

# Contextualization and Localization of Christianity in China: Inter-Cultural and Inter-Religious Dialogues

*Zhao Dong*<sup>1</sup>

Since its inception, Christianity has undergone a series of transformations, first conflict and then convergence, in its world evangelization. Its encounter with China and Chinese culture characteristically mirrors this pattern. How is it possible for Fu Tieshan, a Catholic bishop, to have made the bold statement that “Christianity today has been an integral part of Chinese culture?”<sup>2</sup> What are the special characteristics of the indigenization of Christian doctrines in a communist country that is said to be atheist by Western media? What should be done for Christianity to be better adapted to a Marxist state with long and substantial cultural roots in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and various folk traditions? In what way can Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian concepts help the enculturation and assimilation of Christianity in China? These questions will be addressed in this paper from a Chinese perspective to offer constructive suggestions for this imported religion to take roots and burgeon in the Chinese soil. Furthermore, based on ancient Chinese documents, some tentative solutions are provided as to how Christian tenets can be better perceived and integrated into the Chinese social, political, religious and ethnic context. In sum, this paper demonstrates how the Chinese traditions have reacted to Christian doctrines and how inter-cultural dialogues can facilitate the spread of Christianity in China. Though some articles have already touched upon this topic, my paper argues that in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the development of Christianity in China, especially the indigenization of the Christian faith among the Chinese, we must view it in a larger historical, inter-cultural and inter-religious context. This inter-cultural methodology may not only diminish the foreignness of Christianity in the Chinese context, but also make Christianity more universal.

## **A Chinese Perspective into the Indigenization History of Christianity in China**

Christianity in China has developed since, at the latest, the 7th century AD during the Tang Dynasty, heralded by the introduction of Nestorianism around

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<sup>1</sup> Zhao Dong is the Assistant Dean and Associate Professor of English at the School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Franklin J. Woo, “History of Protestantism in China: The Indigenization of Christianity (review),” *China Review International* 9.2 Fall 2002: 585.

635. Known in China as Jingjiao/景教, it came through representatives of the Church in the East. On January 7, 781, at the Tang capital Xi-an, under the reign of Emperor De Zong, the Nestorian Monument was erected, celebrating the arrival of Christianity in China and the flourishing communities of Christians throughout China. Alopen, the first recorded Christian missionary to reach China, arrived at Chang-an in 635 and was commissioned to translate the Nestorian Sutras into Chinese. In 638, the first Christian book *The Sutra of Jesus the Messiah* was published in China. The book aimed to introduce the Christian faith to the Chinese, stressing that the Christian gospel contained nothing in conflict with China's classical traditions. It particularly made clear that loyalty to the emperor and filial piety had the same essence as the law of the Christian God. Pleased by the book, Emperor De Zong issued a royal decree of toleration and gave Alopen the title of "Great Spiritual Lord, Protector of the Empire." China's door to the gospel was thus opened.

The Nestorians succeeded in their evangelization because they tried to interpret the Christian beliefs in the language of Taoism, Chinese Buddhism and the Confucian court so as to make it agreeable and acceptable to the Chinese literati. The Nestorians had made use of Buddhist and Taoist expressions and images to express Christian doctrines, as can be seen in *The Sutra of Jesus the Messiah* and more notably, their religious sign, a cross sitting on lotus. However, the Nestorians did not pay enough attention to the formation of Chinese clerics, and there were no Chinese to work as exegetes. In other words, they had neglected the localization of church organizations. After the expulsion of foreign missionaries in the 840s, the Yuan Dynasty practiced the policy of religious tolerance to foreigners, thus enabling a second wave of Nestorian missionaries (hence called *erkehün*, Chinese: *yelikewen/也里可温*) to work in China again. Since the 15th century Nestorianism lost its influence in China and vanished around 1550.

