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**Chinese Christian Theology**

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# Chinese Christian Theology

*Alexander Chow and Stephanie Wong*

This article offers an overview of some of the major Christian theological themes that have arisen from the concerns of Chinese Catholic and Protestant Christians since the seventeenth century. It explores contextual factors that have shaped competing categories of loyalty, from differing cultural, religious, and philosophical starting points, to socio-political realities of Western imperialism, and Chinese nationalism and politics. The article examines theological themes that are prioritized by Chinese Christians related to the motif of the 'family', understandings of the human condition, and the importance of fostering a spirituality of suffering and an expression of public faith. Whilst in no way comprehensive, this article attempts to offer vignettes of how Chinese Christians, primarily from the Chinese mainland, have wrestled with the faith and offered distinctive expressions of what can be termed Chinese Christian theology.

**Keywords:** China, Chinese Christianity, Ecclesiology, Family, Public theology, Sin, Suffering, Christian theology

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# 1 Introduction

The encounter between Christianity and Chinese peoples produced a range of reactions, from intrigue and embrace to conflict and contestation. Foreign missionaries, church leaders, and theologians of various Christian traditions have underscored certain priorities when communicating the gospel to the Chinese. These received understandings of Christian thought and practice have helped to catechize converts in the fundamentals of the faith and to build local Christian communities. However, Chinese Christians have navigated their newfound faith with different, idiosyncratic priorities.

China's ever-changing context has produced practical questions for foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians alike. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), Church of the East (or 'Nestorian') traders first travelled the silk road into China. Never having encountered a Christian before, many Chinese presumed they were Manichaeian or Zoroastrian. Yet the Church of the East eventually established the first Christian community in China and pioneered a Chinese Christian lexicon, all while negotiating a religious and philosophical context where Confucianism held the power of state orthodoxy, and Buddhism and Daoism loomed large. Then, in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jesuit missionaries presented themselves as Western scholars of cultural and scientific exchange. In contrast to their Church of the East predecessors, the Jesuits found their main interlocutors amongst the Confucian scholarly elites and built the foundations for Confucian-Christian dialogue.

Both these episodes were quite different from the late-Qing dynasty (1636–1912), when foreign imperial powers forced China open through the Opium Wars (1830–1842 and 1856–1860) and a series of unequal treaties. Protestant missionaries entered the Chinese mainland initially under the auspices of the British empire and Catholic missionaries returned under the French empire. The Russian empire followed suit, ensuring their 1858 unequal treaty guaranteed the freedom to propagate Eastern Orthodoxy, because the Russian negotiator 'was convinced that the British and French resolved to transform China into a Protestant and Catholic country' (Tiedemann 2010: 201). It was during this late-Qing period of the mid-nineteenth century that Christianity was first described as a 'foreign religion' (*yangjiao*), with foreign missionaries demonized (literally called 'foreign devils' [*yang guizi*]) and Chinese Christians ridiculed as running dogs of imperialism. By the time of the Republic of China (1912–1949) and the People's Republic of China (est. 1949), Christianity would continually be questioned about whether it was a foreign religion, inherently vested in foreign powers, or a Chinese religion able to speak to China's pursuits of nationalism, industrialization, and modernity, and to church-state relations.

Along with these socio-political questions, Chinese Christianity has been shaped by Chinese culture as historically underscored by Confucianism, but also influenced by Buddhism, Daoism, popular religion, and, since the twentieth century, communism. On a

basic level, this has been expressed through the translation of Christian ideas into new linguistic forms, often borrowing and adapting pre-existing ideas from Chinese religions and philosophies, such as the Chinese name for God or the rendering of theologically rich concepts like sin and salvation. On a deeper level, aspects of Chinese culture affect Christian patterns of perceiving and experiencing the world, and offer new theological priorities. For instance, despite the generally negative attitude of missionaries towards Chinese religions, the Bible was translated and theology was written in a context rich with Daoist sensibilities such as tranquillity, simplicity, and emptiness (Lee 2021) and with Buddhist understandings of scripture, compassion, and the afterlife (Liu 2021).

This article does not have the space to cover all the theological concerns of Chinese Christians, especially in the wider Chinese diaspora. Instead, it focuses on three major areas raised by the Chinese mainland context. To begin the discussion, the article focuses on how Chinese Christians theologically negotiated one of the key features of Chinese society: the family. This vividly highlights how Chinese Christians have rarely understood religious adherence as simply a matter of individual choice. This is followed by a discussion of the Christian notion of sin (hamartiology). Part of this discussion demonstrates how hamartiology has been one of the most contested theological themes in a context that has tended to emphasize an optimistic view of human nature. Related to the first theme of family, this also explores how difficult it is for Chinese Christians to consider sin in solely individual terms. Finally, given the tumultuous history of China since the mid-nineteenth century, the article highlights ways Chinese Christians have reckoned with human suffering, both in developing a spirituality of suffering and in nurturing a public faith. Overall, from the earliest encounters with Christianity until the present, we see a multiplicity of ways Chinese Christians have negotiated competing loyalties to produce distinctively Chinese Christian theology.

## **2 Theology of the family**

It is often recognized that one of the defining characteristics of Chinese culture is a priority of the family (jia) or familism, which is not limited to kinship relations but has implications for the local community, the kingdom, and, ultimately, the world (see Jeung, Fong, and Kim 2019; Paper 2020). Much of this familist ethos draws from the Confucian five key relations (wu lun) identified between father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, senior and junior, and between friends. Each pairing was perceived as having mutual responsibilities to one another. However, Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) reformers transformed Confucian ethics into political ideology, speaking in terms of three bonds (san gang) – that is, a ruler guiding a subject, a father guiding a son, and a husband guiding a wife – resulting in a patrilineal hierarchical framework with the emperor at the top (Tu 1998). At times, this created oppressive relationships, especially for women, leaving questions over whether Confucianism could be redeemable in this regard (see

Li 2000). However, more latitude was offered to elite women, who, with more time and resources, had greater liberties within the parameters dictated by Chinese society (Shi 2018; Amsler 2018). As we shall see, Chinese Christians have wrestled with these notions of filial responsibility, thereby developing idiosyncratic adaptations and rejections through Christian theology and practice.

