 1922. In the course of a short four-year period, there appears subtle changes to what he means by “interpreted meaning”.

In the introduction of the first edition, he defines the acts of interpretation within the “doctrine of Inspiration”. He almost cites Mannheim’s view on the subject of “fusion of horizons” verbatim: “The understanding of history is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of to-morrow.” Three years later in an introduction to the second edition, Barth continues to engage in “conversation” between two “horizons of expectations”. Barth expresses, “… till I have almost forgotten that I am not its author; till I know the author so well that I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name myself.” He is concerned that “the Word ought to be exposed in the words” and to this aim he labours greatly. A year later in an introduction to the third edition, the original “conversation” is re-explained as the interpreter allowing the author’s voice to be heard, “The question is whether or no [sic] he is to place himself in a relation to his author of utter loyalty. Is he to read him, determined to follow him to the very last word.” Compared to Foucault’s “the author-function will disappear”, “What difference does it make

truth as merely a truth within an inner coherent system (like the truth of mathematical symbols), and does not tell us what objective reality is.” Jiang Pisheng, “Dialogoue, Truth and Religious Language”, p.125.


50 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p.8.
51 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p.12.
52 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p.1. For Mannheim’s concept of “fusion of horizons”, see n.22 above.
53 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p.8.
54 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p.17.
who is speaking?”, and other like sayings, Barth recedes in an entirely opposite direction from “conversation” to the “text” and then to the “author”.

Bearing this in mind, the “ontological” tendency of Lindbeck’s view of “language” and the “substantial” tendency of Barth’s view of “language” show us two possible divergences of the “cultural-linguistic model”. First, when language is removed from “experiential expression”, its significance does not necessarily remain adequate within its “systematic inner coherence” (for instance, Barth’s starting point). Second, when a linguistic system involves dialogue partners, then the pursuit of “substance” will tilt the dialogue towards the side of equilibrium (for instance, Barth’s terminus). Actually, such a result is inevitable in Lindbeck’s “system” because when religious language is seen as a “ritualistic interpretive scheme”, the self-unifying nature of the system becomes the legitimate basis for symbolic truth. Outside Lindbeck’s system, one observes the applicability of Barth’s words, “The more successfully the good and the right assume concrete form, the more they become evil and wrong— *summum jus, summa injuria*… Is there anywhere legality which is not fundamentally illegal?” 56  Barth’s later concern is not with “human interpretation”, “misreading” and the “reconstruction of meaning” that Schleiermacher was concerned with, but the self-revelation of God’s word because “the testimony of the Bible… and the autonomy of our own world of thought is an impossible hermeneutical programme”57, that “revelation is not a predicate of history, but history is a predicate of revelation”.58 Consequently, Barth’s hermeneutics is seen as “a hermeneutics of revelation and not a hermeneutics of signification”.59 Interestingly, Barth, like Schleiermacher, also uses “intuitive certainty” to elucidate “genuine understanding and interpretation”.60 We notice that while Schleiermacher frees “interpretation” from the chains of “language” and practices it in religious experience, Karl Barth similarly uses a “word event”61 to break away from the captivity of language. While the extreme case of hermeneutical language ultimately would posit that “there is nothing outside the

55 Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, pp.186-87.
56 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.479.
58 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2:58; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, p.129.
60 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.7.
Barth asserts using a contrary (or analogous) logic that, apart from faith, interpretation has no sure footing. He occasionally takes interest in irrefutable rhetorical sentences:

Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document – of any document! – except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words? I answer by asking quite simply whether, if the Epistle is to be treated seriously at all, it is reasonable to approach it with any other assumption than that God is God.

Though these rhetorical assertions may not necessarily withstand further threshing, Barth makes his point: “belief” acts as a precursor to “interpretation”.

Pursuing further the “experiential-expressive” and “cultural-linguistic” paths, one perhaps reaches a paradox. On the one hand, if one does not, like Schleiermacher, break away from the restriction of language and disrupt linguistic interpretative activity, and simply to hold onto a yet proven “universal religious experience”; nor does one first subject thinking to experience and then later weed out “oddities” to fulfill its universal nature (like Ott), one would perhaps not be able to escape the subversion of meaning (as Tracy hints). On the other hand, if one assumes Ott’s way of reducing religion to “a system of self-contained symbols”, one may have to take Karl Barth’s alternative of changing the object of “interpretation” – an alternative which would require religious faith to maintain meaning.

Apart from regressing into religious experience and faith itself, would theological hermeneutics be able to face the challenges of modern hermeneutics? In other words, how could theological hermeneutics ultimately provide a solution to the pursuit of meaning amidst the tension present in the “language” medium? In what sense can theological hermeneutics find its solution to the problem of theological meaning? In any case, since the “divine word” is “expressed in human language” one must “accept the various limitations of this language”, and can thus “exploit the ambiguity in language in an extreme manner”.

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62 “There is no outside-text… beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing.” Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak trans. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp.158-59.
63 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 2:506-512; Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics, p.131.
64 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, p.11, 18.
65 Ott maintains the way “to overcome metaphysics in the field of theology” is “to explicate all thoughts as basically objective in essence and then separate the oddities in religion from these thoughts”. Ott, “What is Systematic Theology?”, p.229.
66 Pontificia Commissio Biblica, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, p.ix.
In fact, this question already received attention in theological hermeneutics during the time of Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Paul Tillich were major representatives discussing the question. The hermeneutical thoughts of Tracy, Ott, Lindbeck, Eberling and others also attempted to explicate the problem in their time. Perhaps, what we need is to find a thread and a paradigm different from that of philosophical or theological hermeneutics. From there, we may understand the unique possibilities of theology afresh.

We need to take note that Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Paul Tillich developed their theology in relation to the doubt and lost of faith in Christian philosophy, caused by the unprecedented disaster of the Second World War. On the one hand, this situation might have resulted ultimately in the effacement of the traditional “meaning”; on the other hand, the “protection of meaning” became a basic problem. Karl Barth’s later explanation of “solus Christus” had nothing in common with these considerations of reality of his contemporaries. Although Barth employed a more rigid model, yet his absolute renouncement of the “analogy of being”, and the assertion of various propositions such as “let God be God” and “the Wholly Other”,

certainly did not act so as “to secure the existence of a godhead… but to emphasise the radical difference between the divine essence, the Godness of God, and all ungodly essences”.

His strong rejection of the Nazi position had a casual relation with this theological attitude. Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Tillich (and also Schleiermacher) differ from him in that they do not “get out of the circle (of understanding) but… come into it”.

C. The “Hermeneutical Circle” and the Identification of Meaning
Heidegger wants to go into the hermeneutical circle “in the right way” because “this circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of the Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle… In this

67 About Barth’s strong renouncement of the analogy of being between God and man and that of creation, relationship and operation, etc., see article by Heinrich Ott, “Cong Shexue yu Zhexue de Xiangyu de Beijing Kan Haideger Sixiang de Jiben Tezheng” (Der Weg Martin Heideggers und der Weg der Theologie), in Liu Xiaofeng ed., Heidegger and Theology, p.180.
68 Cf. Liu, Xiaofeng, Zouxiang Shizijiasheng de Zhen (Towards the Truth of the Cross) (Shanghai: Sanlian, 1995), pp.48-62.
69 Werner G. Jeanrond, Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance, p.134.
circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.” Gadamer is motivated by a “positive possibility”. He believes “that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance”. Concerning the reading that follows a “vicious circle”, Gadamer observes only the nature of “arbitrariness” and “fancies”, but he does not touch on Heidegger’s corresponding category of “popular conceptions”. In Heidegger’s view, if “arbitrariness” determines a certain “pre-understanding”, or if “pre-understanding” is confused with “popular conceptions”, then the “hermeneutical circle” becomes a “vicious circle”. One has to enter the hermeneutical circle “in the right way” to realize the “positive possibility” of interpretation. The right way is to understand that “our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions”. Having precluded “arbitrary fancies” and “popular conceptions” which result in a vicious hermeneutical circle, and having scrutinized the “the existential fore-structure of Dasein itself”, the resulting kind of “pre-understanding” is what Karl-Otto Apel calls the “logos of hermeneutics”. The “fore-structure” in the “hermeneutical circle” expressed here clearly refers to a substantive determinacy of “Being”. Gadamer, perhaps having focussed too much on the “horizon of expectation” and “fusion”, did not study “limited Being” (whether in a religious or irreligious sense), and thus did not work with the problem of “popular conceptions”. Later conceptions of literary and textual “interpretation” further misunderstood Gadamer’s interpolation, and conveniently dwelt on language’s “plurality of meaning”, the “allusive nature of expression”, “multiplicity of meaning” and the “reasonable conflicting nature of interpretation”. These ideas missed the original intent that the constant goal of hermeneutics is to seek meaning. They also disregarded the “power structure” of language’s ability to impart feelings of shock and sadness. They may even

74 Miikka Ruokanen, *Hermeneutics as an Ecumenical Method in the Theology of Gerhard Ebeling*, p.135. Miikka Ruokanen believes that the “hermeneutical logos” refers to a linguistic criterion in which pre-understanding forms the act of interpretation, though this may be questionable.
76 Foucault: “My problem is essentially the definition of the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners; what I would like to grasp is the system of limits and exclusion which we practice without knowing it; I would like to make the cultural unconscious apparent.” See Michel Foucault, *Rituals of Exclusion*. Cited from Judith Butler,
bring about an absolute break down of “reading activity”. This kind of “interpretation” actually becomes a “popular conception”, which results in a “vicious circle”.

Entering the “hermeneutical circle” does not mean replacing “meaning” with “interpretation”. Paul Tillich discusses the “theological circle” in relation to this.77 He admits there remains “an a priori of experience and valuation” in theological hermeneutics and that “this is a circle which no religious philosopher can escape”. This restriction caused by a priori and circularity in theological hermeneutics makes one aware that it is not viable to recognize theology as an empirical-inductive science (experiential theology), a metaphysical-deductive science (conceptual theology), nor even a composite of the two. The reason follows:

If an inductive approach is employed, one must ask… what characteristic of reality or experience is the empirical basis of this theology. Whatever the answer may be, an a priori of experience and valuation is implied. The same is true of a deductive approach, as developed in classical idealism. The ultimate principles in idealist theology… like all metaphysical ultimates… are religious ultimates at the same time.

Like Heidegger, Tillich immediately points out, speaking of the circularity of the interpretive a priori of “Being”: “It is by no means a vicious one. Every understanding of spiritual things (Geisteswissenschaft) is circular.”78 Tillich’s affirmation of the “hermeneutical circle” results in his perspective towards history that resembles Gadamer’s “effective history”:79

Tradition… does not report “naked facts,” which itself is a questionable concept; but it does bring to mind significant events through a symbolic transformation of the facts… (But) in these forms of tradition it is virtually impossible to separate the historical occurrence from

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its symbolic interpretation… All history-writing is dependent both on actual occurrences and on their reception by a concrete historical consciousness. There is no history without factual occurrences, and there is no history without the reception and interpretation of factual occurrences by historical consciousness.  

In a short span of about more than ten lines or so, Tillich employs five times the idea of “entering the theological circle”. He naturally does not put emphasis on the “expectation” of “the Being”. This kind of “entering” involves “concrete commitment”, “theological self-interpretation” and a ceasing to speak of oneself “as a scientific theologian in the ordinary sense of ‘scientific’”.  

His only concern is, “Every theologian is committed and alienated; he is always in faith and in doubt…” Thus, his analysis of the “theological circle” is like Heidegger’s “hermeneutical circle” whose “expectation of horizon” does not expand infinitely. He regulates “Being” through the lens of existential significance.

The various approaches of “non-religious interpretation of Christianity or Christian faith”, the “demythologization” of the biblical message and three kinds of “correlations” between man and God are, respectively, how Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Tillich choose to “enter” the “hermeneutical circle”.

Bonhoeffer explains the “non-religious interpretation” as the result of being “driven back to the beginnings of… understanding” due to the difficult situation of reality. This difficult situation even resulted in his imprisonment and execution, but it also brought about two areas of advancement in his theological thought over and above the common theological interpretation: first, the question of the “form” and “essence” of religious faith; second, the secular religion of the “presence of God” and the “significance” of the “eternal absence”. These two aspects form the basic directions of a “non-religious interpretation”.

