Edinburgh Research Explorer

Editorial: Chinese Identity, Christian Identity

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Readers of *Studies in World Christianity* will be well acquainted with the parable of the Professor of Comparative Inter-Planetary Religions.1 As narrated by Andrew Walls, this long-living, scholarly space visitor travels to Earth on a number of occasions to conduct field research related to the religion known as 'Christianity': from the Council of Jerusalem to the Council of Nicea, from the seventh century in Ireland to the 1840s in London and the 1980s in Lagos, Nigeria. What would differ if our spaceman were to narrow the scope of his research to a particular subgrouping of the human species, such as to those with some affiliation with the descriptor 'Chinese'? Would Walls's 'indigenising' principle have to be envisioned differently if we were to speak of a more unified understanding of 'culture'? Or, perhaps, would 'Chinese culture' need to be re-evaluated as embodying manifold meanings, especially when 'Chinese' is not limited to a given time or locale? Does Walls's 'pilgrim' principle which speaks of the universalising factor of Christianity add to or take away from Chinese culture? These are some of the questions raised by the articles of this issue of *Studies in World Christianity* which engage the two foci of Chinese identity and Christian identity.

The first two articles were originally presented as part of the Chinese Christianities Seminar of the American Academy of Religion, held in San Antonio, Texas in November 2016. Michel Chambon begins our tour with Christian church buildings in Fujian province. These structures are placed in the centres of cities with towers that are illuminated at night and reach high into the sky, thereby making them visible from throughout the region. These 'cities on the hill' are contrasted with traditional Chinese temples and ancestral halls which tend to be located outside of the main urban centres, since Chinese gods and ancestors do not dwell amongst the living, and are built to emphasise the horizontal plane. Chambon argues that Christian

architectural structures are not merely lifeless piles of brick and mortar, but active agents that make a transcendent and infinite God present today through material reality. Whereas Chambon's paper highlights the Christian identity of his subjects, the second paper by Xinzi Rao highlights the Chinese identity of her subjects in a Chinese Christian community in Germany. Her paper raises important questions related to the ways individuals negotiate their identities when in diaspora and the identity markers one chooses to take up or to leave behind. Yet some Chinese migrants in Germany who are not Christians have tended to be hostile towards the religion and its influences on the Chinese diasporic community. If Christianity is a vehicle of westernisation, what does this say about the identity formation of Chinese migrants?

Shiun-wey Huang brings our discussion back to Asia to a township in Eastern Taiwan. Huang narrates the religious history of this location throughout the last century and offers a microcosmic study of some of the socio-political events shaping Taiwan more broadly: Japanese rule in 1895, Chinese Nationalist rule in 1945, and Taiwanisation since the 1990s. These circumstances would constantly shift the makeup of this township – ethnically (Han Chinese, sinicised plains indigenous people, and the Amis) and religiously (Presbyterian, Jehovah Witness, True Jesus Church, Roman Catholic, folk religion, etc.). In contrast with our previous two articles, Huang's longitudinal study of this particular location problematises questions of Chinese identity and Christian identity.

In our final article, Xu Ximian ends our tour by studying one of the greatest theologians China has produced: T. C. Chao, also known as Zhao Zichen. Mindful of the theological shifts that Chao experienced through his own life, Xu offers a focused exposition of Chao's Christology as portrayed in his most well-known work *Yesu Zhuan*, often translated as the *Biography of Jesus* or the *Life of Jesus*. On the one hand, we find traces of Kant and Schleiermacher and the broader Western liberal tradition very present in this book. On the other hand, Chao clearly speaks into the Chinese national and cultural crises of his day. As a whole, Xu argues that *Yesu Zhuan* is best read as T. C. Chao's personal spiritual reflections about Jesus Christ as the

greatest exemplar of Christian and Chinese ideals: King of kings, Lord of lords – indeed, Sage of sages.

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1 Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 3–15.