## **2.1 Conflicting family values: from birth to beyond death**

With the introduction of Christianity into China came a recognition of its foreignness. The very existence of such a vocation as the missionary was odd enough. For one to leave their family to establish themselves in a foreign land suggested the abandonment of one's filial obligations to parents and other elders (*Analects* 4.19). Catholic missionaries had an additional chasm to cross related to the priestly vow of celibacy. As Mencius (Mengzi) once said, '[t]here are three ways of being a bad son. The most serious is to have no heir' (*Mencius* 4A.26; 2003: 169). Of course, this was debated much earlier concerning celibacy amongst Buddhist monks and nuns (see Ch'en 1973: 14–55). The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) anticipated this concern and, in his important apologetic work, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*TMLH*; *Tianzhu shiyi*), dismisses these Mencian teachings as not originating in Confucius himself (*TMLH* 8.551–562; Ricci 1985). Was there an error through the passing down of oral teachings from Confucius to Mencius across two centuries? Or was Mencius' response limited to concerns raised in the immediate context? Ricci notes that Confucius praised certain people as benevolent (*ren*) and virtuous (*xian*) without having an heir. There are other acts that are even more severely unfilial than the absence of progeny, such as 'causing one's parents to do wrong, murdering one's parents, [and] robbing one's parents of their wealth' (*TMLH* 8.557; Ricci 1985: 433). However, such arguments did not completely ward off dissenters. Time and time again, criticisms were raised about Catholic teachings and accusations were made about the sexual licentiousness of missionaries (Gernet 1982: 191; Klein 2014: 126–135).

Along with the filial responsibilities related to bringing life into the world, a person's devotion to parents and ancestors did not cease with death. Confucian teachings underscored the importance of serving and respecting parents and ancestors who were both living and dead (*Analects* 1.9, 2.5). By the Han dynasty, Buddhism and religious Daoism infused Chinese culture with even more layers of ancestral beliefs and rituals (Lowe 2005: 114–116). These are not simply one-way acts of honouring the dead, but these rites were often understood to bring about a reciprocation of blessings from the ancestors to the living (*Book of Poetry* 3.2.3). This point was taken up by Aluoben of the Church of the East, who arrived during the Tang dynasty in 635. In his *Book of Hearing the Messiah* (*Xuting Mishu suo jing*), Aluoben develops an ordering of filial piety, in which service to God, to the emperor, and to one's parents would be reciprocated with

blessings (Aguilar Sánchez 2021: 132). He negotiates biblical teachings of worship to God and honour to parents with Confucian teachings of loyalty to parents and to the emperor. By demonstrating a compatibility between the gospel and the Confucian state orthodoxy, Aluoben garnered imperial approval from Emperor Taizong for Christianity to be disseminated in China (Witek 2001: 13). A millennium later in the Ming dynasty, Matteo Ricci provided a similar formulation, explaining:

When all men follow the Way the wills of these three kinds of fathers [God, the emperor, and a family's father] will not be in conflict since the father of lowest rank will command his own son to serve the senior fathers, and he who is a son will observe all three kinds of filial piety by obeying his one father. (*TMLH* 8.558; Ricci 1985: 433–435)

Part of what was at stake was whether ancestral rituals should be theologically understood as veneration or as worship. For the Jesuit missionaries, ancestral rituals held civil and political functions within Chinese society that could be permissible for Christians, thereby upholding the command to honour one's father and mother. Contrastingly, Dominican and Franciscan missionaries saw these rituals as superstitious and idolatrous, violating the command to have no other gods before Yahweh. This 'Chinese rites controversy' did not end well. After Pope Clement XI denounced such practices in 1704, Emperor Kangxi rejected the decree and banned Christian missions to China in 1721. His son Emperor Yongzheng then outlawed Christianity in 1724 and expelled all but a few missionaries. It took two centuries before Chinese Catholics in 1939 were permitted by the Holy See to observe these practices again (Minamiki 1985).

The theological implications of ancestral ritual continue to be important for Chinese Christians throughout the twentieth century and into the present. For Chinese Catholics, theological distinctions between worship (*latria*) offered only to God and veneration (*dulia*) offered to angels and saints provides a potential bridge for integrating ancestral rituals into Christian practices. This came to fruition during the 1970s, when Cardinal Paul Yu Pin (Yu Bin, 1901–1978) spearheaded in Taiwan the development of Chinese Catholic ancestral liturgy, first practised on Chinese New Year in 1971, which was formally approved by the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference in Taipei in 1974. Drawing from post-Vatican II reforms that encouraged inculturation, Yu saw this as an attempt at the 'Christianization of China and the Sincization of Christianity' (*Zhongguo Jidu hua, Jidu Zhongguo hua*) (Wang 2001: 338–339; see Batairwa Kubuya 2018: 126–134). For Protestants, ancestral rituals have been theologically much harder to reconcile and, until today, continue to be a point of contention for Chinese within and outside of Asia (see Huang 1994; Ying 2002; White 2015).

## **2.2 God as heavenly parent**



Perhaps the most explicit theological expression of the family has been in speaking of God in terms of a parent. This has biblical precedence when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray to 'our Father in heaven' or 'your heavenly Father' (Matt 6:9, 14). According to Matteo Ricci, if God is the supreme source of all creation, and if Confucianism underscores filial piety to parents, elders, and sovereigns,

how much more should we honor the Lord of Heaven [Tianzhu; or God] who is the great Father and Mother [da fumu; or great Parent], the great Sovereign, the first Cause of all first ancestors, the One from whom all sovereigns derive their mandate and the Producer and Sustainer of all things? (*TMLH* 2.115; Ricci 1985: 130)

Ricci was invoking Thomistic understandings of God as first cause. But this formulation also coincides with classic Confucian views, as found in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*) and the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*), which speak of Heaven (Tian) giving birth to humanity like a parent. Yang Tingyun (1562–1627) took Ricci's formulation and stated unequivocally that this Great Parent (da fumu) is also One True Lord (yi zhen zhu) – that is, a monotheistic God. Furthermore, whilst Ricci suggests filial piety should lead to honouring God, Yang reinforces the obverse, arguing that service to God requires service to one's parents (Standaert 1988: 116–123). Given the anti-Christian polemics of the day levied by Confucian and Buddhist critics (see Lancashire 1969), these Chinese Catholic apologetic and doctrinal writings show the stakes for demonstrating the compatibility of Confucian and Catholic understandings of cosmogony, and in underscoring how a monotheistic God can be understood as the great sovereign and provider over all (see Zürcher 1993: 85–88; Tian 2008: 169–170).