85 Tillich, *Systematic Theology vol.1*, pp.84-85.
87 About “meaning as an eternal absence”, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Essays van Emmanuel Levinas* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1984), p.46. Derrida alternatively points out, “What opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence”. “Writing” is “the represented in its pure state, without the represented”. It is “constitutive… of
The unique circumstances of German Christians after the Nazi came into power showed Bonhoeffer that the institutional church and traditional faith could not engage and respond to suffering in reality. He, thus, believes that one has to “speak of God in a non-religious way” in order to escape from the religious perspective of “popular conceptions”:

Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail – in fact it is always the *dues ex machina* that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure.

The religious ideals with “form” removed and “essence” remaining should then “speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weaknesses but in strength”.

To understand Christianity in terms of its “essence”, it necessarily means a continuous interpretation of religious experience and the object of faith, to which Schleiermacher and Barth regress. To Bonhoeffer, this is what it means to “enter the hermeneutical circle”, and yet at the same time to explicate meaning from that “circle”; Bonhoeffer employs the concept of the “absence of God” to the interpretive relationship formed between “meaning” and the “interpreter”.

The purported “absence of God” closely relates to the “the world’s coming of age”. A world that has not yet come of age seems to have God everywhere. When believers speak of God in a common way, their “horizon of expectation” is often directed actually at a kind of god who is expectantly listening to pleas for help. This “horizon of expectation” fuses with the “historical Christianity” and leads to the marginalization of God. Thus according to Bonhoeffer, “The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that every reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age.”

The “absence of God” in a “world that has come of age” – this proposition renders instantaneously ineffective existing religious experience and modes of religious faith. In this sense, the only possible way of explanation is,

The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us… The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.

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*speech, of signified meaning” and constituted “presence”, “paradoxically, by being added to it”. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp.159, 312-313.*


This “world without the working hypothesis of God” cannot but remind us of Heidegger, who decided that the “first, last, and constant task” in interpretation is to do away with “fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception… presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions”.  

Bonhoeffer’s “non-religious interpretation” of Christianity seems to hint that with the exclusion of religious “pre-understanding” made up of “popular conceptions”, one would attain the “primordial kind of knowing” that is “hidden” in the “hermeneutical circle”.

Bultmann’s “demythologization” is considered as a kind of existential interpretation of the Bible. He first raises the issue in “The Problem of Hermeneutics” and “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?”: “Since the Scriptures are about God’s revelation, how then do humans have a pre-understanding of God’s revelation?”  

Besides, “If… every interpretation is guided by a pre-understanding, the question arises whether it is possible to gain objective historical knowledge at all?” These two questions carry and yet undo each other. The answer to the former question cannot be found in biblical “myths”, since to interpret the biblical revelation, one has to explain the existence of human beings; as a result, the inquiry of God is embodied within the inquiry of the meaning of life. Consequently, “demythologization”, which turns the question of “revelation” to “human self-understanding” is faced with the latter question of how one is to avoid the “relativity” that comes about due to a different “pre-understanding”? This is the main topic of Bultmann’s The Presence of Eternity.

Since the “interpretation of the revelation of the Bible” now means the “interpretation of the existence of human beings”, Bultmann construes the “meaning of history” using the “present moment” and suggests, among other important propositions, that “meaning in history lies always in the present” and “every moment is the now of responsibility, of decision”. Accordingly, he posits, “Genuine historical knowledge demands a very personal aliveness of the understanding subject… Only the historian who is excited by his participation in history,… will… be able to understand history. In this sense the most subjective

92 Bultmann uses “presupposition” here and not “pre-understanding”, but elsewhere he calls “a particular understanding” of a matter which “is presupposed… a pre-understanding”. Bultmann, The Presence of Eternity, p.113. As such, the two terms will be used interchangeably.
95 Bultmann, The Presence of Eternity, p.149.
interpretation of history is at the same time the most objective.” 98 It is not impossible to read these propositions as concordant to Gadamer’s “effective history”. However, Gadamer believes that Bultmann’s “existential interpretation” only “interpreted Heidegger’s concept of the inauthenticity of There-being in a theological way.” 99 Bultmann would in turn have difficulty agreeing with his successor because he enters into this kind of “pre-understanding” exactly to prevent the “disappearance of truth”. 100 He constantly emphasizes that “all science” require “freedom from presuppositions, for an unprejudiced approach” to happen. 101 In contrast to Bonhoeffer, Bultmann’s issue is no longer ridding “pre-understanding” of “popular conceptions”; but how to “enter the hermeneutical circle” and at the same time surmount the limitations of “pre-understanding”.

According to Bultmann’s discussion, “pre-understanding” includes two different levels: first, the distinct “perspective or viewpoint” of the interpreter; second, the interpreter’s “existential encounter with history”. 102 The former identified level simply “destroyed… the conception of the relation between historian and history as the relation between subject and object” and demonstrates that “the historian cannot see history from a neutral stand-point outside history”. 103 Yet the latter’s emphasis on “encounter” does not merely reflect the “fusion of horizons” of Gadamer and others; instead, its main point is to interpret “existential” “self-knowledge” as “the knowledge of one’s situation and of the problems, the tasks, and the possibilities which are contained within it”, 104 as well as the “distress”, “repentance”, “doubt” and “despair” 105 that humanity cannot overcome. It follows that “pre-understanding” is not necessary to understand history “in its empirical course but as the sphere of life within which the human being moves, within which human life gains and develops its possibilities”. 106 It renders all human “works of culture, in social and political orders as well as in philosophy, religion, world-views… and in art and poetry” the manifestations of history, of which the common essence is humanity’s “virtue of the soul”, which is the “objectifications of the soul”. In this way, “the distance between the interpreted object and the interpreting subject vanishes”. 107

Of special note, even though Bultmann may put forward like Kant and Schleiermacher that “the interpreter shares in general human nature”, his “existential encounter” refers not to “common sense” or “universality of experience” but to common problems in the existential context.

Paul Tillich’s perspective of theological hermeneutics mentioned earlier responds directly to Heidegger’s “entering into the hermeneutical circle”; yet it presents more similarities to Bonhoeffer and Bultmann’s thoughts. As reflected, “Tillich was from the beginning intent on relating theological thought to non-theological reflection and seemingly non-religious spheres of culture”, and his “method of correlation” promotes “an ‘answering’ theology responding to the questions raised by the situation of its time”. So, not only are “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the God of the philosophers… the same God”, it allows one to escape “the ontological anxiety of the void of absolute meaninglessness” and to draw out the possibility of “correlation”.

Like Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, Tillich affirms the relation between “religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them” and “concepts denoting the human and those denoting the divine”. In so doing, he promotes the plurality of “method” and not the plurality of “meaning”. The use of “plurality of meaning” to construe the “hermeneutical activity”, and conversely enriching the “plurality of meaning” through further “hermeneutical activity”, we see the 20th century moving increasingly away from the tragic import of the “war of the gods”, but what remain of hermeneutics are simply cursory sentiments of the literati. To the contrary, a plurality of “method” demonstrates the necessity of “meaning”. It warns against the subversion of “meaning” by “interpretation”, and protects “meaning” in a modern context that tends towards skepticism. This is an important caveat for related studies in humanities.

Additionally, the thread constituted by Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann illustrates the following: theological interpretation has to enter the “hermeneutical circle” and the modern discourse context. To merely take recourse in religious experience or religious faith itself is questionable at least in terms of logic. Neither can it face up to the challenges of modern hermeneutics. Perhaps, it is only through entry into the hermeneutical circle that theological interpretation is resurrected. As Tillich expresses, one “can elicit an understanding of the significance of the Christian faith even from those who stand entirely outside it”.

111 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology vol. 1*, p.84.
Conclusion
In the 20th century, we indeed see the marginalization of the position of Christianity in the area of secular life; yet in various thoughts of humanities involving “value judgments”, theological perspective assumes an increasingly prominent and irreplaceable significance because the pursuit of “value” in secular arena leads eventually to relativity of all “values”. Through the deconstruction of “grand narrative” brought about by post-modern criticisms, Christian theology receives more room for exploration. To a certain extent, this room reveals a similar deep structure of humanities and theology.

The attempt to introduce a perspective of theological hermeneutics for the study of humanities rests not only on the fact that theological hermeneutics is the source of activities in textual interpretation; more fundamentally, the absence of theological hermeneutics leaves the questions of “power discourse”, “openness of text” and other basic hermeneutical problems unsettled. Through standard hermeneutical analysis, we are aware that our “pre-understanding” determines our interpretative activity; that a “definite meaning” is but a certain result of a “truth structure”. We are also aware that the “openness of text” and “over-interpretation” lead ultimately to the dissolution of meaning. The extreme application of reception theory and reader-response criticism renders any communication impossible, since “a thousand readers, a thousand Hamlets” becomes the accepted norm of reading. In terms of philosophical hermeneutics, this interpretation simply subverts the “myth of history and language”, but it is hardly helpful in re-constructing meaning.

In theology, the particular nature of hermeneutics and object of interpretation requires one to maintain the tension between “truth” and “method”, and to work with the erosion of definite meaning that arises from a varying discourse context. One needs to find an anchorage so as not to escape into “blanks”; one necessarily affirms the realness of the “enigma”, while acknowledging the limitations of human beings, of language and of interpretation itself. This, ought to be the character of humanities.
This article discusses the reform of Sino-Christian theology from the characteristics of language. First I want to establish my view of language:

1) Language cannot separate itself from the forms of life; language is itself a form of life. As there are many forms of life, there is also a manifold of languages. If one wants to understand a language, one must integrate with the corresponding form of life.

2) The language that is integrated with our form of life is the only language that we can understand. The language of science, the language of philosophy, the language of theology, mathematics and even the formalized artificial languages in the end have their foundation in the everyday language interrelated with our everyday life.

3) Language is not only a means for our description of the world and for explaining ourselves, but is also the frame for our understanding of the world and for organising our thoughts.

My question is then: if the above view of language is correct, what kind of proposal for constructing Sino-Christian theology can we then draw forth from it?

My conclusion is: language itself is actually “dao”. The Holy Word (shengyan) lives in the human word (renyan), and the Holy Spirit lives in the lives of human beings. There is no such Holy Word or Holy Spirit that is separated from our life. Even if there were, it could still not use our language to express itself, and we would not understand it. What is not related to our life is totally meaningless to us. God cares for people, “dao” (the Word) is with God, and it is also in our lives. If we want to understand the Holy Word we must integrate it into our lives. Because of the diverse forms of life, we should develop a Sino-Christian theology that conforms with the characteristics of the Chinese language and with the Chinese context; applying to it a narrative blending of the history of the Chinese, their reality and hopes, expounding and promoting Sino-Christian theology. “Dao” and “the Holy Spirit” are not only

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1 I have chosen to use the term “Sino-Christian theology” throughout this article for the Chinese term “hanyu shenxue”. There are other possible renderings, such as “Sino-theology” or more literally “theology in Chinese language”, but Sino-Christian theology is in line with the terminology used at the Institute for Sino-Christian Studies at Tao Fong Shan in Hong Kong. - Transl. note.
unfolding in the lives of Hebrews and Greek, but also in the context integrated with Chinese lives.

**Starting from Translation**

In the past linguists often considered language as a tool for describing the world. The world is all the events that have happened, and we use language to describe them. Language is a picture of facts. In contemporary linguistic philosophy, this view of language is seen as one-sided, since language naturally does not only describe the world, but is also the medium for our interchange of thoughts. In his latter philosophy, Wittgenstein criticised his own early view and theory of language as picture, which proves that language is not only of descriptive use but also for orders, apologies, greetings and a number of other uses. Wittgenstein also demonstrated that the use of language is connected with its rules, and that the rules of language are formed in and abided by in language activities. Language activities are one part of the form of life, and only if we take part in language activity and its related form of life can we really learn the rules of a language and understand that kind of language.

Contemporary language philosophers have also taken this kind of viewpoint a step further: when we are using a language, abiding by specified language rules, language does not merely describe things, but is also organising the thoughts we want to express. So-called objective facts are actually facts that we have systematically bestowed with meaning through the concept and structure of language. Because of the diverse forms of life and languages, even if it is “the same” fact, through explanations in different languages it can also produce differences in understanding among people.

The question is then: if the view of language presented above is correct, what consequences will it have on theology? A crucial issue is: with the Bible being translated into different languages, will it produce different understandings of the Bible from people?

