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# Wang Weifan’s Cosmic Christ

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In mainland China, Bishop Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting) is regarded as the main proponent of a cosmic Christology, which is often characterised as a politicised theology. However, since the 1980s, another leading Chinese Protestant thinker, the evangelical Wang Weifan, would also articulate a cosmic Christology – not to reconcile the Christian with the communist, as with Ding, but to reconcile Christianity with Chinese religion and philosophy. This paper will show that Wang Weifan’s Christology is based on a broader ecumenical conversation but is ultimately part of a Chinese evangelical’s attempt to construct a Chinese Christian theology.

## Introduction

One of the earliest theological formulations of a ‘cosmic Christ’ can be traced back to the second-century Irenaeus of Lyon who spoke of Christ’s work of atonement in terms of ‘recapitulating’ or ‘summing up’ all of humanity in himself. This understanding of the cosmic redemption of Christ has been the dominant Christological view in Eastern or Greek Christianity up until the present day. In contrast, this theme has been lost for several centuries in Western or Latin Christianity, in part due to the Western trajectory of modernity and the resultant shifts in cosmological understandings,<sup>1</sup> but has been rediscovered in the twentieth century. From Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s work with evolutionary science to Jürgen Moltmann’s interests in eschatological and ecological matters, Western theologians attempting to answer questions about the created order have led to a growing restoration of cosmic Christologies in new and innovative ways.

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<sup>1</sup> See Allan Douglas Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1951), 121–55.

The watershed moment for this revival in ecumenical circles is usually traced back to two important speeches at the 1961 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi. One of these speeches was delivered by Joseph Sittler, an American Lutheran scholar. His speech ‘Called to Unity’ was based on a reading of Colossians 1:15–20 which speaks of Christ’s universal or cosmic redemption of all things. This, according to Sittler, provides a theological rationale for why Christians should care for the created world.<sup>2</sup> Another speech which asserted a cosmic Christology was delivered by the Indian theologian Paul D. Devanandan. In a distinct departure from the American, Devanandan’s speech ‘Called to Witness’ explains that the cosmic Christ gives legitimacy to non-Christian religions, an argument partly made from Ephesians 1:10 which speaks of the uniting of all things in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these speeches reflected their respective contexts as their starting points for theology. For Sittler, the American involvement in nuclear warfare necessitated a reassessment of the global church’s responsibility for the natural world.<sup>4</sup> For Devanandan, the early-twentieth century debate around ‘fulfilment theology’ to address the religious plurality in India<sup>5</sup> needed to be challenged by a new theology of religions that speaks of God’s dominion over all of creation – and with it, all religions; missions must therefore take up the call to dialog with other religions.<sup>6</sup> This latter approach would become a significant discussion amongst theologians of South Asia, such as M. M. Thomas from India and D. T. Niles of Ceylon (contemporary Sri Lanka). Despite their differences of contexts and questions, both Sittler and Devanandan found in the cosmic Christ a common solution to their respective problems.

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph A. Sittler, ‘Called to Unity’, *The Ecumenical Review* 14, no. 2 (January 1962): 177-87.

<sup>3</sup>Paul D. Devanandan, ‘Called to Witness’, *The Ecumenical Review* 14, no. 2 (January 1962): 154-63.

<sup>4</sup>Sittler, ‘Called to Unity’, 187.

<sup>5</sup>Two important works on this subject include J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913); Hendrik Kramer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1938). See S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 15-88.

<sup>6</sup>Devanandan, ‘Called to Witness’, 162-3.

While there was growing discussion about the cosmic Christ in Asian ecumenical circles during the 1960s–70s,<sup>7</sup> mainland China was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). As all religious practices were forced to near extinction in China during this time, Chinese Christians were isolated from the broader international community<sup>8</sup> and were not able to enter in the theological debates about the cosmic Christ. However, after the Cultural Revolution, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, a cosmic Christology began to be recognised in mainland China. It has been mainly associated with Bishop Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting, 1915–2012),<sup>9</sup> the former head of the two state-sanctioned Protestant bodies, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC).<sup>10</sup> Basing his views on the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Whiteheadian process theology, Ding articulated his cosmic Christology to move beyond a perceived impasse between Chinese Christians and non-believing communists, and to move towards a common spiritual journey.<sup>11</sup> This has led many interpreters of contemporary Chinese Christianity to understand the cosmic Christ as a politicised formulation coming out of Ding’s dual role as a churchman and a statesman.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Douglas J. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians are Thinking* (Manila: New Day Publishers, [1970] 1976), 335-8.

Jürgen Moltmann sees this as a distraction from the real meaning of a cosmic Christology around ecological considerations, as argued by Sittler. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1990), 274-80.

<sup>8</sup>Alexander Chow, ‘Protestant ecumenism and theology in China since Edinburgh 1910’, *Missiology: An International Review* 42, no. 2 (April 2014): 170-1.