The Jesuits came to China during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, their leader and best representative being Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), who had found a key to unlocking the door of this vast country. Led by Ricci, the Jesuits adopted the policy of assimilating and complementing the Confucians; they wore Confucian-style dress, learned the Chinese language, and studied the Confucian classics. Moreover, they got into close contact with the Confucian scholars who helped translate into English the Chinese classics such as *The Confucian Analects*, *Book of Poetry*, etc. The underlying principle was, to the Jesuits, that there was congruity between Christianity and the religious aspects of Confucianism (which they spared no effort in advocating). The missionaries tried to find equivalent Chinese terms for their text from Confucian usage and tradition. In other words, the Jesuits emphasized dialogues instead of confrontations between the two culturally divergent religions. For example, Ricci evidenced that God (*Shangdi/上帝*) existed in ancient China, exemplified

that Confucianism and Christianity were essentially one, and concluded in his Tianzhushiyi/天主實義 that “In reading classical materials I know that Shangdi and God were in the same name and essence. 历观古书，而知上帝与天主合持以名也。”<sup>3</sup> Another telling instance could be found in Chapter 2 of his *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* where a paragraph of less than 300 words contained 21 references to Shangdi cited from *The Book Change/易经*, *The Book of Documents/书经*, *The Book of Poetry/诗经* and *Rituals/三礼*.<sup>4</sup> In sum, almost any Catholic principle or belief that went against the Chinese tradition would be modified or adapted. In so doing, Ricci was able to employ Christian terms to interpret Confucian thoughts, tracing the root of Confucianism to Christianity. He thus demonstrated his inter-religious and inter-cultural far-sightedness in intentionally blurring the fundamental differences between shangdi in China’s natural religious worship and God in the systematic Christian religion.

All went well until the early 18th century when “The Rites Controversy” arose as to whether Chinese ethical and traditional rituals, such as the worshipping of ancestors and gods instead of God, went against Catholic doctrines. Pope Clement XI came to regard Chinese traditional religious practices as incompatible with Catholicism. He ordered to forbid “disputed” ceremonies in China, declaring that the Confucian rituals indeed contradicted Christian teaching. Such theological debates eventually escalated into conflicts between the Kangxi Court and the Vatican. Decree (papal bull) of Pope Clement XI (1715) stipulated: “The spring and autumn worship of Confucius, together with the worship of ancestors, is not allowed among Catholic converts ... No Chinese Catholics are allowed to worship ancestors in their familial temples. Whether at home, in the cemetery, or during the time of a funeral, a Chinese Catholic is not allowed to perform the ritual of ancestor worship. He is not allowed to do so even if he is in company with non-Christians. Such a ritual is heathen in nature regardless of the circumstances.”<sup>5</sup>

Emperor Kangxi, angered by the Pope’s decree, decreed to ban Christian missions in China. Part of Decree of Kangxi (1721) read as follows: “Reading this proclamation, I have concluded that the Westerners are petty indeed. It is impossible to reason with them because they do not understand larger issues as we understand them in China. There is not a single Westerner versed in Chinese works, and their remarks are often incredible and ridiculous. To judge from this proclamation, their religion is no different from other small, bigoted

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Xiping, *Zhongguo yu ouzhou zaoqi zongjiao he zhexue jiaoliushi* 中国与欧洲早期哲学与宗教交流史 (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2001) 175.

<sup>4</sup> See Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven “T’ien-chu Shin-i”*, trans with introduction and notes by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, a Chinese-English Edition edited by Edward J. Malatesta (Taipei: The Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 1985)

<sup>5</sup> This quote, together with the next one, are taken from *China in Transition, 1517-1911*, Dan. J. Li, trans. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1969) 22.

sects of Buddhism or Taoism. I have never seen a document which contains so much nonsense. From now on, Westerners should not be allowed to preach in China, to avoid further trouble.”

The Controversy thus ended a glorious period of Christian evangelization, causing a clash between Chinese and Christian cultures, and leaving a lesson that merits keen reflection. The root of this controversy lies in the fact that the Pope negated Ricci’s policy of religious adaptation; instead, it imposed a set of rules in conflict with the Chinese rituals and customs, inevitably leading to Chinese people’s refusal and resistance. As part of a civilization with a history of over five thousand years, the Chinese folk rituals have a distinct national character which the Christian tradition has to analyze, integrate and synthesize if it wants to take root in the Chinese soil.