Some theologians promote a Bible translation and understanding that is separated from the translation and understanding of other texts, since the Bible was written with the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will help the believers to achieve a common interpretation and understanding, and the translation of “The Septuagint” is one example of that. I believe that the Holy Spirit can help us, but I do not believe that the Holy Spirit’s help to us is like magic. From my own experience of reading the Bible, the Holy Spirit’s help for a person to understand appears in the natural process when man integrates his own life experiences and very seriously reads the Bible, reflects upon its meaning and teachings, looks ahead and lets it guide his own behaviour. I think that we as ordinary persons should use the common sense bestowed on man to talk about this issue. Actually, there has never been any Bible translation with an identical content. The translation of “The Septuagint” is simply a myth. Even the
Bible itself has been compiled out of a historical process, and actually there has been no final conclusion on what texts are part of canon or are not part of canon. There are for example seven more books in the Catholic Bible than in the Protestant. I do not understand Hebrew, but when comparing an English translation of the Hebrew Bible used by Jews with an English translation of the Christian Old Testament, I find rather many differences. There are even some translations of names that involve key issues of doctrine. Martin Luther’s translation to German and the German Bible translation in modern language have differences, and the reason for this is the change of the language. The Bible translation made by the Jewish theologians Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber have differences with Martin Luther’s Bible, but these are not only because of language changes, but also because of the question of theological understanding.

Chinese Bible translation is even more diversified. Until today there have been over one hundred translations that we have evidence for, including to classical Chinese (wenyan), vernacular (baihua) and several dialects. There are two peculiarities worth noting about the process of these translations: (1) they were first translated by foreigners, before the Chinese translated themselves; (2) the classical Chinese version was popular before the vernacular version became popular.

First, almost only foreign missionaries did the translation work. Chinese were at most allowed to make some language polishing. From Robert Morrison’s first Chinese translation (started in 1807, published in full in Malacca in 1823) to “The Mandarin Union Version” in 1919, as far as we know, they were translated by foreigners according to their understanding of the original text, and of Chinese. This situation did not change until the last decades. Presently Chinese themselves undertake most of the new translations of the Bible. The development of the Chinese language and of biblical archaeology has made biblical scholars feel the strong necessity for a new translation of the Bible, and now it is only Chinese Bible scholars themselves who are qualified for this work. Among foreign scholars today, it is very rare to find someone who is simultaneously fluent in Chinese, Hebrew and Greek. Among Chinese scholars the level of foreign languages is normally higher than the Chinese level of foreign scholars. This is a historical leap. Lu Chen-chung (Lü Zhenzhong) made a start being the first individual Chinese to translate the whole Bible. In 1946 he translated *The New Testament* and in 1970 *The Old Testament*. With the translation of *Today’s Chinese Bible* by Moses Hsu (Xu Mushii), Chow Lien Hwa (Zhou Lianhua), I-Jin Loh (Luo Weiren) and others, a new breakthrough was made. They completed *The New Testament* in 1975 and *The Old Testament* in 1979. The style is graceful and smooth, and it has become used and loved among ordinary readers of modern Chinese. The work with *The New Chinese Version*, based on and revised from the Union Version, was undertaken by Paul Yung (Rong Baoluo) and more than 30 Chinese Bible scholars. In 1976 they
published *The New Testament*, and in 1992 the whole *Old Testament* was finished. The whole new Bible translation came out also in 1992. The changes in that version are not many, but they are crucial at many points.

The efforts of Western missionaries to translate the Bible into Chinese cannot be said to have been careless. They used three styles to translate the Bible, High Wenli, Easy Wenli and Mandarin (vernacular). The most popular in the beginning, “The Two Ma Translations” (Robert Morrison’s translation and Joshua Marshman’s translation), were written in Classical Chinese (High Wenli), e.g.: Morrison translated John 1:1 as “In the beginning there was the Word and this Word was with God. And the Word was God.” Marshman translated it as “At first there was the Word. God was with the Word. The Word was God.”

To adapt to the common reader’s language habits the Western missionaries afterwards used both Easy Wenli and vernacular to translate the Bible. *The Union Version of the Bible*, one of the great achievements of their work should, according to the original plan, have had translations in three styles, High Wenli, Easy Wenli and Mandarin (vernacular). Thus comes the saying “only one Bible, but three translations” (*shengjing weiyi, yibenze san*). Later the High and Easy Wenli translations were merged to a “Wenli Union Version” (*wenli hehe yiben*). It was finalised and published together with the “Mandarin Version” in 1919. At that very moment the May Fourth movement was promoting the vernacular, and on one hand the “Mandarin Union Version” (*guanhua hehe yiben*) added fuel to the flames for the development of the vernacular. On the other hand the firm establishment of the position of the vernacular also made the “Mandarin Union Version” come to the fore among the many Bible translations. After 1979 it has been re-printed many times in Shanghai and Nanjing. An edition with horizontal lines and simplified characters was printed 1989 in Nanjing, and until 1994 it was printed in over 10 million copies.

Just as Chinese Buddhist Studies started with the translation of Buddhist scriptures, Chinese theology followed the translation of the Bible and Western theological works. When Buddhism entered China, translation work was primarily done by monks from India and the Western Regions. Only later it became a primary task for Chinese to perform. Kumārajīva (344-413), Paramārtha (499-569) and Xuanzang (602-664) are known as the three great Buddhist translators. Xuanzang was comparatively late, and it is difficult to say if he surpassed the other two in either number or quality of translation, but Xuanzang started the Consciousness-only school in China. The other two did

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2 These are my translations from classical Chinese. Morrison’s original Chinese text was “dang shi yi you yan er qi yan xie shen yu qi yan wei shen”, and Marshman’s "yuan shi wei yan shen tong yan yan ji shen" - *Transl. note.*

3 “Western Regions” is a translation of “Xiyu”, referring to Central Asia. - *Transl. note.*

4 This school is also known as the Dharma-character (*fa xiang*) school and is closely related to the Yogācāra school. - *Transl. note.*
not start any Buddhist school of thought in China. If you should look for a reason, I believe that while Xuanzang brought in the mentality of his Chinese mother tongue when translating Sanskrit texts, the former two transformed the understanding of Buddhist scriptures from their mother tongue Sanskrit into Chinese. Translation should be faithful to the original text, but it must also be an analytical, constructive and creative work. Xuanzang’s Buddhist translations, with the inside information of a native Chinese speaker’s mind, were bound to merge more and easier into Chinese culture and the experiences of Chinese life. In this way, Buddhist schools with Chinese characteristics were more easily formed. This is actually a fact. When Xuanzang interpreted and translated the ten great treatises of the Consciousness-only school, and created the Treatise on the Theory of Consciousness-only (Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi), he brought in his own understanding of China and with that established the Consciousness-only school.

The development of Buddhism in China can be divided into three stages: (1) mission, (2) determination of teachings (panjiao), (3) establishment. Buddhist mission in China was a process of a foreign culture rooting in China, step by step being understood by the Chinese. It originated with monks from India and the Western Regions spreading the teaching and translating the scriptures. Gradually Chinese monks took a greater part and finally the main role.

Following the translation of different kinds of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, different Buddhist schools of Indian origin set their foot in China. The Chinese noted their differences and started to inquire what scriptures were more accurate or appropriate, what schools were more orthodox or outstanding. On the premise that all Buddhist scriptures should be acknowledged as Buddhist teachings, they perhaps also wanted to list and arrange the many scriptures and distinguish which were of more or lesser urgency for their study and practice. According to Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks (Tang Gao Seng Zhuan) the Tang Taizong Emperor asked the recluse Sun Simiao: “Which is the greatest of Buddhist sutras?” Sun answered: “The Avatamsaka Sutra is most respected among the many sutras.” The Emperor asked again: “Is it not preposterous that the 600 volumes of the Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra that Master Xuanzang translated cannot be compared with the 60 volumes of the Avatamsaka Sutra?” Sun answered: “Avatamsaka Sutra expounds the karmic causation of all things boundlessly in the phenomenal world and is equally mild and unfettered as the supreme treasure scriptures. It includes all the doctrines of Buddhism, and regardless of which doctrine it can evolve thousands of needle sharp scriptures. However, Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra is but one doctrine in the world of the Avatamsaka Sutra.” After the Tang Taizong Emperor heard Sun Simiao’s words he consequently believed in and held on to the Avatamsaka Sutra. It does not matter if the Taizong Emperor really heard these words from Sun Simiao, since it shows us the doubtless determination of teachings (panjiao) by the disciples of
the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. To determine teachings is not just to listen to what other people say, but also to show one’s own resolution. One’s resolution should come from one’s own life experience and understanding of the Buddhist scriptures. Chinese people’s own determination of scriptures decided what Indian Buddhist schools should be admitted and carried forward in China. Not all Buddhist schools that entered China could take root and develop, but merely a few were disseminated.

Following the progressive merging of Buddhism into Chinese people’s life, the Chinese also started to recognize the essence of Buddhism directly from their own human experience. At this time, the form of expression of thought was not to quote from authoritative and ancient works, but to start directly from one’s life experiences and to use one’s own language to expound Buddhist theory. It was only at this time one can really talk about the birth of Chinese Buddhist studies. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (*liu zu tan jīng*) emerged under such circumstances. In Buddhism, to make a “sutra” from a text expounding the most basic position and view in human life, and to add proof and further expounding to this basic standpoint and view is called “*abhidharma*”. Prior to the *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* there were only “*abhidharma*” Buddhist works written by Chinese, no “sutras”. The naming of *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* clearly shows the Chinese awareness that their Buddhist Studies has a unique origin.

I believe that Christianity in China also developed similarly to Buddhism, with the three stages of mission, determination of teachings and establishment. At present it is still in the mission and determination of teachings stage, and has not yet entered the establishment stage. We cannot yet strictly talk of any Chinese theology. Naturally there are differences between these two missions. When Buddhism entered China, China had a great wide open mind, and often took the initiative of inviting monks from India or the Western regions to come to China and do mission. When Christianity entered China in modern times it followed in the company of invading powers. The majority attitude to Buddhism at the time of entering was based on successively positive preconditions, but the authority holders and the cultural sphere in modern China had an essentially refusal attitude towards Christianity. There was a fear that Christianity would cause turmoil in the state system and with popular feelings. This mentality is perhaps related to the decreasing self-confidence of one’s own national power and ability to digest foreign culture. With the strengthening of Chinese national power in recent years, Chinese scholars have also adopted an increasingly open attitude towards foreign culture.

We have previously discussed how translation into Chinese of the Bible was primarily done by Western missionaries, but how this task of Bible translation is now taken over by Chinese. What must be added is, that Westerners also did the translation and introduction of Western theology, and
even the ideological trends and social concepts of Western philosophy, for example socialism, was first translated and introduced by Western missionaries. To prove this fact you only have to skip through the pages of *Review of the Times* (*Wanguo Gongbao*). It is said that Kang Youwei was enlightened about New Learning from the occasional reading of *Review of the Times* and other journals published by Western missionaries that he could find on the Fourth Avenue⁵ in Shanghai. This was before he went to Beijing to take the civil service exam. The energy with which Chinese scholars now translate Western theological and philosophical works is quite comparable to the fervour with which Buddhist scripture was translated in the Tang dynasty. The Western theological and philosophical works that you can find in Chinese bookstores is not second to what is displayed on the shelves in European and American bookstores. This is because China is now translating and publishing these kinds of works from antiquity until present all at once, while in the Western bookstores one can only find the currently most popular books. Chinese Buddhism takes pride in that the Buddhist canon in Chinese translation is more complete than the original texts kept in India. With such a continued development, the Christian theological book series in China will be more and more complete, and there will emerge a Christian canon in the same manner as with the Buddhist canon.