As Protestantism began to be propagated in the late-Qing dynasty, God as Heavenly Father became incredibly important for Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), the founder of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. After receiving copies of Protestant tracts and the Chinese Bible, Hong was able to use them to interpret a vision he experienced many years earlier in the midst of a personal crisis. In his vision, Hong ascended into Heaven and met the Heavenly Father and the Heavenly Elder Brother (Tianxiong), Jesus Christ, and was charged with a divine mission to battle demons in Heaven and on Earth. From that point forward, Hong saw himself as the natural brother (tongbao dixiong) of Jesus and was ordained as the Heavenly King, the Son of Heaven (Kilcourse 2016: 48–49, 84). Not only did Hong use familial language to articulate his relationship with the Heavenly Father and the Heavenly Elder Brother, but he also spoke of a worldwide family of spiritual siblings, even calling missionaries 'foreign brothers' (yang xiongdi or wai xiongdi) (Kilcourse 2016: 69). Politically, this gave Hong the rationale to attempt an overthrow of the Qing dynasty led by ethnic Manchus. Theologically, Protestant missionaries contested Hong's views,

worrying that he denied Christ's divine nature and upheld a heterodox understanding of the Trinity, amongst other things. But Hong was informed by one of the Protestant renderings of 'God' into Chinese at the time, as Di or Shangdi – terms derived from Chinese classical texts. Hong believed the Manchu emperors exalted themselves to divine status, as they appropriated the name of God as part of their own title Huangdi, thereby violating the command to not take God's name in vain (Reilly 2014: 91–100). As the Son of Heaven, Hong was the true divinely-appointed emperor of China. This led to a bloody civil war between Taiping and Qing forces. By the time the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was suppressed in 1864, some twenty million Chinese were dead.

Within the Chinese cultural context, the description of God as Heavenly Father also lends itself towards a patriarchal orientation. Some Chinese Protestants, especially those associated with the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in the 1980s and 1990s have attempted to augment fatherly descriptions of God with understandings of God as Mother. We see this in the thought of K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun, 1915–2012), a long-time leader of the TSPM, who notices in Isaiah 49 and 66, and Psalm 131, that God is described as a mother caring and nursing her child. For Ting, this contrasts the harshness of a strict Chinese father. Furthermore, it is a vivid image of God as Cosmic Lover, whose immeasurable love and grace extends to all of creation (Ting 2000d: 417; see also Ting 2000c; Wickeri 2007: 21–22).

Wang Weifan (1927–2015), an evangelical within the TSPM, likewise underscores the importance of considering God as Mother. However, for Wang, any attention to motherly love must also recognize the hardship suffered by mothers, like his own mother who considered suicide at the height of the Japanese occupation of China. Recalling his mother's anguish, in light of Isaiah 53, Wang remarks that mothers reflect the kind of love and suffering that Christ endured on the cross (Wang 1993: 94–95; 1995: 7).

### **2.3 From Chinese family to Christian family**

If the doctrine of God is where theological reconfigurations of family have been most explicitly articulated, it would be in the transformation of the Christian community – ecclesiology – that family has been most implicitly expressed. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Chinese literati who were baptized by the Jesuits they met in Beijing were eager to spread their newfound faith to their families. They were perhaps spurred on by a sense of filial responsibility, and invited missionaries back to their hometowns and often became patrons of the Catholic church. Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) established a house church in his family estate, the now famous Xujiahui of Shanghai, and Yang Tingyuan funded the creation of the first church in Hangzhou. These ensured that loved ones who converted to Catholicism could regularly receive the sacraments (Charbonnier 2007: 159–174). Furthermore, with conflicts that arose after the Chinese

rites controversy, Catholic missionaries often refocused their evangelistic activities on the countryside, eventually resulting in entire villages converting to Catholicism (Harrison 2013). These Catholic villages formed solidarity through kinship and religious bonds that have persevered across waves of religious suppression from the eighteenth century until the present – many representing the mainstay of the contemporary Catholic underground church (Charbonnier 2007: 337–349; Madsen 1998: 50–75). Some Catholic missionaries, such as the bishop of Beijing Stanislas Jarlin (1856–1933), saw the conversion of family units as a valuable evangelistic strategy, as it would result in the creation of future generations brought up in Catholic education (Young 2013: 128–130). When Protestant missionaries arrived en masse at the end of the nineteenth century, they tended to focus on the conversion of individuals, with an emphasis on the profession of faith. However, some Protestant missionaries sought to create Christian families by finding Christian wives for their single male assistants (Tiedemann 2010: 400–402). Others found that Calvinist covenantal affirmations of paedobaptism (infant baptism) facilitated the translation of a Confucian family into a Christian family in the church (Selles 2011: 180).

What we see from these examples is a view where ‘family’ is not simply an organizational unit of kinship relations. Instead, as the sociologist Fei Xiaotong explains, it is like the concentric circles caused by throwing a rock into a lake, whereby marriage and having children has a ripple effect on the broader society, and ultimately on the kingdom and the world (Fei 1992: 63–64). In effect, the church becomes an expression of a surrogate family, as may be seen in Acts 2, in which Chinese people who become Christians often experience a breakage from established relationships and the creation of new bonds within ecclesial relationships. Furthermore, there is a reconfiguration of concentric circles, whereby spiritual change occurs in the individual, through the church, and in a public faith to the broader society and state (see Chow 2018: 146–159). This is perhaps also why one of the major twentieth-century Protestant hurdles in the Chinese context, with regards to ecclesiology, has been the divisions caused by foreign denominationalism. As Cheng Jingyi (1881–1939) declared in the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Chinese Christians

hope to see [...] a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions. [...] Speaking generally, denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but sometimes he suffers for it! (World Missionary Conference 1910: 196)

In part, Cheng’s vision came into fruition through the creation of the Church of Christ in China in 1927, a coalition which initially merged Presbyterian, Reformed, and Congregational mission churches, before adding a number of others (Tiedemann 2010:

533–535). After the 1980s, the emphasis on church unity has also been celebrated by leaders of the TSPM who often speak about the post-denominational Chinese church.

However, throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many have questioned whether priorities of church unity overshadow key theological non-negotiables. Many Chinese church leaders have stayed away from these ecumenical efforts, dismissing the Church of Christ in China and the TSPM as theologically liberal; the latter group is additionally accused of being simply an instrument of the Communist Party. This has led to a tension between two of the four marks of the church: ‘oneness’ and ‘holiness’.