The Opium War (1840) that forced open China’s gates was a turning point in the history of Christian evangelization in China. The new Christian mission to China took advantage of this and missionaries gained the privilege of entering China freely. With a series of unequal treaties that prioritized missionary activities, the Christian churches were gaining a legal identity. To facilitate free entry into China, the missionaries resorted to some non-religious means to carry out their evangelizing activities, such as practicing medicine and running schools for Chinese people, disseminating Western modern technology to complement the Chinese traditional culture. Yet this period of evangelization also witnessed diverse obstructions, resistance and misunderstandings from the Chinese. The reasons could be attributed to some missionaries’ boldness and even violence towards the Chinese culture and people. Consequently, numerous jiao’an/missionary cases were incurred where Chinese people were in fierce conflicts with the Western missionaries. After the defeat of the Boxers’ Rebellion, the Chinese anti-religion mood began to change from simply rejecting all foreign cultures to adopting Western modernization. After the Xin Hai Revolution in 1911, The Provisional Law of the Republic of China stipulated that “all people are equal and there is no discrimination in races, classes and religions; people have the freedom of person, residence, possessions, speech, the press, assembly, association and religious belief.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the legal status of Christianity was protected in the pre-modern Chinese society.

### **Christianity as a New Moral and Cultural Framework in Contemporary Communist China**

The complexity of culture is evident in its dynamics, its changing patterns, and in the coexistence of several subcultures within the same culture. Under the context of inter-cultural dialogues, different cultures coexist and overlap not only within the same community, but also within the same individual. As has

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<sup>6</sup> For more, refer to Luo Weihong, *Christianity in China* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press 五洲传播出版社, 2004) 38.

been witnessed by the world, great changes are taking place in contemporary Chinese culture. The root for such changes is the transition from the “age of the planned economy” (including planned thought, planned culture, and planned literature) to the “age of the market economy.” Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), the open policy and economic reforms promoted not only private ownership and management of resources and capital, but also freer access to information and contacts with foreign cultures and ways of thinking. Slogans like “socialism with Chinese characteristics” come to “legitimize the broad range of new developments, as well as bolder forays into the unexplored territory of reform.”<sup>7</sup> From the mid-1970s onward, having undergone a series of experimentation, confrontation, conflicts and convergence, “a less closed, more liberal, more diverse culture” is emerging in China. Contemporary Chinese culture is gradually trying to shackle off a single, authoritative voice and take on multiple voices, or rather, from hegemony to plurality. Such a composite nature of Chinese culture is making her increasingly global.<sup>8</sup>

Under this context and with an increasing shortage of a spiritual culture caused by over-commercialization, China has witnessed an explosion of “spiritual” revivals in terms of both elite and folk Chinese religions and imported Western religions like Christianity. According to Carol Lee Hamrin, today’s China finds herself in a situation where she lacks prevalent and directional moralizing agents. The civic moralities have been seriously undermined both by socialism and by urbanization; socialist and communist values and beliefs are losing public trust; Confucianism as an elite philosophy cannot enter the household of the common masses; and different Buddhist sects and folk religions cannot shoulder the role of being “modernizing agents.” Hamrin’s conclusion is that “patriarchal Confucianism, monastic Buddhism, and state socialism are inadequate to meet the spiritual needs of the modern individual and the single-child nuclear family in China today.”<sup>9</sup> Christianity fills this moral gap because it proves to be a new moral framework for Chinese people; it ushers in a “higher” purpose than just making money, secures greater stability within family life, and stems the tide of negative social values—all the while helping Chinese identify with global modernity. Hamrin believes that “the core Christian value that appeals most to both rural “second class” citizens and modern urbanites flows from the essential Protestant belief in the individual dignity and equality of human in the eyes of God.”<sup>10</sup> Seen in this light, Christianity assumes the

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas B. Gold, “Tiananmen and Beyond: The Resurgence Of Civil Society In China”, *Journal of Democracy* l.1 Winter 1990: 27. Here it should be noted that Deng’s “open policies” began to radically depart from the Maoist anti-religious ideology.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the features of contemporary Chinese culture, refer to Zhang Ning “The Basic Features of Contemporary Chinese Culture,” *World Literature Today* Jul 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Lee Hamrin, “Chinese Protestants: A Mustard Seed for Moral Renewal,” *Tocqueville on China: A Project of the American Enterprise Institute*, May 2008: 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

vital role of providing people with “strong spiritual, psychological, and material incentives”<sup>11</sup>