In the Chinese mainland, scholars of Christianity and theologians have just entered the stage of determination of teachings. Some like existentialist theology, and translate and introduce more Western existentialist theology; others like post-modernist theology and then translate and introduce post-modernist theology; yet others like neo-orthodox theology and evangelical theology and translate and promote more of neo-orthodox and evangelical theology. They also argue between them, and criticize their opponents for being too conservative, too liberal or even go so far as to claim that they deviate from Christianity. However, this determination of teachings is somewhat distant from establishing one’s own theology, since it is still criticizing theology established by others. Only when Chinese Christian scholars realise that the theological doctrine already existing in the West is not enough to answer the questions that Chinese face themselves, that it is not enough to explain the life experiences of Chinese people, and make efforts to establish their own system of theological narratives and concepts, only then can Chinese theology in its true sense appear. Only when the needs of one’s own life and one’s search for the ultimate meaning is satisfied. Naturally, Chinese theology must not only be limited to answer the specific questions of China, but Chinese theology should also answer the new questions of the whole world and of the whole of humanity. For Chinese theology to be Chinese, it must primarily depend on what Chinese

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⁵ *Si malu* or Fourth Avenue was the premier book selling district in Shanghai, and still is today. The road is now known as Fuzhou Road. - Transl. note.
people can experience in their lives, to look from their own angle and use their own language to express the basic questions of human life and of the world, and to believe that this expression accords with the “*dao*” that is with God.

**Human Word and Divine Word**

The beginning of the Gospel of John says: “In the beginning was the Word [*dao*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) What is this *dao*? *Dao* is word, it is language. Some people say that *dao* is not our word, but God’s word. I want to say that *dao* is God’s word, but it is also our word. God’s word is embodied in our word, and God’s spirit lives in our word, and it is only us that often do not hear or see it. This is what the Gospel of John is telling us, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.” We don’t know that light, that life and that *dao*, but that doesn’t indicate that light, life and *dao* are not in this world. In Christianity God, *dao* (word), spirit and life are united. Jesus said to his disciples: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63)

We live in the world and we also live in language. Language is with us, and in our life and through our language we comprehend God’s *dao*. Our life depends on two kinds of language, one kind is the language of genes expressing biological life, and the other is language in the form of the sound and script expressing cultural life. Genes decide our biological life, and the genetic code innately decides whether what grows out of the embryo should be a human or a dog, male or female, a healthy person or a handicapped person. Genes also decide whether if one should have the ability to understand and use the language of sound and script. What differentiates humans from other animals is that human life is not merely decided by the genetic code, but also by the human ability to study and create culture through the language of sound and script. In this respect humans are rather free and can accept any kind of culture, adopt any form of living, and receive any kind of knowledge and technical training, forming any kind of cultural life for a human being. Listening to Jesus shapes the cultural life of a Christian. Listening to Buddha shapes the cultural life of a Buddhist, and listening to Confucius shapes the cultural life of a Confucian believer. Whether a person becomes a worker, a farmer, a soldier, a teacher, a doctor, an engineer or something else is related to what specialised technical training he receives. A person can choose a life with strict adherence to moral rules, or he can choose an unrestrained life. All these patterns of morality, religion and knowledge are cultural forms learnt and inherited through language.

The language of the genetic code coexists with natural biological life, as well as the human language of sound and script coexists with human cultural life, and this is of course good. But what relation does this have with the *dao* that coexists with God? It seems that the former is a natural phenomenon and the
latter is a human phenomenon, and thus they are not the word of God. I will not argue here if the world is a natural existence or a creation by God. I approve of Kant’s view, that to deal with this issue we go beyond the limits of human reason. What I want to point out is that once we accept that God created the world, just like the Bible says, “Then God said… And it was so.” the genetic discoveries of modern science coincidentally even stronger confirm the Bible story of God creating the world. We can say that the language of the genetic code originates from God’s word. We can also say that as big as the laws ruling the celestial bodies, and as small as the laws ruling the atom, in the end it all comes from God’s word. The scientists of the Renaissance believed that the language of nature was God’s beauty written in mathematical language, and glowing with enthusiasm they consequently sought to express the laws of nature in mathematical formula. Thereby one could even better appreciate God’s perfection. However, the unity of the laws of nature and the continuity of the genetic evolution of all living things is not logically sufficient to prove God’s existence, but it does greatly increase the belief in this: the dao unfolding in the world, pervading all things and making nature comply with laws and causes the continuous evolution of all living things.

Some people argue that conformity with laws cannot confirm that God exists, and that only miracles can confirm the existence of God. I believe that from a logical point of view, neither laws nor miracles are enough to confirm the existence of God. The world is so big that we can never fully verify that all phenomena in nature comply with the laws. Even if the phenomena of nature would all comply with the laws, we could claim that natural phenomena are originally like this. This is the standpoint of naturalism. On the other hand, we could of course also claim that natural phenomena are chaotic by nature, and that God gave them order, made them follow laws. In nature we can see both uniform and chaotic conditions at the same time, but we believe that natural phenomena in the final analysis are ordered. This is a basic belief of modern natural science. We insist on this standpoint: whenever we can confirm the relation between the chaotic states of various physical phenomena, we can find its laws. No matter how complicated they are, the outcome is in principle similar to the planets revolving around the Sun, some seemingly not adhering to the laws (set by universal gravity), but after finding new planets influencing them the validity of the laws are confirmed even further. What we see is often common phenomena, but occasionally we see unusual ones that are enough to make us surprised and call them miraculous. But isn’t finding the factors behind the abnormity of miraculous natural phenomena merely evidence that they in fact do adhere to the laws of nature? As miracles are natural phenomena and inherently follow rules, we can use natural phenomena to change existing natural conditions, but we cannot change the laws of nature as such. This is the only thing that humans are not able to do.
Some people believe that God’s greatness shows in his creation of a united, orderly and regulated world. Others believe that God’s greatness shows in his ability to perform miracles. The former argue that except for that the united, orderly and regulated world is a miracle itself, there can be no other miracles altering the laws of nature. The latter argue that God is omnipotent, and that he created the world by his own will, and that he can also change his creation by his own will. This is a big debate in theology, and I have read many articles where Western philosophers discuss this topic. However, the impression I get is that so far there has been no conclusion on a theoretical ground determining which is right or wrong. Maybe there will not be one in the future either, since this issue cannot be answered merely based on logical deduction.

Nevertheless, this issue relates to the human attitude to life. When a person has a certain faith, it is not because this faith has been fully verified by theory or empirically, but because he himself has had an experience, has inherited a living practice or what he has gained knowledge of has made him inclined to have this faith. On a similar note, a person who has grown up with modern natural science education has difficulty in believing that the laws of nature can be changed since what he has learnt, and his life experiences, has given him more evidence and reason to prove that the laws of nature do not change. A person who has not received modern natural science education or one who is without higher education will perhaps more easily support the idea that the laws of nature can change by miracle.

In China today, the attitude to miracles is a watershed between Church Christians and scholars of Christianity, or Church Christians and “Cultural Christians”. I have made a rough poll in the universities and in the Academy of Social Sciences in Shanghai, and found that over 90% of scholars do not believe that miracles going against the laws of nature exist. However, over 80% of Church Christians believe that such miracles exist. I estimate that the situation is similar over the whole Chinese mainland. Scholars of Christianity often have a supportive and sympathetic attitude to Christian culture, but hold a sceptical view on the Bible and other texts with descriptions of miracles. There are scholars who see Church believers’ faith in miracles as superstition, and want to enlighten them and “deconstruct myths”. Most scholars keep an academically neutral attitude, and declare that they do research for its own sake, and do not want to take part in or interfere with church activities. The attitude of Church Christians is the opposite. Among them there are some who think that it is positive for scholars in universities to do research on Christian culture, and that this is positive for the development of Christianity. Some even believe that this is a path to Christian faith, and because of this put the laurel of “Cultural Christian” on their heads. Others have a negative attitude towards this kind of “academic research”, and argue that this research is only superficial and does not reach the core. They argue that it does not enter Christian life, that they are
way off mark, even harmful, since they may substitute essential things for superficial ones and lead Christianity astray.

In articles discussing Cultural Christians, I have seen that theologians from Hong Kong and Macao describe the characteristic difference between mainland scholars studying Christianity and Church believers as of reading the Bible or not, or going to church services or not. I believe that this distinction is superficial. In reality, it is not so that mainland scholars studying Christianity don’t read the Bible, and they do have different understandings on the miracle stories in the Bible. It is not so that they don’t go to church; they even have various views on the meaning of prayer. When it comes to the issue of miracles, it has already become a significant issue in the Sino-theological context.

**Living in Dao and Unfolding Dao**

The death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection is the greatest miracle. If you don’t believe in this miracle can you still call yourself a Christian? Is theology that doesn’t recognise the cross event still Christian theology? Can Sino-Christian theology avoid the cross event? Are we as scholars studying Christianity qualified to talk about Christian theology? To talk about Sino-Christian culture still seems excusable, but isn’t to talk about Sino-Christian theology to meddle in others’ affairs?

Those who have studied Christian theology know that it includes revealed theology as well as philosophical theology. Miracles are one form of God’s revelation. In the Old Testament we can see that God reveals himself through extraordinary images in nature and through events happening between people. God uses these images and events as a pretext to show himself as the Creator of all things under Heaven and Earth, as the ruler of human destiny, and also to admonish the people of Israel: if they obey the commandments and abide by the covenant they shall be bestowed love and favours; if they do not obey the commandments and do not abide by the covenant they will suffer calamities. In the New Testament we can see that Jesus while preaching also performed many miracles, made blind to see, lame to walk, lepers to heal, deaf to hear and dead to resurrect. Finally, he takes revelation to its peak by showing the greatest miracle, dying on the cross and rising again from the dead.

By means of the discourse of philosophy, philosophical theology talks about God’s existence, relations between God and people, the unity of the world, the goal and meaning of human existence, the possibility of and the road to salvation. To my knowledge, philosophical theology will always feel a weakness and a lack in ability and plausibility when trying to explain the cross event of Jesus Christ out of human common sense, experience and rationality. In the Middle Ages philosophy was seen as the handmaid of theology, and philosophical theology had no independent position. Revealed truth was seen as higher than rational truth, and philosophical theology must explain Christian
doctrine stipulated by the Church only under the condition of confirming the
cross event as revealed truth. In modern times reason was elevated to the highest
position. When reason could take its own initiative and face the biblical
narrative it certainly attacked Christianity on a great scale. This was the effect of
the modern Enlightenment. Using functionalistic theory to illustrate the function
of religion in society will only dispel the social function of religion. As soon as
the believers accept the theory of functionalism they would clear out their
religious belief, and thus religion will loose its foundation of faith that can have
a social function. Using the theory of psychological comfort to explain the
gentle mentality of religious believers will make them fall back into despair and
depression. Opium has an anaesthetizing use, and when an opium smoker knows
this it will still have the anaesthetizing effect. Religion is opium, but as soon as a
believer believes that religion is opium, religion looses it anaesthetizing effect.
For most pious Christians the cross event of Jesus is a concretely existing event,
and this event has lead to the concrete change that has occurred in their lives.
Any functionalistic or psychological method of explaining religious phenomena
will weaken their feeling of reality, and will have a deconstructive effect on
religion.

Karl Barth has paid much attention to this point. According to Barth’s view,
revelation is God’s self-representation and the Holy Word is the activity of
God’s self-representation. The Holy Word is Logos and is objectively factual; it
is the foundation of Christian faith. When Barth explains revelation he always
puts the Holy Word (Logos) first, and firstly clarifies the objective factuality of
revelation. Only later does he discuss subjective possibilities of revelation. He
argues that on the objective foundation of the self-represented Holy Word,
separated from God, people cannot subjectively understand God’s revelation.
Barth writes:

God is thought and known when in His own freedom God makes Himself apprehen-
sible… God is always the One who has made Himself known to man in his own revelation,
and not the one man thinks out for himself and describes as God. There is a perfectly clear
division there already, epistemologically, between the true God and the false gods.
Knowledge of God is not a possibility which is open for discussion. God is the essence of all
reality, of that reality which reveals itself to us. Knowledge of god takes place where there is
actual experience that God speaks, that He so represents Himself to man that he cannot fail to
see and hear Him, where, in a situation which he has not brought about, in which he becomes
incomprehensible to himself, man sees himself faced with the fact that he lives with God and
God with him, because so it has pleased God. Knowledge of God takes place where divine
revelation takes place, illumination of man by God, transmission of human knowledge,
instruction of man by this incomparable Teacher [Jesus].