<sup>9</sup>For two recent studies on Ding’s theology, see Miikka Roukanen, ‘K. H. Ting’s Contribution to the Contextualization of Christianity in China’, *Modern Theology* 25, no. 1 (2009): 107-22; Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 89-111.

<sup>10</sup>Protestantism and Catholicism are treated as two separate religions in China today and maintain their respective legal existences through a number of state-sanctioned organisations. There are, however, a good number of Christian congregations which continue to exist outside of these entities. For Protestantism, the TSPM is the liaison organisation between individual churches and government offices, whereas the CCC is primarily concerned with training leaders and printing Christian literature.

<sup>11</sup>Edmond Tang has discussed how the cosmic dimension of God was explored in China as early as the 1920s in the writings of Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao, 1888-1979). However, Tang argues, the cosmic Christ is most prevalent in the 1980s writings of Bishop Ding Guangxun. See Edmond Tang, ‘The Cosmic Christ: The Search for a Chinese Theology’, *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 2 (October 1995): 131-42.

Though Ding gives his most comprehensive discussion on the subject in a 1991 speech, there are signs of a cosmic Christology much earlier in his writings. K. H. Ting, ‘The Cosmic Christ’, in Janice Wickeri, ed., *Love Never Ends: Papers by K. H. Ting* (Nanjing: Yilin Press, [1991] 2000), 408-18.

<sup>12</sup>For a highly critical reading of Ding Guangxun, see Li Xinyuan, *Theological Construction – or Destruction? An Analysis of the Theology of Bishop K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun)* (Streamwood, IL: Christian Life Press, 2003).

However, this is only one of several ways Chinese Christians have articulated a cosmic understanding of Christ. In particular, another leading Christian thinker of the state-sanctioned Protestant church has upheld a cosmic Christology: Wang Weifan (1927-2015).<sup>13</sup> In contrast with the more ‘liberal’ Ding, Wang Weifan is a self-identified evangelical. Wang was a professor of biblical studies and Chinese theology at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, the flagship seminary of the CCC, and continues to be well loved by many within the Chinese church for his preaching, theological teachings, devotional writings, and poetry. As an important Christian leader in the 1980s–90s, Wang would articulate his own cosmic vision of Christ – although never as fully articulated as in Ding’s writings. In perhaps his most explicit reference to the subject, Wang Weifan explains in a 1985 article that Jesus is not only the Lord of Christian believers, but even more, he is ‘the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of history’ (*yuzhou zhi zhu he lishi zhi zhu*).<sup>14</sup> He further explains that the grace of Christ’s redemptive work accomplished on the cross is not limited to a small group of Christians, but instead reaches the groans of all of creation.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the more exclusive tendencies of other Chinese evangelicals, Wang Weifan’s Christology has a more inclusive disposition in the extent of God’s concern.

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<sup>13</sup>This is a point that has been made by others, but has not been examined with much depth. See Janice Wickeri, ‘Preface’, in Wang Weifan, *Lilies of the Field: Meditations for the Church Year* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1993), 6.

Biographical information for Wang Weifan can be found in Yuan Yijuan, *Shengsheng shenxue: Wang Weifan shenxue sixiang yanjiu* [Shengsheng Theology: A Study of Wang Weifan’s Theological Thinking] (Beijing: Gold Wall Press, 2010). For a brief English biography to Wang Weifan, see Wickeri, ‘Preface’, 5-8. For another introduction to Wang Weifan, although unfortunately with the incorrect birth year of 1928, see John C. England, ed., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources from the 7th to 20th Centuries*, vol. 3 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 193-5.

<sup>14</sup>Wang Weifan, ‘Zhongguo jiaohui de mouzhong shenxue bianqian’ [Changes in Theological Thinking in the Church in China], in *Nian zai cang mang: Wang Weifan wenji (1979–1998)* [In the Wilderness for Two Decades: Selected Works of Wang Weifan (1979–1998)] (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, [1992] 2011), 9, translation mine. This article is reprinted in a number of forms, including in his important work Wang Weifan, *Zhongguo shenxue ji qi wenhua yuanyuan* [Chinese Theology and its Cultural Origins] (Nanjing: Nanjing Theological Seminary, 1997), 145-53.

This article has been translated into English by Philip L. Wickeri as Wang Weifan, ‘Changes in Theological Thinking in the Church in China’, *Chinese Theological Review* 2 (1986): 30-37. While I generally agree with the translations of Philip Wickeri (and Janice Wickeri), I have given my own in this case as I think it is more accurate than his rendering ‘the Cosmic Christ and the Lord of History’.

<sup>15</sup>To be clear, Wang Weifan is not saying that the efficacy of Christ’s work of *salvation* is to all creation, but that the efficacy of Christ’s work *on the cross* is to all creation. Atonement includes much more than just salvation.

This essay will begin by examining a selection of Wang’s writings on the basis of the two phrases ‘the Lord of the cosmos’ and ‘the Lord of history’, before asking how his Christology plays into his theological method. In so doing, this essay will argue how Wang Weifan’s formulations reveal a unique and nuanced understanding of the cosmic Christ which, on the one hand, is informed by the South Asian debates in the 1960s–70s and, on the other hand, provides an evangelical counterpart to Ding Guangxun’s Christology in China in the 1980s–90s.