According to Thomas B. Gold, the civil society under communist China can best be illustrated by two essential periods: “the years immediately following the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, when the newly victorious CCP restructured Chinese society in a systematic effort to destroy all autonomous spheres of activity and preclude their revival; and the period since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, when the CCP set in motion a process that has culminated in the tentative emergence of a true civil society, which is something that the CCP is able neither to understand nor to tolerate.”<sup>12</sup> From a historical perspective, while the traditional values on the mainland during the fifties universally accepted the guiding principles of Marxism, there was still the free and open period of “letting a hundred schools contend.” This can be attributed to the fact that the Chinese communists, according to the rules of yin and yang, employ the guidelines of shou (restriction) and fang (liberalization) in handling cultural complexities like religion and philosophy. Yet following the reform and open policies, the general trend has been towards increasing openness and liberalization.<sup>13</sup>

There are two images of China seen through the Western lens. The first is the Political China preoccupied with complicated political organizations. The second image is China viewed as the Big Bad Chinese State for its human rights violations, political prisoners, censorship, the Communist Party’s fierce ideological grasp on people’s beliefs. But this picture is undergoing modifications and reformation with the increasing tempo of globalization. Under the influence of the deep-rooted Chinese tradition of “the harmony of human beings and heaven,” China has been trying to tolerate such institutional, world religions as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity though officially it remains an atheist state with a belief in Marxist and Maoist “historical materialism.” China is a country where religion, commerce, and politics have coexisted for thousands of years, and these domains interact and intersect significantly in contemporary China. For the practical mentality of the Chinese people, it may be the god of wealth that is restored first as they become prosperous, or it may be that religion functions as just another form of insurance. But whatever the interpretation, religious expression is a significant feature of Chinese life today. Possible sources of creativity and diversity may both be seen to lie within China and supplement to the above-mentioned images is that of a “Multilingual,

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Christianity in Contemporary China: An Update,” *Journal of Church & State* 49 Spring 2007: 278.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas B. Gold, “Tiananmen and Beyond: The Resurgence Of Civil Society In China,” *Journal of Democracy* 1.1 Winter 1990: 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 18-31.

### Multicultural, Local, and Religious China.”<sup>14</sup>

China is now undergoing a dramatic change marked by “a new change of the cultural system.”<sup>15</sup> Since commercialization has caused a series of challenges to the values, beliefs and morals of China, traditional Chinese morals and beliefs as well as new ones like Christianity have come to fill the Chinese spiritual vacuum. In other words, contemporary China is now witnessing a spiritual awakening and many Chinese are experiencing “a crisis of faith” and they want to seek solace and moral guidance from mystical Taoist sects, Buddhist temples and Christian churches. Chinese elite religions, folk religions and imported religions are all reviving<sup>16</sup>, and of all the religions the number of Christians is increasing at the highest rate. Scholars in Shanghai, even suggested that, according to a survey, there were up to 40 million Protestants in China among a total of 300 million religious adherents (not including estimated adherents of informal popular religions or “folk faiths”).<sup>17</sup> The boom of Christianity is reshaping the morality, politics and worldviews of this officially atheist nation. The prosperity of Christianity in China is due in part to the fact that it offers a moral framework to Chinese citizens in an age of rampant West capitalism that often results in money worship and moral corruption. The Chicago Tribune even declares that Christianity has been infused into the Chinese life: “Intellectuals disillusioned by the 1989 crackdown at Tiananmen Square are placing their loyalty in faith, not politics; tycoons fed up with corruption are seeking an ethical code; and Communist Party members are daring to argue that their faith does not put them at odds with the government.”<sup>18</sup>

Various sources have witnessed that the new Chinese generation, especially those born in the late 70s and 80s are becoming ideologically more and more liberal towards religions, both native and foreign. Native religions and imported

<sup>14</sup> This discussion is based on Susan D. Blum, “China’s Many Faces: Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Pluralism.” *China Beyond the Headlines*. Ed. Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen. Lanham (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000) 69-95.