6 English translation from Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, G. T. Thomson trans.
(London: Harper and Row, 1959), pp.23-24; German original text in Karl Barth,
Barth’s neo-orthodox theology starts directly from revelation, and avoids the predicaments of modernist theology based on human reason and this-worldliness, when discussing revealed truth. However, Barth’s neo-orthodoxy gives people the feeling that it is too far removed from peoples’ lives: this village pastor, remote from the people, is just chattering and we don’t understand what he is saying. The cross event of Jesus is a true event, and so are also peoples’ awareness of the meaning of existence developed in daily life, the yearning for the transcendent, and the thorough change in approach to life, turning from individually self-centred to centre on transcending reality. These two kinds of real events are complementary, if one leaves the former on cannot know the former and vice versa. In nature and in peoples’ lives all kinds of events occur. Looking at these events as the inevitability of nature is very common. Looking at them in a specific situation, in a specific context of peoples’ encounters, they can have a peculiar effect and make people aware of the meaning of existence. Every event, with regard to its unfolding of dao, can be seen as a latent event of God’s actions and revelation. Among individuals and groups there are certain specific events to serve as tools of holy actions and they stand out in a highly special manner; these events are miracles. Miracles are not meant to break the laws of nature, but to be symbols or signs of a thorough and fundamentally important transformation. Just as any other event they can be seen as natural events, and they can be explained with the laws of nature after an investigation of the natural relation between cause and effect. Even so, for the individuals and groups who accept the embedded meaning, they convey God’s grace, which is an extraordinary real event.

Contemporary Christian theologian John Macquarrie has called understanding “the symbol of existence”. He explains as follows about the story of Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt, walking on dry land in the sea with the water forming walls on their sides:

The example chosen is the crossing of the Red Sea by the people of Israel, a miracle that impressed itself so deeply upon the mind of the people that they always looked back to it as God’s great providential act on their behalf and indeed as the very foundation of their existence as a community. As is well known, the account as we now have it is put together from various sources. Scholars differ over the details of how these sources are to be disentangled, but the broad outlines are clear enough. According to the older version, we can visualize an incident which can be understood as perfectly “natural” in the sense that it does not involve any happenings that would contradict our ordinary experience of natural


Exodus 14:5-31. - Transl. note.
phenomena. In this account, the Israelites were already encamped by the shore, and the Egyptians were in pursuit. The combination of a strong wind with a low tide enabled the Israelites to get across. The Egyptians tried to follow, but their chariots got stuck in the sand and they were caught by the incoming tide. The later version transforms the story into a “supernatural” event by introducing magical elements. Moses stretches his rod over the sea, the waters divide and stand like walls on both sides. The Israelites go through, and the Egyptians foolishly attempt to follow and are overwhelmed by the water as it falls back down upon them.8

Through analysis of the origins of the Bible, and with methods of explaining myths, Rudolf Bultmann and other contemporary Bible scholars have done away with the elements of sorcery and myth that was squeezed into the Bible. If the views of these Bible scholars are correct then we cannot understand God’s performance of miracles as breaking the laws of nature. The laws of nature cannot be broken, and natural phenomena are subject to inevitable objective restrictions. Analyses of the Bible should adhere to science, not to sorcery. God is a transcendent existence, and the cross event of Jesus is a transcendent event. If Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection is understood as breaking the laws of nature, then it is still a non-transcendental and naturalistic understanding of a transcendent event. To understand the transcendent reality one must rely on transcendent experience. This kind of experience happens in our lives, and appears in our hearts. To discover miracles, one has to be good at seeing the peculiar in the common, the great in the ordinary, and to see meaning and value in the spontaneous. Of course, it is not easy to experience events with a hidden transcendent meaning in our common circumstances, but in certain times of crisis the implied transcendent meaning is more easily revealed and grasped, like when the people of Israel were pursued by the Egyptian army, and were in the moment of life and death.

If people believe in God only for the sake of personal gain and luck, then they could just as well not believe in God but in “the Grand Immortals”, since it is said that the immortals can make sorcery and miracles. The essence of Christianity is not to achieve personal benefits from God, but to change oneself: changing from self-centred to centre on the transcendent, making one’s individual life enter eternal life. Paul says: “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” (Romans 8:10)

A few hundred years after Indian Buddhism had entered China, and thousands of Buddhist scriptures had been translated, the Indian monks could still not clearly explain where Buddha actually was or where the Western

Paradise actually was. Only when Chinese Buddhism arose was this issue given an answer that was clear and could withstand examination. Du Shun, the founder of the Huayan School (Avatamsaka), wrote the following gāthā (verse) to a monk who sought to find the miracle of Buddha's divine manifestation everywhere but never found anything: “Travelling everywhere, always on the run, rituals on Mount Wutai, only Mañjuśrī is there, but Amithāba is everywhere”. That Buddha is in our hearts, and that the Western Paradise is in our hearts, has become common knowledge in Chinese Buddhism. If Chinese Buddhism has some characteristics or has made some contributions, I believe that this is an important one. A few hundred years after Christianity entered China, and merged with Chinese culture and lifestyle, Chinese people rather easily accepted some of its common views and thoughts in its diverse expression in the Chinese context. One day will come when you can ask what characteristics Sino-Christian theology has, and what contribution it has made to the whole of Christian theology, and I believe that it might be these two sentences: We live in the body of Jesus, and Jesus lives in our hearts. In philosophical language: We live in dao, and dao unfolds in the world and in our hearts.

9 The sub-headings of this paper are added by the editors.
The Paradigm Shift: From Chinese Theology to Sino-Christian Theology – A Case Study on Liu Xiaofeng

CHIN Ken-Pa

Christianity as a Barbarous “Foreigner”

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (I Corinthians 1: 22-25) If St. Paul had known, besides Jews and Greeks, the existence of the Chinese, the paragraph might have been reformulated as such:

For Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, and the Chinese honor morality, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles, and savagery to the Chinese, but to those who are called, Jews, Greeks and the Chinese alike, Christ the power of God, the wisdom of God, and the nobleness of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, the weakness of God is stronger than human strength, and the savagery of God is nobler than human civilization.

Though it was first introduced into Chinese context one and a half century ago, Christianity has not successfully settled down in Chinese culture and still remains a “foreign religion” (yang jiao). It is intolerable for the Chinese that this Western religion rejects any forms of adaptation: “indigenization”, “Sinification”, “contextualization”, “inculturation”, or “integration”. This criticism towards Christianity attempts to show how barbarous this foreign religion is. It states that the very savagery (invasion, colonization, hegemony, and pride) of Christianity consists in its lack of “morality” or virtues respected by the Chinese, such as tolerance, amity, accommodation and receptiveness. Especially during the times characterized by post-colonialism, “de-westerncentrism”, tolerance, pluralism, and dialogue, the criticism against this “foreign religion” which rejects to be acculturated and contextualized seems more reasonable and acceptable. In another word, for the Chinese, a “foreign religion” should have accepted Chinese moral regulation without qualification, and the main reason that the mission of Christianity in China has not been as successful as Buddhism consists in the very fact that it remains a “foreign religion”.

However, under powerful nationalist discourse, the attempts to domesticate Christianity into a Chinese religion have never ceased. Nevertheless, few people take it seriously whether these attempts conflict with the Christ crucified event,
and some even take it for granted that there is no conflict in being a Chinese and a Christian at the same time.

In fact, if one takes this “foreigner” seriously and respects it as a foreigner, there is no necessity at all to give up its image and identity as a foreigner. Those who attempt to inculturate it into Chinese context care little about its otherness and even try to dissimulate its authentic identity for the sake of evangelization. Or rather, they probably do not really understand the otherness of this foreigner as a foreigner.

Unlike all sorts of “Chinese theology” or “contextual theology”, “Sino-Christian theology”, however, defends the foolishness, weakness, and savagery of this foreigner, and thus makes itself a stumbling block of the current Chinese academia, rightly blocking our way and letting Chinese thought oppose and reject it. But, as is written in the Bible,

God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. (I Corinthians 1: 27-29)

Defending the faith of being a “foreigner”, Sino-Christian theology is in line with the theology of the Cross. Instead of starting from Christology and the doctrine of Creation, Sino-Christian theology starts from “the truth of the Cross”, which is foolishness to the peoples but the power of God. Nevertheless, some so-called Chinese “theologians” want to correct the foolishness, the stumbling block and the humiliation in order to make it conformable to the expectation of the Confucian “Ren”, the Taoist “Tao”, and the Buddhist “perfection”. Isn’t their ambition a kind of pride in thinking that they possess the God-like wisdom?

In modern Chinese thought, Christianity as a foreigner has long been expected to be transformed into something native to China, but Sino-Christian theology defends this crucified “foreigner”, even though it stands for foolishness, stumbling block and humiliation.

Liu Zong-zhou, a renowned Neo-Confuciansim, said, “The propagation of the Western religion in China is the enemy of the Way.” (xifang zhi jiao xingyu zhongguo, dao zhi zei ye) In contrast, Liu Xiaofeng, a Sino-Christian theology speaker responds, “I am the enemy of the Way”.1 This statement with a clear-cut stance spells out the radical significance of Sino-Christian theology in Chinese context: as the enemy of “China”.2

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2 Liu Xiaofeng’s works on Sino-Christian theology cited in this materials: The Sino-Christian Theology and the Philosophy of History, Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao [Salvation

140
The “De-Heresy History” of the Divine Dynasty

Chinese culture, which is of long-standing, self-sufficient, and exclusive, treats all foreign cultures with a superior air, assimilating and making them serve China. Compared with the Chinese “Divine Dynasty”, all other cultures are nothing but heresies or barbaric, namely, “Yi”. Coming from foreign countries, Christianity is certainly “Yi”, whose doctrines are without exception heresy. So an anti-Christian compilation appeared during the last years of the Ming Dynasty was titled as *Shengchao Poxieji* (*The Sacred Dynasty’s Collection of Writings Exposing Heterodoxy*). It was said that there was a “Si Yi Guan” (four-Yi building) between the cities of Yi and Luo, in the west of which there were “four-Yi” lanes, namely “Gui Zheng” (submission to the righteous), “Gui De” (submission to the virtuous), “Mu Hua” (admiration for cultivation), and “Mu Yi” (admiration for justice). For the Divine Dynasty, the fundamental difference between Chinese culture and foreign cultures, Hua (China) and Yi, is the distinction between civilization and savagery. Therefore, Western learning is simple and not worth of attention. In another word, all cultures other than Chinese culture are Yi, whose destiny is either “submission”, “admiration”, or “returning to the virtuous life”.

In past history, whether it is contextualization or adaptation theory, Christianity should seek the recognition of heterogeneous cultures. Those critics believe that Christianity has not adapted well to Chinese context. For some theologians and believers, the reason that Christianity remains a minority in the Chinese context lies exactly in the lack of recognition from the Chinese culture. Because of its status as a foreigner, and also because of the number of believers, contextualization or inculturation seems a necessary condition for the reception of Christianity by the Chinese academia. Christianity should realize its identity as “Yi”; it must take off the dress of “Yi” and put on Chinese clothing instead, which is supposed to be the only appropriate one. Many critiques refer the failure of Jing-jiao (literally the luminous religion; pejoratively called Chinese Nestorianism) to its over-compromising attitude towards the classical Chinese culture, whose power was under-estimated. Facing up to the hegemony of Chinese culture, Jian-jiao had to take the strategy of “emphasizing and elaborating the similarity while disguising and ignoring the difference”. The destiny of Jian-jiao could not but being “the first crucified Chinese Christianity”.

The powerful exclusive discourse of the Divine Dynasty forces Christianity to justify itself with a gesture of moralization in its process of Sinification, which works out a compromised “Chinese theology” in the name of humility. The pursuit of moralization becomes a burden to Chinese theology, and it also
obscures the core value or the fundamental value of Christian faith. Such an endeavor not only degrades the theoretical depth it should have, but also distorts the practice with the negative result of “hypocrisy” and “the mean person”.

From Xie Fu-ya to Lin Zhi-ping, cultural integration had always been the subject of indigenization. Lin believes that Western missionaries should not impose their cultural symbols on the Chinese. But following this same logic, another question would emerge: “Could an ‘indigenous Christianity’ be imposed on the Confucians, and would they accept it without any objection at all?” Would the Chinese accept such kind of Christianity—having only ideas without symbols—designed specifically for them?