## The Lord of the Cosmos

As with a number of other exponents on this subject, Wang Weifan’s understanding of the cosmic nature of Christ is an extension of his understanding of the cosmic nature of God – that is, theology proper. This is clearly seen in his view of an ever-generating God (*shengsheng shen*),<sup>16</sup> what several commentators have identified as his most important theological contribution.<sup>17</sup>

Wang argues that the intellectual basis for this idea can be found in *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), which speaks about the creation of the myriad of things. This Chinese cosmological understanding was adopted into the language of the earliest Christian encounters with China dating as far back as the Tang dynasty (618–907).<sup>18</sup> These early Christians used various Chinese phrases to speak about God: *changsheng tian* (‘ever-generating God’), *yongheng de shangdi* (‘ever-lasting God’), or *yongyuan chuang sheng de shangdi* (‘ever-generating God’).<sup>19</sup> All of these terms point towards a view in which God is continually generating – what Wang Weifan prefers to call *shengsheng shen*.

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<sup>16</sup>Wang, *Zhongguo shenxue*, 12-24; Wang Weifan, ‘Chinese Traditional Culture and its Influences on Chinese Theological Reflection’, *Chinese Theological Review* 13 (1999): 9-11.

<sup>17</sup>See Archie Chi Chung Lee, ‘Contextual Theology in East Asia’, in David F. Ford with Rachel Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 527. It is also a key theme and part of the title of the first major study on Wang Weifan: Yuan Yijuan, *Shengsheng shenxue*.

<sup>18</sup>Wang Weifan identifies two groups. The first group, the *Jingjiao*, often erroneously called the ‘Nestorians’, was the early Church of the East. This group is recorded to have sent the first Christian missionary to China, arriving via the Silk Road in the year 635. The second group is known as the *Yelikewen* – a generic term for Christianity used during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). It is a term which does not distinguish between different Christian branches. See Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1-2, 44, 90-92.

<sup>19</sup>Wang, *Zhongguo shenxue*, 15. Though some may disagree with some of these translations, Wang Weifan provides these English renderings himself in the Chinese text.

As one commentator explains:

The central theological idea focuses on the word *sheng* ('life'). God is understood as a God of *sheng sheng*, 'a Life-Birthing God' – the first *sheng* is used as a verb ('to give birth to') and the second as a noun ('life'). The unceasing generating God is a living and dynamic God who does not only give birth to life, but also sustains and protects it.<sup>20</sup>

Creation, therefore, did not end when God rested on the seventh day. From the creation of each new day and new night to the flourishing of human life, God continues to bring order out of chaos. Wang declares this God as One who should be worshipped. But humanity has been deceived and tempted by Satan. He writes:

Therefore the death and resurrection of Christ is for humankind to create a new path and destroy death. This effort of Christ in humans is to complete God's work of creation.... God is an ever-generating God who creates and sustains life and Christ is an invitation to life through the destruction of death, making life more complete and full.<sup>21</sup>

Here we see the echoes of an idea captured in the Chinese phrase *tian sheng, ren cheng* – Heaven engenders and humanity creates.<sup>22</sup> The Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming describes this as encapsulating an anthropocosmic vision, whereby humans are cocreators with Heaven; this vision offers significant ethical and aesthetic implications to humankind.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Wang Weifan argues that due to Christ's redemptive work in overcoming death, humanity has new life and can now participate in God's creative work.

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<sup>20</sup>Lee, 'Contextual Theology in East Asia', 527.

<sup>21</sup>Wang, 'Chinese Traditional Culture', 11.

<sup>22</sup>This is a common abbreviation to a phrase in *Xunzi* 10.6 and 27.31, namely *tiandi sheng zhi, shengren cheng zhi* ('Heaven and earth create it, the sage perfects it').

<sup>23</sup>Tu Wei-ming, 'An "Anthropocosmic" Perspective on Creativity', in Zhao Dunhua, ed., *Dialogues of Philosophies, Religions and Civilizations in the Era of Globalization* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2007), 143-53.