## **2.4 Women in the Chinese church**

Another important dimension can be seen in terms of the place of women in the Chinese church. One of the great challenges of the propagation of Christianity within imperial China was the strict separation of genders in Confucian society. This was such a concern that Matteo Ricci completely set aside the evangelism of women. Later Jesuit missionaries instructed male converts to catechize their female family members and only met women to baptize them in the presence of male family members while separated by a curtain or a screen (Amsler 2018: 48–50). Subsequent generations of the first Chinese literati converts produced a number of significant Catholic matriarchs, such as Candida Xu (1607–1680, Xu Guangqi’s granddaughter) and Agnes Yang (c. 1630–1640, Yang Tingyun’s daughter). Both were widowed, took vows of chastity, and were financially independent enough to live in service to the church. In the midst of a Confucian patriarchal society, Chinese women like Yang found paths to leadership as widowed matriarchs of domestic convents, in which chaste Christian women dedicated themselves to prayer and social service within their community (Entenmann 1996; Amsler 2018: 132–137; see Mungello 2015: 33–37). Ming and Qing-era Catholicism also saw the development of a relatively idiosyncratic form of consecrated life for women (xiunü), who took private vows and yet typically continued to live with their families of origin while doing active pastoral work throughout the local church community (Chambon 2019: 3). This challenged Confucian gender norms and also suggested a Catholic ecclesiology of the religious life not as separate from society but committed to it.

When Protestant missionaries entered the late-Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, they faced similar challenges related to the separation of genders. Missionary wives and, later, single female missionaries focused on evangelizing Chinese women. Eventually, female missionaries began enlisting the help of Chinese ‘Bible women’ or ‘women preachers’ (nü chuandao) to help overcome cultural barriers. Female missionaries of the American Methodist Episcopal Church saw Bible women as part of the reinstatement of deaconess, which they viewed as warranted by the Greek in passages such as 1 Tim 3:11 and Rom 16:1 (Robert 1997: 157–158).

By the Republican era in the early twentieth century, China was experiencing an intellectual climate calling for democratic and scientific thinking, as well as changes in gender norms. Reticent about these developments, the Chinese Protestant pastor Wang Mingdao (1900–1991) advised the female readership of his Christian periodical to be ‘in the world but not of the world’. The social changes of the times may liberate women from the secluded family, but they also open up many dangers for sin and hypocrisy. Women, he explains, must be aware of the power they have in tempting men to sin. Wang reasons that in 2 Samuel 11, Bathsheba tempted David to sin by bathing in a place where the king could readily see her. Whilst modern women do not bathe in the open, he argues that they prefer exposing their bodies and pursuing all sorts of dress and adornment. Rather, women should protect their brothers from sinning and focus on glorifying God (Tseng 2015: 57–58).

Others saw benefits for women during this period, but insisted Christianity offered an even more compelling argument for women’s liberation. P. S. Tseng (Zeng Baosun, 1893–1978), a Protestant leader in women’s education, argues that Confucianism had long kept women limited to the domestic, social, and intellectual spheres. She contends that Christ

has given woman [sic] life, soul, and the way to come to God’ and hopes that in Christianity ‘the women of China will find their right position, not only as citizens of China, but as citizens of the Christian world. (Tseng 1928: 443)

Pointing to the gospels, Tseng notes the ways Christ sent women as witnesses of theological truths such as Jesus’ messiahship (the Samaritan woman who preached about the Living Christ in John 4) and resurrection (Mary Magdalene sharing the news to the disciples in John 20). Not only does Christ respect and uphold women, Tseng declares ‘Christ is indeed the emancipator of women’ (Tseng 1915: 12)!

Ruth Cheng (Cheng Guanyi), another Protestant educator of this time, remarked that the high illiteracy rate in China, especially amongst women, made it difficult for them to study the Bible. In a 1922 article, she worries that without appropriate knowledge about Christ and the history of religions, women are unable to properly serve the church. Whilst literacy is a problem, Cheng further argues that the lack of ordination for women renders them unequal within the church. She questions whether prohibitions against women’s ordination were due to contextual matters specific to the Western church and the ancient church, and were perhaps no longer relevant for the present church, especially in China (Cheng 1922: 540).

Before long, Chinese women were globally amongst the earliest Protestant women to be ordained, as local preachers in the Methodist Church in the 1920s, as elders in

Church of Christ in China in the 1930s, and as priests in the Anglican communion in 1944 and 1971. Despite this openness to female leadership in Chinese Protestantism, the revival of Calvinism in the early twenty-first century has lent strength to complementarian views. Nonetheless, women have offered indispensable contributions to the life and the leadership of the Chinese church, both within and despite gendered barriers erected by Confucian society and Christian ecclesiology.

### **3 The human and social condition**

Along with prioritizing the family, another defining characteristic of Chinese culture is its relatively optimistic view of human nature. For instance, Daoist texts present the Way (Dao) as a pervasive natural power already present and operative in all things. In this view, the pursuit of a sagely life did not require grasping for any additional rectitude. In fact, people should refrain from imposing mental or social constructs that impede harmony with the Way. Rather, human flourishing lies in letting non-action (wuwei) characterize all one's doings (Daodejing 48), and in the return to a perfect, primordial simplicity (pu) that is instinctive to all (Zhuangzi 12). Likewise, Mencius famously taught that human nature was good (xing shan) – that people have an inherent capacity and even incipient tendency towards goodness. In his account, the human heart-mind (xin) possesses sprouts (duan) of feeling that can be cultivated into the virtues of benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), wisdom (zhi), and propriety (li) (*Mencius* 6A.6). Thus, human nature is not bereft of direction, but, just like water flows downhill, it inclines to the good (*Mencius* 2A.2).

Whilst Mencius represents the main trajectory of Confucian orthodoxy, Xunzi contested this view and argued unequivocally that human nature is bad and morally blind (e) (*Xunzi* 23.1). Yet both these perspectives within China's spiritual traditions were more about the innate nature humans are born with, and therefore less grim than Augustine's preoccupation with the impossibility for humans not to sin (non posse non peccare). Chinese moral anthropologies stressed that the goodness or badness of human nature can be shaped through education received in this world. Chinese thought has endorsed moral cultivation and social progress as a natural, albeit difficult, undertaking for humanity: insofar as people have a capacity for self-transformation, they can both seek goodness and be held accountable to it.