Another approach of indigenization, the representative figures of which were Jian Youwen, Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao) and Wu Yaozong, took a “denomination ecumenical movement” as its theme. The aim of “denomination ecumenical movement” is to “save China”. This approach was finally developed into “three-self patriotic movement” (Self-support, Self-govern, Self-propagate) by Wu, who reduced Christianity merely to the “gospel of love alone” for the sake of revolution, i.e. lowering its status as a salvific faith down to a governing instrument to serve the nationalist movement. The rise of theological indigenization, whose focus has always been the “similarities and differences” between Christianity and traditional Chinese thought, is to make Christianity settle down in Chinese context. However, does such kind of “comparison” have a promising future?

As Hans Küng pointed out, “A contextual Chinese Christian theology does not need to refer primarily to the classical authors. Rather what is an analysis of the complexity if the present for the sake of survival in the future.”4 “The question of indigenization” is not a question of actuality (modernity). Moreover, taking Christianity and Chinese thought as the static objects of archaeology is to ignore the real context of modern Chinese. In my opinion, it is only a presupposition rather than a conclusion that the spread of Christianity in Chinese context depends on Confucianism or the reconciliation with it.

The question of modernity was carried out in Chinese thought in the forms of cultural nationalism (Confucianism, the quintessence of Chinese culture) and state nationalism (KMT or the Communist Party), emphasizing their national characteristics via the opposition of “China vs. West”, of “modernity vs. tradition”. The real impasse of Christian faith in Chinese context is nationalism. Interestingly enough, the response of Chinese Christianity to nationalism is carried out in a nationalist manner, the result of which could be nothing but intensifying and justifying nationalism. Chinese nationalism can accept science as “applied techniques” but resists Christianity for its spiritual nature. For cultural nationalists, Chinese culture is superior to Western culture; for state

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nationalists, Christianity is nothing but an instrument of the infiltration of Western imperialism.

Nationalist discourse is dominant institutionally, intellectually and spiritually in Chinese world. Christianity, as a kind of “spirit”, should also submit to nationalism. Theological indigenization actually means modifying Christianity from “the inside” of nationalism. Hence, nationalism not only keeps Christianity outside, but also tries to dominate or transform it from the inside. The effort to solve this *aporia* by means of indigenization which is essentially driven by nationalist impetus is to “set the nationalist spear against its shield”.5

**Sino-Christian Theology as the “Enemy of Tao”**

In fact, in order to be recognized by the Chinese academia, Christianity has accommodated itself to Chinese context with several garments, e.g. “Huaren” theology, “Zhongguo” theology, “Huaxia” theology, “Zhonghua” theology (all these names literally mean “Chinese theology”), contextual theology, indigenous theology, acculturative theology and integrative theology, etc. Their method is to reconcile, communicate and integrate Christianity with Chinese thought.

All the above theological approaches seek to find common ground between Christianity and Chinese culture. The commonality here means not only the affirmation of the resemblance (abolishing difference) but also the recognition of Christianity by Chinese culture. In other words, Christianity has to reconcile itself with Chinese culture to be accepted in Chinese society; this means that it should first recognize the superiority of Chinese culture in the political and cultural sense. Therefore, the various forms of Chinese theology are in their essence different types of *Sinicized* theology, reconciling Christianity with Chinese culture. On the one hand, it keeps the independent status of Christianity; on the other hand, it tries to show that there is no essential conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture.

As Wu Lei-chuan points out, “not only should Christianity play a role in the future of China, the future of the national revival of China, but it should play an eminent role with its special contributions. Christianity should take its responsibility for the state and the nation, especially in such hard times as ours.” 6 Therefore, in order to get the recognition of its identity, Christianity was eager to dilute its foreign features and identify itself as Chinese Christianity, 7 namely standing in the Chinese nationalist position, defending the interests of China and adopting the revival of the nation as its task. Even the kerygmatic work of the

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6 Wu Lei-chuan, *Jidujiao Yu Zhongguo Wenhua* [Christianity and Chinese Culture] (Shanghai: Qingnian Xiehui, 1940), p.150.

7 Likewise, Mao Zedong also accepted Marxism through indigenizing it as “Chinese characteristic socialism.”
evangelicals was driven by a strong nationalist feeling. For them, “Christianization of China” and “Sinification of Christianity” were indeed different sides of the same coin. For the Chinese, believing in Christ had an additional value, namely saving China. As Zhao Zichen overtly admits, “the spiritual heritage of Chinese culture can make contribution to Christianity in its manner of presenting religion.” The so-called “spiritual heritage” here indicates the ethical orientation of Chinese culture.

The driving force of the aforementioned theological trends is a kind of nationalist feeling than the apology for faith; or rather, they at best try to persuade Chinese cultural circles to accept Christianity as a “legitimate religion” (the “three-self patriotic” movement) by giving it a national identity or a political apology for Christianity. And thus, being patriotic becomes the legitimate license of Christianity. It also means that Christianity becomes one of the branches of “Chinese religions”. In order to get a legitimate identity in Chinese cultural context, Chinese Christian theology has to participate in the construction of the national cultural enterprise. Behind the aforementioned theological trends is the attempt to revive national culture. Therefore, considering the question of recognition, Chinese Christianity necessarily excludes the otherness of Christian theology. The condition for “seeking for commonality” is that Christianity has first to deny its differences with Chinese culture. Recently, such kind of “Chinese theology” emerges again in the name of “religious dialogue” and the “comparative study of religions”.

Besides the nationalist feeling, there is also a “will to identify” in “Chinese theology” for missionary purposes. Some people believe that Christianity should be Sinicized in the light of the Confucian-Taoist idea, such as “yuzhou ji wuxin, wuxin ji yuzhou” (The cosmos is my heart and my heart is the cosmic), to be acceptable to the Chinese. There is an assumption that the Chinese reject Christianity due to cultural differences. Sinification thus becomes the necessary method to dispel the misgivings of the receivers. Likewise, it can also be justified in the name of missionary work, for Sinification can dispel Chinese’s resistance of the Gospel. Moreover, it is also said that the differences and the conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures are merely a kind of misunderstanding. Christianity and Confucianism can even be translated into one another,

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9 I once criticized that comparative religions or religious dialogue was indeed detrimental and distorted to the essence of religion, for it essentially weakened the requirement and the function of differentiation of “religion”. See: Chin Ken Pa, *Xinyang de (Bu) Kenagxing* [The (Im)possibility of Faith] (Hong Kong: Wenzi Shiwu, 2004), Chapter 4. See also Giovanni Filoramo, “Religious Pluralism and Crises of Identity”, *Diogenes* 199 (2003).
because they essentially sprung from the same origin. The work of Chinese theology, therefore, is to build the unification or harmonization of Christian doctrines with Chinese thought. Only in this way can the Gospel flourish and bear fruits in the soil of Chinese culture.

In view of the success of Buddhism in China, some scholars believe that the very reason for Chinese rejection of Christianity lies in the fact that it has not integrated itself with Confucianism and Daoism as Buddhism did. And this is the model for foreign religions to follow. In order to be a truly Chinese religion, Christianity has to follow the example of Buddhism. In another word, the efforts to interpret Christianity in terms of Buddhism-Taoism (e.g. Jing-jiao of the Tang dynasty) and Confucianism (Catholicism of the Ming-Ching period) are actually strategies to advocate the legitimacy of Christianity in Chinese context.

The emergence of the term “Sino-Christian theology” and the rise of the Sino-Christian theology movement should be understood against such background as the negation of the aforementioned theological approaches. Although it is a kind of “impossibility”, Sino-Christian theology is the deconstruction of Chinese thought in response to the Word of God. According to Liu Xiaofeng, the possibility of Sino-Christian theology lies in it impossibility or the deconstruction of the original metaphoric order of Chinese sustained by the idea of “Tian Tao” (the way of heaven’). Sino-Christian theology must deconstruct Chinese thought in order to understand the Word of God, which is actually the act of Chinese thought to understand God. As an impractical theology in accordance with the Cross, Sino-Christian theology grounds itself on the deconstructive act marked by the position of “defending the differences”.

The revolutionary significance of Sino-Christian theology should be properly grasped from the perspective of “paradigm shift”. In some sense, the old paradigm focusing on the relationship between “Christianity and Chinese culture” has come to its end, or it becomes outdated in that it has not kept up with the pace of contemporary thought. With a careful scrutiny, “Chinese theology” working on the relationship between “Christianity and Chinese culture” seems more and more inappropriate in that it puts the wrong question from the very beginning. Chinese Christianity has not even grasped “theology” properly. The main concern of Liu Xiaofeng’s Hanyu shenxue yu lishi zhexue [The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History] is the “philosophy of history”; in other words, its focus is the “possibility of Sino-Christian theology

10 Liu Xiaofeng, The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History, p.88
11 Shi Yuan-kang once discussed the topic of “paradigm shift” in Chinese culture, but it was a pity that he did not go further enough in exploring the content of the paradigm shift. But this topic is an appropriate point of view to understand the context from which Sino-Christian theology arises. See: Shi Yuan-kang, Cong Zhonggui wen hua dao xian dai xing: dian fan zhuang yi? [From Chinese Culture to Modernity: Paradigm Shift?] (Beijing: Sanlian, 2000).
in the context of modernity”. Only in this way can one grasp theology in its right perspective; only in this way can the proposal of “Sino-Christian theology” be an integral part of Chinese thought, and can even further enter into the context of Western thought.

Therefore, Sino-Christian theology is not another name for “Chinese theology”, nor is it the same way of thinking as contextualization, indigenization, inculturation, or “communication and transformation”. The basic themes of Sino-Christian theology are as follow:

I. Faith is not the instrument of nationalism.
II. Faith should not be degraded to the instrument of morality.
III. Sino-Christian theology should go out of the dualistic metaphysical framework of “Chinese culture as substance and Western learning for application”.
IV. Sino-Christian theology should ground itself on the existentialism of individual faith.
V. The issues of modernity are the contextual theses (problematique) of Sino-Christian theology.

Regarding the relationship between “Sino-Christian theology and the philosophy of history in the context of modernity”, Liu Xiaofeng says:

How can a developing Sino-Christian theology make the progress demanded by the historical moment without rethinking itself from the perspective of modernity?... Doesn’t the proposal of “indigenous theology” rise from the horizon of Christianity-China relationship that is characteristic of the Chinese academia in the “May-Fourth days”? If Sino-Christian theology, without proceeding from its authentic situation and changing the misinterpretation of Christian theology in Chinese academia, still confines itself to such kind of problematic understanding, it can hardly harvest significant fruits in the future.

It is clear that the “paradigm shift” in itself is a response to the change of horizon. The outdated paradigm makes the discourse of Christian theology the instrument of the revival of nationhood, and turns Christian theology into a “Chinese” theology according to the meta-narrative or grand-discourse of the nation. Every paradigm has its own language game. The old paradigm contains the discourses such as “ethnocentrism”, “respect for ethics”, and “Chinese culture as substance and Western learning for application” (Substantially Chinese, Practically Western, zhongti xiyong). As a new paradigm, Sino-Christian theology goes out of the framework of nationalist discourse by emphasizing the “existentialism of individual faith”, “modernity”, and “the forming of the divine Word in Chinese”, so that it may serve as a useful resource to resolve the current spiritual aporia not only for Chinese people but all mankind.

12 Liu Xiaofeng, *The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History*, p.3.
13 Liu Xiaofeng, *The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History*, p.4
Sino-Christian theology refuses to identify itself with Chinese culture. One could find the reasons for such rejection in Liu Xiaofeng’s Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao (Delivering and Dallying) and Zou xiang shi zi jia shang de zhen li (Towards the Truth on the Cross). According to Liu, Chinese culture gives more weight on secular values and lacks the critical thinking from the perspective of absolute divine values, and thus it has no real query rising from individual existence. The Sino-Christian theology proposed by Liu affirms “the existential dimension of individual faith” and “the absoluteness of divine values” to resist any thinking that conflicts with it. Therefore, the enemies of Sino-Christian theology include not only Chinese thought, but also those Western thoughts that go against “the existential dimension of individual faith” and “the absoluteness of divine values”. But Chinese cultural tradition has not taken this question seriously. In his The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History, Liu expresses his critique and retrospection on this subject with greater clarity.