For Wang Weifan, creation is closely paired with redemption – a feature of other Chinese Christologies. Ding Guangxun, for example, has argued that many Christians have tended to separate creation from redemption, thereby articulating two separate gods. One god, the Father, created the world, which was subsequently captured by Satan; a second god, the Son, snuck into Satan’s dominion to rescue only a select few.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Ding is cynical of conservative Christians who have tended to emphasise the saving of souls and an otherworldly prolepsis, seeing this view as doing injustice to the world God created. Wang, as a self-identified evangelical himself, is not as critical of this view as Ding. However, for Wang Weifan it is clear that the ever-generating God is always involved in the process of creation, recreation, and new creation of the entire cosmos. In Wang’s mind, this includes both a social responsibility as well as an ecological responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the cosmic nature of God is recognisable in Wang’s mystical theology,<sup>26</sup> which is characteristic of other conservative Chinese Christians such as Jia Yuming (1880–1964) and Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee, 1903–72). Though this is noticeable in Wang Weifan’s more devotional works, we see this also in the 1985 article mentioned earlier that speaks about Christ as ‘the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of history’. Wang describes three decades of challenges faced by the Chinese church since the 1950s as a journey, echoing the journey of the Shulamite woman in the Songs of Solomon, from ‘my beloved is mine’ (2:16) to ‘I am my beloved’s’ (7:10).<sup>27</sup> Previously, the Chinese church saw Christ as a possession; thirty years later, the Chinese church is the possession of Christ. Therefore, it is less about trying to guard the fence around one’s possession (that is, Christ), but about revelling in a fuller life in the arms of the beloved.

On the one hand, Wang explains that thirty years of suffering have taught Chinese Christians to depend on Christ and seek his protection. These were the years in which communism took over China, the TSPM was established, many Christian leaders were attacked during various denunciation

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<sup>24</sup>K. H. Ting, ‘Creation and Redemption’, in *Love Never Ends* [1995], 478-9.

<sup>25</sup>Wang engages both Daoist and Christian texts to make the case for an ecological theology. See Wang Weifan, ‘Ren yu dadi’ [Humanity and Earth], in *Nian zai cang mang* [1996], 84-92.

<sup>26</sup>I am grateful to Philip Wickeri for commenting on an early draft of this paper and highlighting this point.

<sup>27</sup>Wang Weifan, ‘Zhongguo jiaohui de mouzhong shenxue bianqian’, 3-9.

meetings, and Protestant churches in a given region were forced to consolidate and have unified worship services; by the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, all public religious activities would come to an end.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Chinese Christians who have endured these thirty years no longer forsake this world for the next but embrace this world as the garden of Christ – an allusion to Song of Solomon 4:12. As one commentator explains, ‘For Wang Weifan, the mystical and the socio-political are not mutually exclusive but rather interacting or even complementary modes of discourse’.<sup>29</sup>

Wang Weifan is an evangelical whose life experiences have shaped his spiritual journey towards a new cosmic understanding of Christ. The Christian God is an ever-generating God Who continually births new life. The redemptive work on the cross is Christ’s call for Christians to join in this ever-generating process, to declare ‘I am my beloved’s’, and to embrace the fullness in life today in hope for greater fullness in life tomorrow. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the cosmos.

## The Lord of History

Already, we get a sense that Wang Weifan believes Chinese Christian theology needs to be rooted in Christian scripture, the Christian tradition, and the Chinese situation. This echoes the three *loci theologici* of contextual theology as expressed by Stephen Bevans: scripture, tradition, and present human experience.<sup>30</sup> Wang’s understanding of an ever-generating God engages Chinese traditional religious and philosophical resources, and is also recognisable in scripture and expressed by various Christians throughout Chinese history. But this ever-generating God is part of a bigger picture of the person of Jesus Christ.

One of the major debates which has plagued the Christian church since its beginning has been around the person of Jesus Christ. Is he divine, human, or both? Does he have one or two

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<sup>28</sup>Chow, ‘Protestant ecumenism and theology’, 170-1.

<sup>29</sup>Wickeri, ‘Preface’, 6.

<sup>30</sup>Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 4.

natures? Does he have one or two wills? This would form the basis for the Nicene Creed and continue to produce debates within the church in the present era. This is also an important theme discussed in Chinese Christianity.

Bishop Ding Guangxun has spoken about how the two natures of Christ was an important foundation in his Anglican upbringing. However, he recalls a time in the 1930s when he listened to Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu, 1893–1979), a man who would later become the founder of the TSPM, speaking about a Jesus who stood with the suffering people. For Ding, Christ could no longer be understood only in abstract terms of the two-natures doctrine, but a ‘Christology such as [Wu’s] which put Jesus back in to [sic] his contemporary history as well as right within the realities of our own national conflicts struck a fresh, compelling note in my ears’.<sup>31</sup> This would be an important basis for Ding’s later cosmic Christology.

In contrast, Wang Weifan explains that the God-man of Jesus Christ is easily understood in the Chinese context. Chinese traditional culture has a strong understanding of the unity between Heaven and humanity.<sup>32</sup> Often seen as a common quality of most Chinese religious and philosophical teachings, though interpreted differently in each, the concept indicates a harmony between the domains of Heaven and humanity.<sup>33</sup> Hence, Wang asserts, the Christological debates occurring outside of China have had little relevance within the Chinese context, and Chinese Christians have therefore not had any major conflict with understandings of the God-man Jesus Christ. Chinese traditional thinking has in fact opened possibilities for Christianity to become Chinese.

Elsewhere, he discusses how Chinese Christians understand the transcendence of God. In 1989, he writes:

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<sup>31</sup> See K. H. Ting, ‘Forerunner Y. T. Wu’, in *Love Never Ends* [1981], 74.