<sup>15</sup> This point was discussed further in “Christianity and Chinese Cultures Sino-Nordic Conference”, Lapland, August 2003. For more, please refer to Miiikka Ruokanen 罗明嘉 and Paolos Huang 黄保罗 eds., *Jidu zongjiao yu Zhongguo wenhua: guanyu Zhongguo chujing shenxue de Zhongguo-Beidou huiyi lunwenji* 基督宗教与中国文化：关于中国处境神学的中国—北欧会议论文集 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> The baseline for official numbers of religious adherents in China is a government census in the mid-1990s: 100 million Buddhists (including 7 million Tibetan Buddhists), 18 million Muslims (8.6 million Uighur, 7.2 million Hui), 11 million Christians (4 million Catholics, 7 million Protestants), and 50,000 Taoists. Yet on October 1998, the Compass Direct news service quoted an official charged with monitoring religious activity who acknowledged in an anonymous interview that Protestants likely numbered more than 50 million. Quoted from Notes 1 and 2 of Carol Lee Hamrin, “Chinese Protestants: A Mustard Seed for Moral Renewal.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Evan Osnos, “Jesus in China: Christianity’s rapid rise,” *Chicago Tribune*. 4:57 PM CDT, June 22, 2008 <<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/custom/religion/chi-jesus-1-1-webjun22,0,1980190-story>>. The discussion in this part partly owes to this article.

religions like Christianity are no longer considered superstitions according to the Maoist doctrines, but a new way of mental comfort in times of stress or material allures. Sociologist Peter Berger, in his study of contemporary culture of ten countries, China being one of them, argues that globalization has resulted in a “cultural earthquake,” which makes it almost impossible for the state to contain people’s “unorthodox” ideas since new ideological or social movements can now transcend borderlines quickly as a result of cultural globalization. The “internal and transnational mobility” that come to characterize the Chinese people and their ideas have become “the seedbed for novelty within Chinese society”. Within this context, there is a trend to modernize the various co-existing and competing belief and value systems to match new situations and spiritual needs of the Chinese people. During such a period of unprecedented and rapid transition and transformation, the Chinese are pursuing “new sources of meaning for their lives and new purpose for the communities they live in”.<sup>19</sup>

Christian missionaries and their activities are now spreading both in rural and urban areas of China with the tacit approval from the communist polity. Generally speaking, the government allows Christian churches to be more open and active than ever before, symbolizing a new tolerance of faith in public life. President Hu Jintao even held an unprecedented Politburo “study session” on religion, in which he stated that “the knowledge and strength of religious people must be mustered to build a prosperous society.”<sup>20</sup> He reiterated a policy of free religious belief by saying that “We shall fully carry out the Party’s policy of free religious belief,” and that “The Party and government shall reach out to religious believers in difficulties and help them through their problems.” Hu also emphasized the training of religious professionals, stating that the Party would help and support religious groups to improve self governance, voice the opinions of its followers and protect their legal rights and interests.<sup>21</sup> The essence of Hu’s statement is that since the growth of Christianity in China is inevitable, the Communist Party may as well use it as a tool for renewing the public morality and building “a harmonious socialist spiritual culture”. As is known, in the 50s the Party had founded The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (officially 中国基督教三自爱国运动委员会, National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China; colloquially 三自教会, the Three-Self Church) or TSPM. It is the government-sanctioned (“patriotic”) Christian organization, serving the function of controlling Christian churches in China. Institutional churches must collaborate with the government by accepting the “Three-Self principles” of self-administration, self-support and self-propagation. Article 7 of “Church Order of Protestant Churches in

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted from Hamrin 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> See note 14.

<sup>21</sup> Central Government News, Xinhua News Agency December 20, 2007.

China,” adopted by the Joint (National) Conference of the Seventh Standing Committee of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches in China and the Fifth Standing Committee of the China Christian Council, stipulates that “The church is both a spiritual fellowship of Christians which should build up the body of Christ according to biblical teachings, and a social group, which must abide by the national Constitution, and the provisions of laws, regulations, and policies, fulfilling its duties, such as legal registration.” Therefore, even though there has been no change in the Communist Party’s insistence that all religions are forms of superstition, there have been “significant shifts in perspective.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the Maoist repression of Christianity after 1949, the “Patriotic Associations” controlling it in the 50s and the closure of churches during the Cultural Revolution in the 60s and 70s, China has carried out a policy of religious freedom ever since the 80s in order to counteract the side effects of market economy, to embrace globalization and thus to ensure political stability. Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution states that:

(1) Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.

(2) No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.

(3) The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt the public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state.