#### **3.1 Contesting 'original goodness'**

Christian missionaries have been well aware of the quandary that exists between Chinese and Augustinian-Reformed accounts of human nature. Matteo Ricci wrote of original goodness (xing shan) bestowed by God and innately found in human reason, and he avoided even mentioning the notion of original sin (*TMLH* 7). Instead, he argued

that people could best realize Confucian benevolence (ren) through Christian love, as expressed in Jesus' greatest commandments:

The definition of humanity [ren] can be summed up in the following two sentences: Love the Lord of Heaven, for He is supreme; and love others as you love yourself for the sake of the Lord of Heaven.[...] The Lord of Heaven loves people; if I genuinely love the Lord of Heaven can I fail to love the people He loves? (*TMLH* 7.468; Ricci 1985: 375)

Another Jesuit, Giulio Aleni (1582–1649), penned an important Christian primer that offers a passing mention of original sin, but mostly avoids discussion of human sinfulness and focuses on the nature of God in history and on Christian living (Clark 2021: 37).

In contrast to these tenuous approaches, early Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century – many of whom came from evangelical Presbyterian and Congregationalist backgrounds – spoke more adamantly about human depravity. Robert Morrison (1782–1834), for instance, took the Westminster Shorter Catechism as inspiration for his Chinese Protestant catechism. However, given its evangelistic usage, Morrison differed from the Westminster Standards by prioritizing discussion on sin and the Ten Commandments in the earlier section of his catechism (Morrison 2014). Another Protestant, Walter Medhurst (1796–1857), composed a Christian primer which, in contrast to Aleni, spends eight couplets on the sin of Adam and Eve, the temptation of the Devil, and the inheritance of sin amongst later generations (Clark 2021: 37–40).

### **3.2 Individual faith, corporate responsibility**

Chinese Catholics tended to echo the reticence of their missionary counterparts in discussing human sinfulness. Yang Tingyun briefly acknowledges the existence of original sin as the seed that causes sin, but he also sees it as washed away through the sacrament of baptism. Yang places greater emphasis on the Christian's practice of daily introspection and the sacrament of penance for the absolution of sins, echoing Buddhist and Daoist practices of self-examination (Standaert 1988: 143–144; see Charbonnier 2007: 173). Instead of dwelling on human inability to do good, Yang and other Chinese Catholic literati of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) promoted a strong spirit of social concern, often creating Christian benevolent societies modelled after the Seven Corporal Works of Charity of medieval Catholicism taught by the Jesuits (Chow 2018: 31–33).

Lou Tseng-tsiang (Lu Zhengxiang, 1871–1949), the Qing dynasty foreign diplomat who later became premier of the Republic of China and then a Benedictine monk, makes a similar move. For him, the Confucian values of moral self-scrutiny, relational integrity, and humble service were predicated on an ennobling conviction – namely, that humans were meant for lives not of dissolution but rather of moral and spiritual strength. In this way,

Confucian teachings anticipated and echoed the Christian call to holiness. He was deeply committed to values of moral cultivation and fulfilment of duty, drawing on both Confucius and St Benedict to argue that the supreme work of a statesman was not to promote any regime as such. Rather, he says, with reference to the opening line of the *Great Learning (Da Xue)*, it is 'to develop the natural virtues in the hearts of all men' (Lou 1948: 4–7).

Like Chinese Catholics, many Chinese Protestants in the late-Qing dynasty echoed their missionary counterparts in their understanding of the human condition. This is epitomized in the work of Liang Fa (1789–1855), one of the first Protestant converts and preachers. His important work *Good News to Admonish the Ages (Quanshi liangyan)* published in 1832 was written in the style of Chinese morality books which typically brought together Confucian social values with Buddhist and Daoist ideas of moral self-examination. Rather than emphasizing penance as Yang Tingyun did, Liang argues that moral uprightness could not be achieved by human efforts but only by the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the receipt of Christian baptism, and the work of the Holy Spirit to expel evil thoughts (Sun 2018: 105–108). Liang condemns sinful practices of China's religious and secular milieu, especially the great sin of idol worship. He sees filial devotion expressed in Christian ethics and underscores that Christians should be loyal to the state even though Chinese emperors fall short of the authority God bestowed on them (Rom 13; Bohr 1985: 40–44).

Liang's *Good News to Admonish the Ages* left a strong impression on Hong Xiuquan of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. However, Hong rejected Liang's understanding of human depravity and instead affirmed the ability of human nature to cultivate righteousness. He believed demons have deceived the world, causing people to lose their original heart-minds (*benxin*) of goodness. Like Liang, Hong speaks out against various forms of sinful acts, especially perceived idol worship, and declares a return to the worship of the true God (Kilcourse 2016: 112–115). For the Taipings, original sin derives not from the first humans, but from the blasphemous moment the first Chinese emperor adopted God's name as part of his own title (Clark 2021: 41–42).

Similar to the perspectives of Liang Fa and Hong Xiuquan, Chinese Protestants in the Republican era held a range of views around the human condition and its implications for broader society. However, much of this was shaped by polemics exported by the North American fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Chinese conservatives like Wang Mingdao, Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903–1972), and John Sung (Song Shangjie, 1901–1944) tended to underscore teachings on human depravity and the need for the atoning work of Christ (see Lian 2010). In contrast, Chinese progressives like L. C. Wu (Wu Leichuan, 1870–1944) and T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen, 1888–1979) contested the doctrine of original sin and understood sin in terms of selfishness or self-centredness caused by ignorance of the love of God (Chu 1995: 62; Chow 2013: 76–77).



For Wu, Jesus' teachings on love and sacrifice for the benefit of the community (John 12:24–25, 13:34–35) were entirely consonant with the Confucian goal of cultivating benevolence as a social virtue (Chu 1995: 46–50). In Chao's perspective, too many Christians have forgotten the implications of the Kingdom of God, and have focused instead on the saving of a remnant few. Rather, '[t]he truth is that the individual cannot be separated from society, for individual salvation carries with it the larger task of social reconstruction' (Chao 1922: 312). A radical change occurred for Chao during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), when he was imprisoned by Japanese authorities with other Christian educators. This forced him to re-evaluate his views and reject his earlier stance. He acknowledged original sin in both his captors and himself, and he came to stress the human need for the atoning work of Christ (Chow 2013: 79–82).