<sup>32</sup> He uses two familiar Chinese phrases here, *tian ren heyi* and *tian ren tongyi*. Wang Weifan, ‘Man you endian he zhenli’ [Full of Grace and Truth], in Wang Weifan, *Shi nian ju ju: Wang Weifan wenji (1997–2007)* [Walking Lonely for Ten Years: Selected Works of Wang Weifan (1997–2007)] (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, [1999] 2009), 321. See Yuan, *Shengsheng shenxue*, 98–99.

Most translators render the term *tian* as ‘Heaven’. In certain uses, particularly within Daoism and Chinese folk religiosity, this term can likewise be rendered as ‘nature’.

<sup>33</sup> See Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 5–6, 48.

It is very difficult for those who have been brought up in traditional Chinese culture to accept a God who transcends creation and the human world. The Chinese prefer to bow down to a 'superman', a sovereign emperor or a great leader. We cannot seem to comprehend a transcendent God. In Western humanism God and humankind are rivals, but God is absent from Chinese humanism.... For the Chinese, an object of worship must always be an idol from on high to whom homage is paid... On the contrary, God is a God who suffers for human iniquities, bearing our heavy burdens and enduring our tribulation.... Precisely because ours is a God who is anxious over the iniquities of humanity, Jesus Christ who was sent among us could be nothing other than a 'suffering servant'.<sup>34</sup>

Wang Weifan believes that the Chinese mode of understanding is not receptive to any form of dualistic thinking that creates a gulf between transcendent and immanent realms. The two-natures doctrine of Christ brings together the transcendent with the immanent which, according to Wang, makes complete sense in the Chinese mindset. However, he explains that the Chinese traditionally prefer to pay homage to a superior human. Yet, Christianity speaks of either a God who is beyond humanity or a God who is a lowly, suffering servant. The Christian God is too high and too low for the average Chinese, and therefore incomprehensible.

Significantly, Wang Weifan says that the perspective of God as a suffering servant may have been problematic in traditional Chinese thought, but the Chinese context has now changed. As in his other writings, Wang in this article explains that China has experienced three decades of struggles.<sup>35</sup> In the midst of social, political, and economic distress, people have suffered as a result of human sin. Though he differs from Ding Guangxun and Wu Yaozong in terms of their desire to move away from a two-natures doctrine of Christ, and differs from Ding's rejection of the notion of human sinfulness,<sup>36</sup> Wang Weifan agrees with his colleagues in placing a priority on Christ's presence within

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<sup>34</sup>Wang Weifan, 'The Lord of Sorrows', *Chinese Theological Review* 5 (1989): 149.

<sup>35</sup>This article was originally published in June 1989. Though some may suppose this includes the military clash with student protesters in Tiananmen Square, it is more likely that this article was written earlier in the year.

<sup>36</sup>Ding Guangxun's hamartiology shifts away from the 'sinner' to the 'sinned against', arguing that all humans have a shared experience of structural sin. See K. H. Ting, 'Human Collectives as Vehicles of God's Grace', in *Love Never Ends* [1979], 43-8; Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 100-5.

the events of history. Hence, Chinese Christians need to transform their hearts, their minds, and their hands to mimic their Lord, the suffering servant. This is a *kairos* moment. What was once incomprehensible is now yearned for. This is the moment in Chinese history wherein Christ as the Lord of sorrows is to be pursued, embraced, and followed after. His domain is therefore across both space and time – Christ is the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of history.

## The Word Was Here Made Flesh

As mentioned in the outset of this essay, as early as 1985, the self-identified evangelical Wang Weifan wanted Chinese Christians to think beyond understanding Jesus as only the Lord of Christians who believe in him. As we have seen so far, he has been developing a Christology that also considers Jesus as the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of history. Implicit to this discussion is a particular theological method. In one sense, he is engaging with the question of contextual theology – that is, how does one formulate a theology that is genuinely Christian and contextually sensitive. In another sense, he is engaging with the question of theology of religions – that is, how does the Christian understand and engage other religions. Both of these matters come to the foreground in a paper he presented in 1992 entitled ‘The Word Was Here Made Flesh’.<sup>37</sup>

The title of his paper comes from the words carved into a marble sign in the place where the angel Gabriel is said to have pronounced good news to the Virgin Mary. The ‘here’ in the inscription implies the small Galilean town of Nazareth. But for Wang Weifan, the ‘here’ also refers to the many places and cultures in which the incarnation happens. Though the pre-existent Christ is not bound by space or time, the incarnation is the enfleshment of the *logos* or the *dao*<sup>38</sup> in particular cultures and

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<sup>37</sup> Wang Weifan, ‘The Word Was Here Made Flesh’, *Chinese Theological Review* 8 ([1992] 1993): 92-99. See Wang Weifan, ‘Dao zai zheli chengwei roushen’ [The Word Was Here Made Flesh], in *Nian zai cang mang* [1992], 54-60.