(4) Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

Besides, Article 147 of the Chinese Criminal Law states that “a state functionary who unlawfully deprives others of their freedom of religious belief or violates the customs and habits of minority nationalities to a serious extent, will be sentenced to detention or imprisonment for not more than two years,” which at least shows the government’s intention to grant freedom, quasi or not, to religions. Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau is a functional department under the State Council in charge of religious affairs and issues. In addition to its efforts to put religion under the communist control, it functions to protect the freedom of religious believers by law; to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of religious groups and their activity venues; and to support and help religious circles to conduct friendly communication abroad.<sup>23</sup> What is worthier to note is the Chinese government’s October 1997 White Paper expressing its attitude toward religion: “Religion should be adapted to the society in which

<sup>22</sup> Bob Whyte, “The Future of Religion in China,” *Religion in Communist Lands* 1980 (8): 4.

<sup>23</sup> For more please refer to “State Administration for Religious Affairs,” The Chinese government’s official web portal <[http://english.gov.cn/2005-10/09/content\\_75331.htm](http://english.gov.cn/2005-10/09/content_75331.htm)>.

it is prevalent. This is a universal law for the existence and development of religion. Now the Chinese people are building China into a modern socialist country with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese government advocates that religion should adapt to this reality.<sup>24</sup> Fully observed or not, these policies have at least given religion a legal status in China. And the “Patriotic Associations” under the leadership of the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau are the channels for churches to communicate with the government and tools for the execution of relevant laws protecting religion.

In sum, the Chinese Communists’ relatively loose-hand policy regarding Christian activities in China, despite the Marxist materialistic denunciation of theistic symbolism, results from its practical concerns. First of all, the government is placing great emphasis on social instability and corruption which are very likely to give rise to such religious or spiritual resorts as offered by Christianity. Besides, a highly “restrictive, almost destructive strategy as well as diverse established working relations between the local authorities and the religious communities may well result in increasingly opaque spiritual-religious activities.”<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, a more tolerant policy, if handled within reasonable control, may come to benefit both the communist rule and the building of “a socialist harmonious spiritual culture”. To Kristen Kupfer, China’s spiritual and religious life has demonstrated a strong revival because of “the weakening ideological and organizational control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP),” and Christianity, together with Chinese native religions, has come to amend the gaps left by China’s modernization process. So the missing “ideal” community desired by the Communists could somehow be compensated with this newly emerging spiritual pursuit. Thus, it is expected that spiritual-religious groups could help the Chinese people in pursuing their lost Edenic dream.

### **Christianity in Dialogue with Chinese Religions**

According to H. Richard Niebuhr, the question of Christ and culture is an eternal one. Wholly God and wholly human, Jesus’ life is located in a particular culture: He lived and died a Jew. As a Jew, the incarnate Jesus had to deal with Jewish culture and when he did so courageously and resolutely while on earth, the issue of Christ and culture had been in the lime light. The Jewish scholar, Joseph Klausner sees the rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees and Sadducees as a Christ vs. culture issue, i.e., the Pharisees and Sadducees rejected him because he was a threat to Jewish culture. But Klausner also notes that Jesus was a product of Jewish culture and so his ethical and religious admonishments in the

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<sup>24</sup> “Freedom of Religious Belief in China,” *White Papers*, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China Beijing, October, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Kristin Kupfer, “Christian-Inspired Groups in the People’s Republic of China after 1978: Reaction of State and Party Authorities,” *Social Compass* 51 Jun 2004: 282.

gospels in all cases run parallel to Jewish codes.<sup>26</sup> According to Chen Yongtao, “humans’ knowledge and understanding of Christ is always linked to culture; it cannot be separated from the cultural context...” God’s revelation in Christ is indeed inseparable from the culture that mediates it. Apart from culture, according to Chen, there is no way to understand and accept the revelation of God, nor is there any way for true links to be found between our lives and Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

There will always be interaction, adaptation and interfusion in the encounter of Christ with culture, in which Christ and culture will read and synthesize each other. God is working in different cultural contexts and culture is a crucial medium for God’s revelation to be spread to different corners of the world. As is argued by Chen, “apart from culture, God has no means by which to reveal God self to human beings.” This is not to suggest that God’s revelation is limited by culture, but that the reception of that revelation by human beings is always limited by culture. Though Christ, as the revelation of God, transcends culture, Christ has to become incarnate in different cultures in order to set up a connection with human beings. In this way, He is always regarded as intrinsic to the culture. Chen goes on to argue that it is through the mutual reading and interfusion that different Christian communities in different cultural constructs are able to form their own local theologies, and that these local theologies are imprinted with marks both of Christianity and the local culture. And therefore, for Chinese Christians, a genuine Chinese theology must be a reading of Christ’s gospel in Chinese culture.<sup>28</sup>