### **3.3 The rediscovery of sin during the People's Republic of China**

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party initiated a series of tumultuous economic, industrial, and social campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Whilst earlier Chinese Christians negotiated traditional Chinese understandings of human potential, this period was dictated by socialist understandings of progress and industrialization. This was also a time when Christianity was severely suppressed to near extinction in the country. Hence, Chinese Christians did not and could not readily engage broader discourses around science and technological progress. In the late-1970s and into the 1980s, when public religious activities were once again a possibility, Chinese Christianity experienced a rapid growth that tended to be associated with miraculous, supernatural experiences, as opposed to a more 'scientific' approach as found in the wider discourse. Furthermore, the majority of Chinese Christians tended to emphasize human depravity, thereby offering stronger impetus for evangelism with appeal to 'otherworldly' hope and salvation. Despite this trend, in 1979, the TSPM leader K. H. Ting argued that focusing on human sinfulness creates an unhelpful division between those who are saved from sin and those who are not. Instead, he argued that it is better to speak about how all have been 'sinned against' by the evils endured in this world, and that Christians and non-Christians (notably, atheistic communists) could work together as vehicles of God's grace (Ting 2000a; see Chow 2013: 100–105).

In the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, the communist party emphasized the development of a socialist market economy and rapid urbanization. In part, this period witnessed a growing number of Christian entrepreneurs who played significant roles in local church leadership. This has led some to speak of Max Weber's classic thesis associating the rise of Protestantism with the spirit of capitalism (see Cao 2011). However, many have seen these economic and social changes as underscoring human depravity.

In contrast with Ting, Aloysius Jin Luxian (1916–2013), a bishop associated with the state-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), expressed worries that Chinese society was facing challenges ‘of modernization, of pure materialism, of the idolatry of money, of individualism’ (Madsen 1998: 114). Likewise, the non-Christian scholar Zhuo Xinping, echoing T. C. Chao’s post-imprisonment views, remarks:

In the present period of social mutations in China, the appearance of cases of moral bankruptcy, human corruptibility and pessimism about life have led many Chinese to understand and experience the meaning of the fallen nature of humanity. (Zhuo 1995: 82)

Ultimately, for each of these Chinese thinkers, the human condition is not merely an academic concern, but one which stems from existential questions for individuals and societies.

## **4 Theological responses to suffering**

In the previous sections, we discussed ways that Chinese Christians have made sense of humanity and their relationships with the world around them. This section highlights some of the ways Chinese Christians have attempted to make meaning in the midst of China’s multiple socio-political crises since the mid-nineteenth century.

### **4.1 Spirituality of suffering**

In times of adversity, Chinese Christians have often embraced their condition of suffering. In part, this is a recognition that Christian suppression can be found within the biblical witness and the historical experience of the early church. For Chinese Christians, suffering becomes an occasion to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ within a wider non-Christian society. Perhaps the most prevalent theological language used with respect to suffering has been that of martyrdom. Jesuit missionaries trying to find an appropriate rendering for ‘martyr’ in Chinese chose the phrase *xundao*, emphasizing a view drawn from Mencius in which self-sacrifice serves a greater moral good (*Mencius* 7A.42; see Clark 2011: 8–11).

However, Chinese traditional notions of death, especially in Buddhism and Daoism, tended to regard death as an inevitable part of an impermanent and constantly changing reality (Ames 2011). In general contrast, Christianity holds a rather poignant sense of death as unnatural or even perverse. Chinese Christians often maintain a stalwart attitude towards their own passing but underscore Christian hope for the life to come. For instance, as Wu Wenyin (1850–1900) reminds his mother before being tortured to death for the faith: ‘Mother, go back home and do not worry. [...] I am going to die for God. Goodbye. I’ll see you in heaven’ (Clark 2011: 17). Many of the Chinese Christian martyrdoms occurred in times when Christianity was severely repressed, such as after the Chinese rites

controversy when Christianity was declared by the emperor as a heterodox or evil teaching (xiejiao) (Laaman 2006: 70–76), or in the midst of the Boxer Uprising of 1900 when foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians of every major branch of Christianity were killed due to their association with foreign colonial powers (Tiedemann 2010: 338–343).

Martyrdom became an important theological motif after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when debates arose about whether Christians should align themselves with the communist government through the creation of Christian patriotic organizations. For Chinese Catholics, a dispute ensued over whether being patriotic and anti-imperialistic necessitated an independent Chinese church. Father John Tung (Dong Shizhi), appalled at Chinese Catholics advocating a 'schismatic' church, delivered a speech in June 1951 speaking of how he loved China and the church, but that creating a separate patriotic church would render it no longer 'Catholic' in its universal nature. With regards to communists, Tung disagreed with their atheistic stance, but spoke in admiration of their unswerving commitment to their beliefs even in the face of death. The resolve of communists reminded him of the tenacity of past Christian martyrs:

[Communists] have more than one quality which forces admiration, shakes my own indolence and brings me to recall vividly the millions of martyrs of our church during the course of 2,000 years. These martyrs are the ones who urge me to beseech God day and night, to forgive my numerous sins and grant me the unparalleled gift of martyrdom. (Tung 1951: 680)

For Tung, Chinese Christians, even more than the communists, needed to be steadfast in their faith despite the challenges they faced. He hoped that, within the Communist Party, 'there may be found many Sauls who become Paul' through Christian conversion (1951: 681). The next day Tung was arrested, never to be heard from again. The following year, Pope Pius XII echoed Tung's appeal to Christian history in his apostolic letter *Cupimus imprimis*, citing Tertullian's aphorism 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity' (semen est sanguis christianorum) and encouraging Chinese Catholics to be willing to be martyred themselves (Pius XII 1952). In the end, many Chinese Catholics went into exile, especially to Taiwan and Hong Kong. Those who stayed were inevitably denounced, imprisoned, and, in some cases, killed (see Mariani 2011: 87–91).

In 1953, Wang Mingdao, the ardent fundamentalist and opponent of the TSPM, also offered reflections on martyrdom. Although not explicitly referring to his contemporary situation, Wang notes that at the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7, Christ is seen not sitting at the right hand of God but *standing*. He explains:

It is significant that when the disciples of Christ bravely witness for His name and His word, suffer humiliation and attack, persecution and death, even the Christ who sits at the right hand of God takes note and stands up from His seat, expressing respect and welcome to them. What a glorious thing to contemplate! (Wang 1983: 136)

Whilst Tung speaks about martyrs as exemplars of unswerving faithfulness, Wang gives a christological assessment of martyrdom, speaking about what Christ offers Christians who are persecuted to the point of death. Echoing Chinese sensibilities, it was a statement that the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, reciprocated faithfulness with the reward of honour and respect. However, Wang also distinguishes the death of a Christian martyr from the common Chinese practice of marking the death of an aged person with a 'happy funeral' (xi sang). Instead, 'nothing can compare with being put to death for the sake of our Lord's name and word – which is much more beautiful, glorious and admirable' (1983: 137).