<sup>38</sup> The Greek *logos* is often translated in Chinese as *dao*. This can be seen in the Chinese rendering of John 1:1: ‘In the beginning was the *dao*’.

*Dao*, which can be rendered ‘road’ or ‘way’, is understood within Daoism as the mother of creation and the path of all things.

particular contexts. Therefore, Christ's incarnation in Nazareth also speaks of Christianity's incarnation in the Chinese cultural context.

Biographically, he explains this process of incarnation by using the metaphor of his own life. He was born into a devout Buddhist home and nurtured by traditional Chinese texts and upbringing. His father died when he was seven and his mother, who considered suicide, chose a life of hardship and raised Wang Weifan during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). He writes:

[I]t was precisely this mother love with its reflection of Christ which led me three years after her death to a Christ who seemed already familiar and which further led me to dedicate myself to repaying the Lord's grace as a pastoral worker.... Perhaps we can see culture as a mirror, different cultures being different mirrors. But in each mirror alike we find some aspect of Christ reflected. Just as in Mary's womb the incarnate Christ was conceived, so in mother love is contained a reflection of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

The Word was 'here', in Wang Weifan's life, made flesh. While aspects of Christ were highlighted in his personal journey before becoming a Christian, in his non-Christian household, this intermingling of the Christian faith and the Chinese traditional upbringing have transformed his own understanding of Chinese Christianity.

Moreover, he explains, every culture provides a different aspect of Christ enfleshed. The relationship between the incarnation and Wang Weifan's personal journey parallels the relationship between the incarnation and China's cultural journey. He explains that each of the historical encounters China has had with Christianity have led to different results.

This can be seen in the two waves of missionary endeavours to China, coming from both the Eastern and the Western branches of Christianity. Eastern Christianity, as seen in the Church of the East, entered during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (the 7th to 13th centuries), encountering the ancient Chinese cosmology of *The Book of Changes*, Daoism, and the 'five elements theory' (*wu xing*).

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<sup>39</sup>Wang, 'The Word Was Here Made Flesh', 94-5.

Therefore, Eastern Christianity's encounter with Chinese culture resulted in an ever-generating God (*changsheng shen*).

When Western Christianity in the form of Catholic and Protestant missionaries entered during the Ming and Qing dynasties (the 14th to early-20th centuries), they encountered Confucian understandings of morality. The focus was therefore on the 'outer transcendence' (*waiwai chaoyue*) of the Christian God in contrast to the 'inner transcendence' (*neizai chaoyue*) of humanity, the latter encapsulating the Confucian teaching of humanity's innate ability to pursue moral cultivation. The priority placed on engaging morality continued to operate throughout the May Fourth movement (1919) and including the present day Chinese church. Therefore, 'It centers around the relationship between faith and works, mysticism and service, inner merit and sacred virtue, history and eternity and explorations of how theological categories may be unified'.<sup>40</sup>

The Word is 'here' made flesh in these two major encounters – firstly between Eastern Christianity and Chinese metaphysics and secondly between Western Christianity and Chinese morality.

Writing in the midst of China's spiritual crisis of the 1980s–90s, the question is raised once again by Wang Weifan for Chinese Christians to consider what it means to have the incarnation here, in this context. He explains that during this period, a Christianity fever (*jidujiao re*) has spread throughout the country and has resulted in growing interests in Christianity by two major sectors of Chinese society: the peasants and the elites.

With regards to the first group, Wang Weifan points out that much of the growth in Chinese Christianity in the recent decades have come from the simple and goodhearted of the rural countryside. However, this childlike faith has been accompanied by 'certain superstitious and absurd aspects of Chinese folk religion... [that] have become parasites which feed off the body of Christianity'.<sup>41</sup> The Chinese church is therefore challenged to cleanse the faiths and the doctrines of

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 96.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 98.

the peasants from vulgar superstitious teachings and increase the quality of their faith and their spirituality.

With regards to the second group, the elite, Wang mentions how many intellectuals, from Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun of the 1920s to the ‘cultural Christians’ (*wenhua jidutu*)<sup>42</sup> of his day, have found respect and admiration for Jesus Christ. In contrast to the challenge that has arisen with the peasants, the elites’ challenge is to leaders of the Chinese church to raise their own cultural level (*wenhua suyang*)<sup>43</sup> in order to bring them into the Christian fold.

When the gospel meets these two groups, it is faced with two unique challenges. For the uneducated, the challenge is for the Chinese church to educate them; for the educated, the challenge is for the Chinese church leaders to be better educated. Moreover, Wang Weifan seems to have a hierarchy of Chinese religious and philosophical teachings in mind. The folk religions of the uneducated peasantry is problematic, but the refined and sophisticated elite traditions of China in the *The Book of Changes*, the ‘five elements theory’, philosophical Daoism, Confucianism, etc. are part of the Chinese intellectual history which should be embraced and encouraged. The Word should be made flesh ‘here’ in certain cases, but definitely not ‘here’ in other cases. A value judgement has to be made on which aspects of a context should be embraced by an incarnational theology.