Liu asserts that “Through the Chinese interpretation of a history of thought that is heterogeneous to itself, Sino-Christian theology will bring about a break or transformation in its own tradition and will suffer in itself the tension of the conflict.” As a radical hermeneutics that transforms Chinese language thoroughly, Sino-Christian theology defends the “foreigner” and the “Other”. In the context of modernity, the slogan “the propagation of the Western religion in China is the enemy of the Way” seems more significant. The Western religion not only needs to preserve its identity as a foreign enemy but should also intensify this identity. Nevertheless, it is more an interferer (the enemy/thief of the Way) than a foreigner, whose task is to keep disturbing (stealing) China.

In other words, Sino-Christian theology, as a revolutionary paradigm, no longer confines itself to the framework of “Chinese culture as substance and Western learning for application” or the dualistic thought pattern of “substance/application”, nor does it emphasize the ethical expectation that Christianity should serve the nationalist discourse. In addition, taking the split of modernity as its problematique, Sino-Christian theology tries to break through the primordial context of Chinese thought by the discourse of individual faith, and thus makes the theology in Chinese an integrative part of ecumenical theology.

The “Oneness of Substance/Application” (ti-yong bu-er) and the Spiritual Condition of the Chinese

The introduction of “Western learning” into China did not meet any strong resistance. China may be totally westernized and embraces Western science and democracy without rejecting Confucianism. But why was Christianity rejected as a “foreign religion”, and why was Christianity alone considered having nothing to do with “Western learning”? The real problem lies in that modern

China, on the one hand, is open to the “Western Enlightenment”; and on the other hand, Chinese academia tries to filter all the “foreign spirits” by its traditional ontological model.

In his *Quan Xue Pian* (Guidance to Study), Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909) points out that Chinese learning, referring to a “submissive ethics” with “Sangang Wulun” (three cardinal guides and five constant virtues), was a kind of immanent learning with heart-body as its subject matter, while Western learning was a kind of external study of the material world, which could be adopted according to the need of different situations insofar as Chinese learning remain the unchangeable substance. In order to avoid the theoretical difficulty caused by the dualistic division of the “Chinese/Western” substance, some attempt to resolve the incompatibility between the “Chinese substance” (*zhong ti*) and “Western application” (*xi yong*) by emphasizing “the Chinese origin of Western learning” or by showing that there were already many traces of Western learning in ancient Chinese thought. In this way, the thought pattern of “Chinese culture as substance and Western learning for application” becomes coherent and perfect. Lately, Li Zehou, a contemporary philosopher, proposes a new model called “Western substance with Chinese application”, which refers to modern science and technology and its application into Chinese situation. Although his using of Western learning to correct Chinese learning has nothing to do with “wholesale Westernization of China”, his project is still confined to the framework of “the superiority of Chinese culture” (*zhongxue weiyou*) and “the oneness of substance and application” (*tiyong buer*). He is essentially a Chinese traditionalist with a Marxist background.

While facing Christian theology, the first thing for Chinese scholars is to affirm that Chinese culture possesses its own spirit; moreover, it is an ontological, and metaphysical spirit of the nation. Christianity is understood as a kind of spirit as well, but a Western one, Christianity cannot take the place of the innate spirit of China. The strategy of “Chinese culture as substance and Western learning for application” actually grounds itself in the principle of “oneness of the substance/application”. That is to say, Christian theology as a kind of spirit must be absorbed into the Chinese national spirit in order that Western learning could be applied without straying from the Chinese substance. In other words, the precondition of accepting Christianity is the “Chinese substance”; otherwise, the national spirit would be lost.

Although Chinese scholars have to admit the advantage of Western technology and social system, they also believe that the Chinese would retain the “Chinese soul” as long as the “Chinese substance” has been preserved. Therefore, the acceptance of Western culture is conditional, and even those proponents of “wholesale Westernization of China” do not really want to duplicate Western culture mechanically. On the contrary, they believe that the Chinese “spirit” is self-sufficient and reject Christianity as the “Western sub-
stance”. In this sense, the proponents of Westernization and the advocators of national spirit are essentially the same in their attitude towards Christianity; that is, they are all preoccupied with Chinese ethnocentrism in their insistence on Chinese substance (national spirit).

Different versions of “Chinese theology” still deal with the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture within the framework of “Chinese substance/Western application”. As a kind of “spirit”, Christianity should give way to the “Chinese” spirit when once they encounter each other; in other words, the Chinese are human beings through being “Chinese”, and not the other way round.

“Chinese culture as substance and Western culture for application”, which is actually a prolongation of the so-called “the distinction between Chinese (Hua) and foreign (Yì)”, usually represents a kind of nationalist characteristic in the context of modern China. The national spirit of modern China consists of two fundamental elements, namely the political recognition by the modern nation state, and the ethicized “Tian Tao” (the way of the heaven) principle. And so they keep asking these questions: “Is Christianity capable of reviving the nation?” “Is Christianity based on Chinese ethics?” Both the “using of Christianity to revive the nation” and the “interpreting of Christianity based on Chinese ethics” are the theoretical results of “Chinese substance/Western application”. The latter attempt is a strategy to use the spirit of Christianity to intensify the inherent Chinese substance; that is, to unify the Christian spirit and the irreplaceable Chinese soul. Although the discourse seems ridiculous that “one more Christian means one less Chinese,” it shows the confidence of nationalists in Chinese culture as self-sufficient substance.

Sino-Christian theology questions the “spiritual problems” of China such as the “nationalized Christianity” (Liu Xiaofeng) and the “ethicized Christianity” (Yang Huilin). Such kind of ethic-centric nationalism was and will be a heavy burden to Chinese Christianity. The under-development of Chinese “theology” is due to the above framework of thinking. Having criticized the spirit of the Chinese, Sino-Christian theology, not surprisingly, is regarded as an attempt of “total Westernization” or “anti-tradition”. However, these two critiques have missed the point of Sino-Christian theology; this shows that they still think in the framework of the “substance/application” and have not understood the problématique of Sino-Christian theology yet.

Modern Chinese philosophy of history undertakes a nationalist task: the revival of the nation. On the one hand, “the superiority of Chinese culture” is the natural consequence of Chinese monism (the oneness of the substance and application); on the other hand, it is also a reasonable response to the institutional oppression of powerful Christian countries. China accepts Marxism, which is also a foreign Western discourse, mainly because it is primarily a sort of political discourse, supposed to take the responsibility of reviving the Chinese
nation. Moreover, it is also said that one can find in Marxism the ethics of the “Confucian revolutionary spirit”.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Liu Xiaofeng, the dominant and conventional idea that Christian theology is a “Western” theology is in itself a misunderstanding, a product of the political culture of the nation state in the process of modernization. The real crisis of indigenous theology consists in its accepting the idea uncritically that Christian theology is a kind of “Western” theology; and hence, it rejects the language of Christian theology. This is probably the “rational craft” of the national spirit in the name of indigenization.\textsuperscript{16}

Liu questions, “Is it that according to the imperative category of Historical Reason, thought is doomed to reject the lovely God, just because the idea of God is not native and without historical and psychological foundation?” In his Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao, Liu strongly contends that it is unreasonable to measure the truth of faith according to the criterion of being native. The native nationality is a seemingly sound excuse for refusing the possibility of conversion. Therefore, Sino-Christian theology “has to oppose the authority of Historical Reason adored by the historical-cultural psychology and anthropology.”\textsuperscript{17} Taking his favorite Russian thinkers (Lev Shestov, Dostoevsky, and Merezkovskiy), Liu believes that their attitude to Christianity could be the example for Chinese academia, for they apparently rejected the idea that a religion must grow from the native soil, and they also reject the idea of religion as morality or put morality above religion.\textsuperscript{18}

Therefore, “when laws of history become the absolute values, out of which, there is no eternal truth, justice, and love; all values are nothing but the products of historical situations, and the actions of history are themselves the absolute values.”\textsuperscript{19} Setting historical laws against individual faith and insisting on a kind of absolutism immanent in history, the “Tian Tao” principle of Chinese thought accepts the idea of historical necessity and at the same time falls into a kind of nihilism. Sino-Christian theology thus questions whether the “Tian Tao” principle, which runs the risk of diminishing the individuals, could be summarized and accepted in the form of the imperative of national metaphysics.

Liu emphasizes time and again that despite being a theology speaking

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\textsuperscript{15} Gu Bin (Wolfgang Kubin) & Liu Xiaofeng, Jidujiao, Rujiao yu Xiandai Zhongguo Geming Jingshen [Christianity, Confucianism, and Modern Chinese Revolution] (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1999).
\textsuperscript{16} Liu Xiaofeng, The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History, pp.90-91
\textsuperscript{17} Liu Xiaofeng, Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao [Delivering and Dallying] (Shanghai: Sanlian, 1988), p.26
\textsuperscript{18} Liu Xiaofeng, Zouxiang Shizijiashang de Zhenli [Towards the Truth on the Cross] (Hong Kong: Sanlian, 1990), pp. 4-5. Sino-Christian theology is talking about Christ who bumps his bloody head against the iron wall of the “grand narrative”.
\textsuperscript{19} Liu Xiaofeng, Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao, p.56
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“Chinese”, Sino-Christian theology is not a theology merely “belonging to” the Chinese. Since it is foreign to the Chinese way of thinking, Sino-Christian theology remains a “foreigner” or a theology of “foreign language”. Only because it is a “foreigner” can Sino-Christian theology help Chinese thinking break through the Chinese Semantics. In the incessant polemics with its Other, Chinese thinking can keep correcting itself, and therefore, instead of merely belonging to the Chinese, it may become common intellectual resources for the whole humankind.

The Existential Hermeneutic of Individual Faith
Theological indigenization or contextualization interprets “God incarnate” as God’s identifying with the world, and supports the enculturation of Christian faith, with a consequence of “de-theologization”. For the Jews and the Greeks, the Word made flesh is impossible. The incarnation of God is the act of His kenosis (Philippians, 2:6-7), namely “being born in the likeness of human beings” rather than “identifying with humankind”. God only identifies with Himself and reveals Himself as God “through humanization”. The coming of God into the world in the form of flesh is in itself an indication of “non-identity”, because this event in any case presupposes the existence of “difference” or “non-identity”; this means that God does not recognize any approaches of salvation within the world. “The Word became flesh” is all the time a paradox, for it is beyond human pre-understanding of God: a God as flesh, and at the same time remains God is a “paralogy”.

“The Word became flesh” cannot be the methodological basis of “indigenous hermeneutic”. Before using the concept of “anthropology”, it is better for “indigenous hermeneutic” to keep itself within the confines of theology. Taking incarnation as its biblical or theological evidence, indigenous theology does not go deep enough into the New Testament theology to understand the theological significance of incarnation, nor does it really clarify the meaning of “being human” in biblical theology. Liu Xiaofeng reminds us that “what Christian theology talks about is the God of Jesus Christ, not any other God, gods or ultimate being.” One should also keep in mind the “basic fact of human life and faith” that the conflict between religions is “regular and irreconcilable”.20

Liu tries to break through the bondage of “Chinese-Western” opposition by emphasizing the individual existential experience. Once Chinese thinking is confined to this grammar, not only Christian theology cannot really take root China, but more importantly, Chinese thinking is also incapable of breaking out of the deadlock of nationalist grammar. Therefore, the strategy of being “the enemy of the Way” is, “through an existential-hermeneutical Sino-Christian theology, to

break through the language system of national ideology, and separate the original existential experience accumulated in it from the grand national narrative.”

Liu believes that the evangelical message of the Christ event is directly related to the original existential experience of human beings. Theology is related to the subject “I” of “I believe” or “I don’t believe”. In other words, “Christian theology is the result of the encounter of the divine Word with the individual existential experience, rather than the encounter of the divine Word with national ideology.” Moreover, “the incarnation of God is to renew the quality of the individual life rather than to establish the Church.” It is obvious that “the individuality of faith is one of the marks of modernity”. We can see that the “cultural Christians” coined by Liu could make sense in the proposal of Sino-Christian theology.

Liu resists on breaking through the language system of national ideology by a kind of individual-hermeneutic Christian theology, stepping out of the national grand narrative, and moving towards the original individual existential experience. Regarding the idea of Sino-Christian theology, Liu Xiaofeng says:

Sino-Christian theology tries to make Chinese thought a possible will towards God through the impossible interpretation: stepping out of the ultimate reality of Confucianism-Taoism, and unifying with the Word of the Christian God. The possible will of impossibility is the concrete historical language of faith... Sino-Christian theology is the revival of interpreting Chinese thought, as a particular national language, in the historical discourse of faith, making Chinese thought become the discourse of Christian faith.