Throughout his writings, Wang acknowledges that Christians may suffer on account of their own ignorance and transgressions or from self-created strife. However, he maintains that there is a more essential sort of suffering baked into the Christian experience. He warns Christians not to be surprised by tribulation, but rather to hold fast against any temptation to compromise the gospel. For Tung and Wang, the early history of suffering in the face of Christian witness becomes inspiration for Chinese Christians to maintain the faith in the midst of adversity. This sense of martyrological drama and sacrifice departs especially from the traditional Chinese valuation of long life, especially the religious Daoist goal of becoming a long-living immortal (xian) through spiritual enlightenment and alchemy. In this sense, Chinese perceptions of what is honourable or good in a long life are relativized in the embrace of Christian ideals of Christlike death to self and even martyrdom.

Along with John Tung and Wang Mingdao, it is worth considering Wang Weifan of the TSPM. Whilst Wang Weifan disagreed with Wang Mingdao's opposition to the Communist Party and the TSPM (Wang 1989a), he also recognized the 1950s was a complex time for Chinese Christians. From its foundations, the TSPM aspired to reform the Chinese church, but Wang acknowledged that it had 'in reality become a purely political movement' (Wang 1989b: 152). Writing in the 1980s, he unashamedly notes that the prior three decades of the communist revolution included internal strife and external interference. But this suffering has transformed Chinese Christians. Wang explains that, in contrast to traditional Chinese religious thought, God is not merely One who is worshipped on high. Enigmatically, God suffered in Christ for human iniquities as a suffering servant, a reference to Isaiah 53 (Wang 1989b: 149). Elsewhere, he states:

Most Chinese Christians had no share in bearing the sufferings of the people in the catastrophic times of old China [before 1949], because we did not undergo any sacrifices on behalf of the people's liberation. This not only made Chinese Christians unworthy of the martyrs of the [communist] revolution, but even less worthy of the Christ who bore our suffering and took our cares and woes upon himself. But today, Christians are willing to shed their blood for the people and we spare no effort in the performance of our duty. We are ready to exert ourselves to the utmost and even to die unto ourselves so that others may live and experience what the apostle Paul spoke of as Christ's suffering. (Wang 1986: 34)

In contrast to John Tung and Wang Mingdao, who spoke about martyrdom whilst facing the very real possibility of death in the 1950s, Wang Weifan speaks in retrospect about the spiritual importance of what suffering does. It is part of a redemptive process of purgation, resulting in a more holistic understanding of Christianity as embracing spiritual life and service to common humanity (see Wang 1986: 33). Hence, suffering does not conjure up questions around the existence of God – as we find in traditional theodicy discourses. Suffering is an agent of spiritual transformation.

## 4.2 Suffering for the common good

Along with spiritual understandings of the nature of suffering, Chinese Christians have often been willing to endure hardship for the common good. In Western discourse, this is often spoken of in terms of 'public theology'. But this is a somewhat limited category in that it focuses on the dichotomy between public and private religion, and is shaped by a Western history whereby the social standing of Christianity in society has fallen. This is quite different in China, where Christianity has only existed as a minority religion. For Chinese Christians, the public relevance of the faith is partly tied to questions around Chinese Christian identity and its association with foreign powers.

Early twentieth-century Chinese Catholics were especially hard-pressed to shed the imperialist associations between Catholicism and the French Religious Protectorate and to make the case that Catholics were Chinese patriots. When the Japanese Imperial Army invaded China, the Holy See and some foreign missionary bishops urged clergy to remain as neutral as possible in the international conflict. However, Chinese leaders like the bishop of Nanjing, Paul Yu Pin, and the editor of *Catholic Review* (*Shengjiao zazhi*), P. Joseph Zi (Xu Zongze, 1886–1947), immediately rallied to the war effort. In their theologies of wartime resistance, they painstakingly make a Catholic case for the inherent justice of Catholics participating in the armed defence of the nation. In a discussion on just war theory, Yu explains that the Japanese attacks do not meet the classic justifications

for a just war. For that reason, the Chinese church is well within their rights to defend the nation. Furthermore, the Chinese defence is a tool for peace:

[O]ur soldiers and those who are helping in the defence of the country and of our national hearth, deserve to have applied to them the words of St. Thomas: 'Qui juste bella gerunt, pacem intendunt: those who make war justly are helping the cause of peace'. (Yu 1938: 90–91)

Yu continues to explain the love that Christ demands extends to all nations and tribes (Rev 7:9) and even those who offer hostility (Matt 5:44). In contrast to the unjust war launched by Japan that divides the human race, '[w]e must therefore, while still serving our country, keep before our eyes the ideal of universal brotherhood, with the rights and duties which it confers on us' (1938: 92).

Whilst Joseph Zi initially preferred a non-violent Catholic response, his views evolved over the course of the war and he came to promote his own theory of 'critical war' (jinyao zhanzheng). Coming to view defensive war as critical in the sense of being both out of time and out of options, Zi justified armed participation in the war effort on three criteria: that the independent sovereignty of the nation was violated, the territory of the sovereign nation had been annexed, and the honour and glory of the nation had been insulted (Lai and Lili 2017: 175). In addition to making these philosophical and ethical arguments, however, Catholics also felt it was urgent to offer a patriotic witness for the reputation of the church.

The naturalized Chinese citizen and Catholic priest Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940) explained his willingness to serve Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's war effort as a strategic investment in the future: if Catholics help fight the war against Japan, then 'tomorrow, when we have set to building new China, we shall be in the front line, shoulder to shoulder with the working people and the peasants' (Leclercq 1958: 299). These Catholic theologians promoted discourses of courage and fraternity in the face of suffering, both as a matter of Christian duty and as a witness to the non-Christian society at large. This preoccupation with demonstrating social responsibility was mainly a function of China's self-conscious embrace of modernity, but not at odds with traditional Confucian maxims urging the priority of discerning and doing what is right, rather than just settling for what is easy or pleasant (*Analects* 1.14).