## Conversant with Ecumenical Conversations

If we briefly return to the earlier ecumenical debates around the cosmic Christology, Wang Weifan shows an awareness of those discussions, though he never directly engages them. While Wang’s theology can work towards a concern for the ecology, like with Joseph Sittler, it seems evident that his main concern is the encounter between Christianity and indigenous religious and philosophical

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<sup>42</sup>In China, the term ‘cultural Christian’ was first coined in the late 1980s. It refers to academics who were increasingly interested Christianity and Christian theology, but who did not necessarily participate in any local Christian church. For the first major study on this group, see Fredrik Fällman, *Salvation and Modernity: Intellectuals and Faith in Contemporary China*, rev. ed (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

<sup>43</sup>The meaning of *wenhua*, which is often translated ‘culture’, carries the connotations of ‘high culture’ or ‘learned culture’.



traditions, closer to the approach of Paul D. Devanandan. During the South Asian conversations in the 1960s–70s, we must appreciate that one of the major debates was the relationship between the cosmic Christ and the historical Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, for example, argued that the cosmic Christ was an unknown reality behind Hinduism and other religions. Panikkar emphasised mystery and downplayed the significance of the historical person of Jesus. In contrast, individuals like M. M. Thomas underscored the cosmic Lord of history – that is, a cosmic Christ who has a concern for the historical struggles for equality, justice, and peace, which is shared by people of other religions. Both of these strands focused on formulations of the cosmic Christ to engage a context of religious pluralism – one in terms of God’s mysterious work behind other religions and the other in terms of a tangible work before other religions.

Wang Weifan differs from both of these extremes and brings them together in his 1985 article declaring Christ as ‘the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of history’. As I have argued, his understanding of ‘the Lord of the cosmos’ is best understood in terms of the generative nature of God and the mystical dimension of the encounter with Christ. In contrast with Panikkar, it is not so much formulated as a mystery of Christ behind other religions as it is about how other religious and philosophical traditions can guide the articulation of Christian faith and theology. Moreover, Wang Weifan’s Lord of the cosmos points to the universal extent of the redemptive grace of Christ on the cross. The ever-generating God creates and sustains life, and Christ, the Lord of the cosmos destroys death and invites humanity to join in the creative ever-generating life of this same God.

His understanding of the cosmic Christ as ‘the Lord of history’ necessarily focuses on the incarnation. The incarnation speaks of the Christian notion of a transcendent God who breaks into the immanent world. In the person of Christ is a happy intermingling of Heaven and humanity. Importantly, the cosmic Christ is concerned for the plight of all who suffer – especially those who endured the Cultural Revolution. Like M. M. Thomas, Wang Weifan argues for the recognition of the

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<sup>44</sup>See John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, ‘Towards an Ecumenical Christology for Asia’, *Missiology: An International Review* 22, no. 1 (January 1994): 4-6, 9.

presence of Christ in all struggles for justice, whether Christian or not. This is noticeably a dimension of Ding Guangxun's cosmic Christ as well. While for Ding, the focus is moreso on the Christian and the communist, for Wang, the concern is much wider including people of various religious and philosophical backgrounds.

## Conclusion: An Evangelical Cosmic Christology

In 2013, the year after Bishop Ding Guangxun's death, Wang Weifan wrote an article in tribute of the late church leader. He recalls back to 1985 when Ding asked him to write an essay entitled 'Changes in Theological Thinking in Chinese Evangelicalism'. However, as the periodical was being printed, Ding decided to rename the article 'Changes in Theological Thinking in the Church in China', removing any mention of evangelicalism as to not create any conflict between different theological camps within the Chinese church.<sup>45</sup> It would be in this very same 1985 article that Wang Weifan claimed that Chinese Christians – or shall we say, Chinese evangelicals have now learned that Christ is not only the personal saviour of a few, but also 'the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of history'.<sup>46</sup> Christ is still to be understood as a personal saviour, but not limited to this understanding. In Wang Weifan's view, a cosmic Christology is not merely for 'liberals' such as Bishop Ding Guangxun, but also for evangelicals such as himself.

However, it would be far too simplistic to characterise the Christology of Ding Guangxun as politically-based liberalism and the Christology of Wang Weifan as culturally-based evangelicalism. Ding, for instance, explains at the end of his important speech on the subject that the understanding of a cosmic Christology is not necessarily foreign to the Chinese cultural history. Quoting from Laozi's *Dao De Jing* that proclaims of the *dao*'s engagement with the cosmos, Ding concludes, 'This passage prepares the Chinese soil for receiving a Christ whose dimensions are cosmic'.<sup>47</sup> Mindful of

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<sup>45</sup> Wang Weifan, 'Remembering Bishop K. H. Ting', *Chinese Theological Review* 25 (2013): 123.