Liu’s “individual hermeneutic” Sino-Christian theology is rooted in a radical hermeneutics; that is, taking the revelation theology (Christ event, Trinity) concerned with the “I believe” as the weapon of his thought. He has a high regard for those theologians of fideism and apparently shows a consistent Barthian stance from his Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao to Zou xiang shi zi jia shang de zhen li. Despite its differences from the conventional denominational theology, Liu’s stance on fideism is stronger than that of those denominational believers who advocate the reconciliation of Christianity and Chinese culture, so that his position could even be called “decisionism”.

Liu Xiaofeng, The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History, p.94.
Liu Xiaofeng appreciates those defenders of fideism, such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, Shestov, Dostoevsky, and Barth, who declare Christian faith as their stance. See Zhengjiu Yu Xiaoyao, p.7. In memory of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus, Liu addressed again, “I believe there is no salvation outside Christ.” See: Liu Xiaofeng, “Lang-man-de Fuyinshu zhong de Yeshu Jidu” (The Romantic Jesus Christ in the
Referring to the personal existential experience towards God, Liu explicates:

Christianity is essentially a kind of religious ethics rather than political ethics. Unlike Judaism and Confucianism, Christianity is like Buddhism in that its religious ethics fundamentally concerns the salvation of individual life rather than the moral order of the community and the issues of social justice or equality. What Christianity provides is merely the idea of the absolute value of individuals and the idea that God has arranged the natural order of the world.\(^{27}\)

Sino-Christian theology is by nature a theology of existentialist grammar. Etymologically speaking, “theology” is a discourse about “God”. Sino-Christian theology therefore points to “the forming of the divine Word (God) in Chinese”, which refers not to the revival of national spirit with the help of divine Word but the event that the “Word was made flesh”. “Flesh” or “person” indicates existentiality, and the “forming” refers to the subjective existentiality of individual believers. Hence, Sino-Christian theology is essentially a theology of existentialism.\(^{28}\) Liu’s proposal of Sino-Christian theology provides a new horizon for Chinese thought. Without confining itself to a particular discipline called “theology”, Sino-Christian theology is not even a specific discipline of Chinese academia called “theology”, nor is it a grand enterprise of saving the nation. Only in this way can Sino-Christian theology really reflect on the question of the “split of modernity”. And only by resisting the temptation of national spirit can Sino-Christian theology really pay attention to the question of “individual decision”.

Because of the contingency of individual existence, individuals are in an ontological status of privation, which is an ontological dualistic difference in the becoming of Christian theology. There is no such dualistic difference in Confucianism and Taoism, which maintain the “oneness of the substance and application”. Liu points out that “the forming of the divine Word in Chinese” is possible only if the individual speaking in Chinese accepts and speaks Christ, and makes the Word of divine love concrete speeches in Chinese. There is no personal encounter between individuals and “Tao”; only the “Word” of the “divine Word” and persons can encounter each other. The encounter is the “Word became flesh”, namely the encounter of the eternal infinite individual and contingent finite individuals. Since the correlation of the divine Word and Chinese culture lies not in the general ideology of the nation, but merely in the forming of individual person, faith is a matter of the individual, and there is no such question as “the Sinification of Christianity”.\(^{29}\)

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29 Liu Xiaofeng, “Editor’s Preface”, *Dao yu Yan: Huaxia Wenhua yu Jidu Wenhua Xiangyu*
Theology is based on the Word of God. The basic proposition of Sino-Christian theology is “the forming of the divine Word in Chinese”. Here, the “Chinese” does not denote the ethic-centric nationalist grammar. Indigenous theology goes to the wrong direction insofar as it has no clear idea of the meaning of “being Chinese”, and it does not take the suitability of using the language of faith to sustain the ghost of national culture seriously. “The forming of the divine Word in Chinese” refers to the formation of a kind of existentialism-oriented grammar of individual faith, which is the core of Christian theology and a way of thinking absent in Chinese thought. Liu uses it to break through the original semantics of Chinese thought. Therefore, Sino-Christian theology rejects the previous project of Chinese theology.

Believing in Christ is after all a matter of individual confession. The subject of believing is individual “persons” rather than “cultures”. In this sense, the theological indigenization of Chinese Christianity deviates from the track of Christian theology. The heart of Sino-Christian theology is certainly “theology” rather than “Chinese”. The identity of Christian theology consists in its response to the question: “Why God became man?”

The main concern of “cultural Christians”, which is a special phenomenon of modernity, is “personal confession”. The justification of such stance is up to the reading background of the individuals. Only by going out of the enquiry of natural ontology can individuals get sufficient spiritual resources to reflect the meaning of existence, so that they can freely make existential choices related to their ultimate concern.

In some sense, Sino-Christian theology opposes the original “Chinese semantics”, namely those “grand national narrative” inherited from the original national language; in other words, the aim of Sino-Christian theology is to lead the Chinese into the ontic-hermeneutic of the Christian God rather than to intensify the “grand national narrative” as the tool of indigenization.30 Hence, Sino-Christian theology does not generally refer to the theological writings in Chinese; this general idea of Sino-Christian theology lacks a philosophical-hermeneutical understanding of language per se. Sino-Christian theology, however, is a deconstructive power towards the “grand national narrative” and a turn to the meaning of individual existence. Liu Xiaofeng remarks:

The Christ event (the divine Word), which was, is and will be an unheard and incredible information for the national ideology of mankind. It is in tension with every original national ideology and its linguistic experience. Turning to face the Christ event, every language of national ideology will entail a thorough split.31

30 Liu Xiaofeng, The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History, p.84.
The earliest contact between Christianity and Chinese culture can be traced back to the ninth year of the “Zhenguan” regime of Tang Dynasty (635), which left the earliest written record and scriptures; the introduction of Catholicism into China did not start until Matteo Ricci’s arrival in China (1582), and since then, Christianity began its process of sinification, together with several attendant questions related to Chinese language, Chinese culture, and Chinese context: “Whether Chinese is capable of being a bearer of Christian faith?” ,“Is language merely an instrument or itself part of culture?”, “Why Western sciences can be introduced into Chinese context smoothly?”, “Can Christianity be taken and used as natural sciences?”

Perhaps, the divine truth in its essence has nothing to do with nationalist discourse, and it is impossible to develop a kind of Christian theology out of Chinese language. But what does Christian faith mean to Chinese language? This is the question for Sino-Christian theology.

In my view, Christianity is not only the “other” to Chinese culture but also the “other” to all existing cultures—or rather—what Christian theology talks about is a “foolish God”. For Christian theology, submitting to the strategy of assimilation of Chinese culture (e.g. the Jews in Kaifeng city), especially to the powerful discourse of Chinese language (love for country, love for church), may avoid the conflicts with Chinese thinking and thus gives Chinese academia a good impression. However, it also obscures the salvific grace of Christianity and intensifies the authority of Chinese language.

The “West” as known and accepted by modern China is actually a “split West”, the result of the Chinese schema of “substance/application”. On the one hand, it may point to the “Enlightenment rationalism” embraced by the proponents of Westernization; on the other hand, it implies “the Western Christianity” rejected by nationalists.

For Liu, the mission of Sino-Christian theology is to enable the Christian kerygmatic tradition to break through the domination of Confucianism-Taoism-Buddhism in Chinese, so that Chinese thought could touch the base of the philosophy of history of modernity. Lacking the knowledge of Christianity, it is hardly possible for Chinese thinking to have a deep understanding of Western thought after Nietzsche, not to mention touching the bottom of the philosophy of history of modernity. What is the “the bottom of the philosophy of history of modernity”? It is about the increase of the responsibility of individual faith. The question is: “Before the collapse of the modern cosmology, what kind of existential-hermeneutic can undertake the responsibility of argument?”

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32 Tan Lizhu, “Cong Jidujiao De Hanhua Shuchuqu” (The Sinification of Christianity and Others), Dushu [Reading Books] 1997/6, pp. 89-94.
Besides the myth of the “superiority of Chinese culture”, the main targets of Sino-Christian theology are scientific rationalism and the ethics of nationalist state, which have occupied an eminent status in modern Chinese thought. The new task of Sino-Christian theology is to rethink the “problematique” of the philosophy of history of modernity in the spirit of Christianity, so that it can grasp in greater depth the “theological-political” question of scientific rationalism and the ethics of nationalist state.  

Sino-Christian theology is not a kind of traditionalism under (Western) nationalist discourse, nor is it a searching for “returning to tradition” in the name of different forms of “post-ism”. Rightly speaking, Sino-Christian theology is “a wicked foreigner who covets China; it confuses Chinese cultural tradition, and tries to introduce an unparalleled change by talking about gods and ghosts.” For some traditional Confucianists, Christian theology is vicious in its “destroying the way of Confucian Saints and their statues, ruining the hierarchy and the worship of ancestors, disregarding our monarchs and teachers, terminating our tradition and trying to sweep our ethical principles.” Liu Xiaofeng says:

If, as is said, Chinese itself cannot be detached from the ultimate reality of Confucianism and Taoism, “Sino-Christian theology” is in itself a contradiction in terms and a kind of impossibility… The very possibility of Sino-Christian theology just consists in this impossibility; in other words, its possibility lies in the deconstruction of the original metaphoric order of Chinese sustained by the idea of “Tian Tao”. Sino-Christian theology must deconstruct Chinese thought in order to understand the Word of God, which is an action of Chinese thought to understand God…

The construction of contemporary Sino-Christian theology tries to get out of the framework of nationalism and pan-moralism. It will change from an old paradigm of inculturation, indigenization, or communication, emerged since Ming and Qing Dynasty, to a new paradigm of modernity, and thus be an integrative part of Chinese academia, engaging in the reflection of the post-traditional (post-May-Fourth) “problematique.”

The main concern of Sino-Christian theology is not whether there are any resources, be it evident or potential, for Christian faith in Chinese cultural

34 Liu Xiaofeng, The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History, p.11.
context, but rather, the point is whether a contingent individual shows his or her will of openness to the Christ event. In its insistence on “the oneness of substance and application” and “the superiority of Chinese culture”, Chinese thought has been deficient in such posture of openness to the Divine. Although Christian theology cannot arise out of Chinese context, Sino-Christian theology, by its belief of “the forming of the divine Word in Chinese”, will inevitably impact Chinese culture. Due to the absolute otherness of Christian theology, Sino-Christian theology, rooting itself in the context of modernity, can make more contribution than Buddhist scholarship to the expansion and renewal of Chinese culture.

By its identity as Christian theology, Sino-Christian theology does not simply mean that Christian faith is from the West; more importantly, it shows that believing in Christ means to identify oneself as an “other”. This “other” is not an Other of “dissidence” but an Other of “difference”. That is to say, “God is God”. Facing the God as an “Other”, the construction of Christian theology can only be self-critical, for the “Other” is by no means an object of “communication and transformation” for us. Similarly, the Cross is not merely the foolishness to Greeks and the stumbling block to Jews, but the foolishness and the stumbling block to the Chinese as well.

Theological “contextualization” or “indigenization” is to seek common ground between Christianity and Chinese culture, a strategy compelling the foreigner to be naturalized or compromised. In Chinese context, Christian theology is crucified by Chinese culture. Put in another way, Christianity is in the first place a “stumbling block” in Chinese cultural context, and this is a fact which we perhaps cannot or do not have to change. Isn’t Christian theology talking about such an “Other”? For all cultures, including Jewish, Greek, European-American, Latin-American culture, Jesus Christ is the “foreigner”, for whom Christian theology apologizes.

Just because what Christian theology talks about is an “Other”, any effort to accommodate or adapt this “Other” as something familiar to particular cultures is to take it as “foolishness” as Paul said. Therefore, in view of the crucified God, Christian theology can only keep reiterating this “stumbling block” when it faces different cultural contexts. Sino-Christian theology should insist on the openness to “difference” as the right attitude of faith.

Going out of the “grand narrative” inherited from the language of national thought, refusing to be the mediator between Christianity and Chinese culture, and working towards a real conversion, this is the first flag of deconstruction that Sino-Christian theology raises in Chinese thought, which is also an inception of a real spiritual action initiated by God’s entering into Chinese thought. Hence, Sino-Christian theology is an event of impossibility for contemporary Chinese thought. This Sino-Christian theology in accordance with the theologia Crucis is still to be launched.