As Chinese Catholics during this time often engaged Catholic social teachings such as just war in their theological formulations, their Protestants contemporaries were informed by the North American fundamentalist-modernist discourse. Chinese Protestant progressives such as L. C. Wu and T. C. Chao tended to uphold a postmillennial eschatology and saw

Jesus' life and teachings in the gospels as offering inspiration for the transformation of Chinese society. Another prominent figure of this time, the YMCA secretary Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong, 1893–1979), became a proponent of the social gospel, publishing a book on the topic in 1934, *The Social Gospel (Shehui fuyin)*. Wu appealed to Christians to join efforts to transform Chinese society, but also critiqued the association between Protestantism and capitalism, and between Protestantism and imperialism. Whilst his views leaned towards communism at the time, he remained critical of the Communist Party's support for violence in social revolution. Wu's social gospel advocated pacifism, even in the face of Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931 and in Shanghai in 1932 (Reilly 2021: 93–95). However, as Wu later recalled, with further Japanese aggression in 1937, he threw his pacifist views aside:

I came to realize that I had misunderstood Christ's teaching: To love your enemies does not mean to condone wrong, the method of persuasion is not enough; on the contrary, one best loves one's enemies by attacking all wrong. Thus I realized that it was the Communists who truly love their enemies, for they on the one hand resolutely carried on war, and on the other treated their Japanese prisoners with kindness and tried to help the Japanese people obtain democratic freedom. (Wu 1963: 52)

After the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Wu led a delegation of Chinese Protestants to meet with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and penned the 'Christian Manifesto' in 1950, setting in motion the creation of the TSPM. For Y. T. Wu, the TSPM was the ultimate vehicle for declaring the Chinese church's independence from foreign imperialism and for creating a unified church.

Not all Protestants in the early twentieth century were so eager to bring into alignment spiritual and social transformation. Many conservative Chinese Protestants tended to uphold a premillennial eschatology and saw the degradation of society as reason to withdraw from the concerns of this world. Wei Enbo (1877–1919), the founder of the oneness Pentecostal and Sabbatarian True Jesus Church, saw patriotism as plainly demonic:

Why have the nations of Europe and America gone to war with each other [in the First World War]? It is because the leaders of each church have frequently sung the praises of patriotism and have been led astray by the devil. (Inouye 2019: 108–109)

There is also the example of Wang Mingdao. In the 1930s and 1940s, Japanese authorities pressed Wang to support their cause. They repeatedly asked for his church

to join the North China Christian Union, a group which claimed to be three-self (self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating) and therefore independent of foreign powers. Wang resisted, seeing it as impossible for his church to defile itself by partnering with this organization – in his eyes, a political church led by a ‘non-believing faction’ (buxin pai) (Wang 2012: 183). He was interrogated and threatened by Japanese authorities, but the matter was eventually dropped. In the 1950s, when he was asked to join the new TSPM, Wang again resisted, criticizing figures like Y. T. Wu, T. C. Chao, and K. H. Ting as modernists, and saying again he could not join an organization of non-believers (Wang 1963: 104). The communist authorities were not as forgiving as the Japanese authorities and Wang was shortly after arrested. Whilst this can be seen as Wang retreating from the world, it should also be noted that his actions reflect a public theological approach that is less about theologizing on public issues than it is about the living God animating humanity in the public (see Chow 2022: 498–501).

In the 1980s, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the question about Christianity’s relationship with the state would once again return. This was also a time in which, globally, there was an increasing interest in Latin American liberation theology. K. H. Ting spoke of his appreciation for liberation theology’s emphasis on praxis, but he did not think China needed the approach because it had already been ‘liberated’ (jiefang) (Ting 2000b). Here, Ting was referring to the 1949 communist victory over the nationalists, ending the Chinese Civil War, known in communist historiography as ‘liberation’ (jiefang). Aloysius Jin Luxian of the CPA agrees with Ting, remarking that ‘China is a liberated country, liberated from the oppression of feudalism and colonialism, but not yet liberated from poverty’ (Jin 1989: 16).

What is curious about both these leaders of state-sanctioned Christian organizations is that they recognized good in liberation theology but were circumspect in speaking about China’s *political* liberation as anything other than accomplished. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, Chinese public theological discourse from unregistered Protestant house churches has increasingly tended to emphasize either a performative approach like Wang Mingdao or a dialogical approach with the state and the civil society, the latter drawing on Neo-Calvinist notions of common grace and the cultural mandate (see Chow 2018: 92–114; Chow 2022). Contrastingly, Chinese Christians outside the mainland in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and North America have been more willing to engage in a political liberation or a postcolonial approach of public theology (see Tse and Tan 2016; Kwok and Yip 2021; Yang and White 2021).

## 5 Conclusion

Chinese Christian theology has developed in a dynamic way, always expressing ideals of the Christian life from within the matrix of social relations. In this sense, the Chinese theological method is not primarily a speculative inquiry into God, as though one



undertakes scriptural interpretation or philosophical reasoning to pull God from behind a veil out into the light of understanding. Rather, across the spectrum, most Chinese theologians tend to ‘take seriously the plain sense of the [Bible] and try to apply Jesus’ teachings literally and analogically to their contemporary life-settings’ (Yieh 2008: 157). There are some who have spoken of a ‘spiritual interpretation’ (jingyi jiejing) of the Bible (Wan 2008: 104), and quite often Christian scripture is read in concert with China’s treasury of traditional religious and philosophical ‘scriptures’ (Lee 2008). But, by and large, Chinese Christians theologize by drawing on a plain reading of the Bible and under the assumption that the spiritual and ethical call of God is already issued in a world of activity. Therefore, the theologies of Chinese Christians can be found explicitly in theological books and journals, but certainly also in the lived theologies articulated in ecclesial documents such as pastoral addresses and sermons, and also less obvious genres like newspaper editorials, memoirs, fiction, and poetry.

Chinese theologians have underscored socially-inflected understandings of God and the church, a theological anthropology which considers connections between a person and the societies they are a part of, and the role of suffering as an agent of spiritual transformation, for the individual and for the common good. These theologies have a social quality that queries how people – living in the midst of familial, communal, ecclesial, and national aspirations – might discern and adhere to the ways of God.

The negotiation between competing loyalties has created distinct contours in the multiplicity of Chinese theologies. But these particularities have implications for universal and perennial concerns of humans and their relationships with one another, with the created order, and with God, irrespective of context. In other words, the ‘Chineseness’ of Chinese Christian theology has contours which are contextually articulated, but likewise offer pertinent theological insights for the universal church.

## **Attributions**

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