<sup>46</sup> Wang, *Zhongguo shenxue*, 151; Wang, 'Changes in Theological Thinking in the Church in China', 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ting, 'The Cosmic Christ', 418.

his background in Chinese culture and broad-church Anglicanism, there is an underlying sacramental-mystical element to Bishop Ding Guangxun's cosmic Christology. Conversely, though Wang Weifan does self-identify as an evangelical, he does not have a divorced view of the concerns of this world as is held by a large number of conservative Christians in China. As previously mentioned, Wang sees the mystical and the sociopolitical as complementary modes of discourse. Mindful of these points, both their theologies are clearly informed by the roles and self-understandings of each individual. Along with Ding's inward-facing role as a church leader, he had an outward-facing role as a public figure and spokesperson of Chinese Protestantism to the Chinese government and the broader world. In contrast, Wang was in many ways a pastor-theologian who's focus was primarily on a largely evangelical Chinese church. Each of these Christian intellectuals had their own unique priorities.

It is perhaps worth considering what 'evangelical' actually means in the case of Wang Weifan and in the Chinese context. Wang self-identifies as an evangelical and has often spoken on behalf of other evangelicals. This identity opened him to attack during Bishop Ding Guangxun's project of theological reconstruction (*shenxue sixiang jianshe*) in the late-1990s.<sup>48</sup> Later reflecting on this project, Wang pointedly challenged Ding's theological formulations, particularly on the point in which Ding questions conventional understandings of 'justification by faith'. Wang declares:

The moral function of 'justification by faith' lies in the way it transforms the search for external righteousness and goodness into internal, spiritual, innate and self-regulating goodness and righteousness that are self-consciously revealed and expressed in concrete acts of goodness and righteousness. To distort or downplay (*dan hua*) 'justification by faith' as 'emphasizing the opposition between belief and unbelief' is to downplay basic Christian teachings and their moral function. This is something that no pious Christian can accept, and moreover contradicts the Marxist understanding of this teaching.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 361-3.

<sup>49</sup> Wang Weifan, 'Tan ban hao jiaohui yu shenxue sixiang jianshe' [On Running the Church Well and Theological Reconstruction], unpublished manuscript (third draft), May 4, 2002, 4-5, quoted and translated in Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China*, 362; for Chinese, see *Shi nian ju ju*, 455-67, esp. 464.

Directed against his colleague's theological formulations, Wang Weifan underscores the importance of 'justification by faith' as a theological hallmark of Protestant and, moreover, evangelical Christianity.

Yet in China, the term 'evangelicalism' tends towards a sectarian understanding of Christianity and is often understood synonymously with 'fundamentalism' – the result of the North American missionary enterprise of the early 20th century.<sup>50</sup> While Wang Weifan sees himself as an evangelical, his theology has clearly departed from earlier understandings of Protestant fundamentalism as was seen in individuals like Wang Mingdao (1900–91) and Song Shangjie (John Sung, 1901–44), but in some ways echoes the fundamentalist theology of individuals like Jia Yuming. The hallmark of evangelicalism has nevertheless had a deep impression on Wang Weifan's theology, although he does want to push its boundaries.

Reflecting on Wang's Christology further, it is instructive to consider the recommendation of evangelical theologian Henri Blocher to rethink the tripartite typology of atonement theories promoted by Gustaf Aulén's important work *Christus Victor*.<sup>51</sup> In particular, Blocher believes that there need not be such a mutually exclusive relationship between the 'classic' view of atonement which focuses on a cosmic victory and the 'Latin' view of atonement which emphasises the penal character of the cross. Instead, he suggests that a new, mediating position of *Agnus Victor* be considered – one that emphasises both victory and vicarious punishment.

It seems as though Wang Weifan's Christology takes a likewise mediating position between the cosmic and the metacosmic ramifications of the work of atonement. Wang wants to maintain a

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<sup>50</sup>See Kevin Xiyi Yao, *The Fundamentalist Movement among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-1937* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

<sup>51</sup>Henri A. G. Blocher, 'Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victor and Vicarious Punishment', in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., *What Does it Mean to be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 67-91.

Though this is outside the scope of the present discussion, it is worth noting that some scholarly debate exists on the validity of Gustaf Aulén's treatise, particularly in having too narrow a reading of the patristic writers and too generous a reading of Luther's role in restoring the 'classic' view of atonement to the West. See David S. Hogg, 'Christology: The Cur Deus Homo', in Francesca Aran Murphy, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 200.

view of Jesus Christ as the personal saviour of Christians, speak about the gravity of human sin, and underscore the necessity of the doctrine of justification by faith. However, he also wishes to expand the evangelical Christological vision. There are three dimensions to Wang Weifan's understanding of Jesus Christ: the personal Lord of Christians, the Lord of the cosmos, and the Lord of history. It is such a cosmic Christology that, for Wang, is at the same time particular yet general, evangelical yet ecumenical, Christian yet Chinese. Moreover, in the midst of China's spiritual crisis, it provides a method of positive engagement with Chinese religious and philosophical teachings in today's construction of a Chinese Christian theology.