Under the paradigm of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogues, Christianity, as the core of Western culture, has to readjust itself when encountering the vast and various traditions of the Chinese culture and religions. For Christianity to become Chinese Christianity, it must be rooted in the fertile soil of Chinese culture. Before I go on to explore how Chinese culture interacts with and helps the contextualization of Christianity in China, it is worthwhile to list at least three typical erroneous attitudes that hinder the spread of Christianity in China:

(1) Nihilism—thinking that traditional Chinese culture is devoid of all merit and should be completely rejected and entirely replaced by Christianity.

(2) Blind optimism—failure to see the inadequacies of Chinese culture, failure to distinguish the essence from the dross, the deadwood from what remains vital. This is a tendency to think that traditional Chinese culture is superior and does not need to interact with other cultures, to be complemented

<sup>26</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Hong Kong: Southeast Asian Theological Association Publishers, 1992) 2.

<sup>27</sup> Chen Yongtao, “Christ and Culture: Reflections of a Chinese Christian,” *Nanjing Theological Review* 3 (2004): 41-58. This point will be brought up again later in this paper.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* My treatment of the inter-cultural understanding and reception of Christ is partly indebted to Chen Yongtao’s “Christ and Culture: Reflections of a Chinese Christian.”

by and draw lessons from them, and even less that it is in need of the light of the truth and life of this religious culture, Christianity.

(3) Cultural relativism—the idea that cultures are self-sufficient, that any culture coming from the outside (especially in the spiritual realm) is alien, that cultural exchange and dissemination are of no benefit and are in fact harmful, and that therefore cultural propagation is unnecessary. Cultural revisionism sees the propagation of any form of Christianity to others as a kind of cultural aggression, trampling on and wreaking havoc on the cultures of other peoples.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the right attitude to take is summarized by Zhuo Xinping, Director of World Religion Research Institute of the Social Science Academy of China, who praised the accommodation and contextualization method of evangelization of the seventeenth-century Jesuits and celebrated the “combination or confluence between Christianity and Confucianism” in producing rich hybrids of “Confucian Christians” or “Christian Confucianism.”<sup>30</sup> Indigenization suggests that intercultural interaction, exchange and influence never necessitate the total displacement of one tradition by another.

In the course of China’s long historical development, the Chinese religions, as part of the traditional Chinese thinking and culture, have interacted with and integrated Christianity. As is discussed earlier, the Chinese government, in order to counteract the side effects of modernization, conditionally encourages the religious circles to actively participate in the construction of a new moral framework. In this sense, Christianity and the Chinese traditions like Taoism, Buddhism, etc. can be synthesized and assimilated to this grand principle. Under the Communist paradigm, they are interpreted as enhancing the value system and promoting the people’s well-being. The Buddhists’ “honoring the country and benefiting the people,” and the Taoists’ “being benevolent, peaceful and harmonious, saving the world and benefiting the people,” are deemed equivalent to the Christian “glorifying God and benefiting the people.” In this way, different religious traditions or folk cultures could be synthesized and have a harmonious relationship. In my opinion, the fact that Christianity has flourished amid China’s variegated landscape of native traditions is due to its sincization and localization efforts. The three major Chinese religious traditions, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, despite their divergences with the Christian tradition, have greatly facilitated the prevalence of Christianity in China through inter-religious dialogues on some commonly held principles.

It would not be of much necessity to present the long list of books that

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<sup>29</sup> See Shu Ning, “On Christianity and Chinese Culture from the Perspective of Cultural Dissemination,” *Nanjing Theological Review* 9 (1991).

<sup>30</sup> Zhuo Xinping, “Religion in China,” in *China News Update* (a publication of the China Program, East Asia/Pacific Office, Worldwide Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], Louisville, KY), January 2003: 8-10.

center on the dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity.<sup>31</sup> They do share essential traits that shed light on the affinity of the two religions, particularly on the Confucian understanding of Tian/天 and Li/礼. A common concern of these books is the study of Matteo Ricci who had paved the way for the convergence between the two religions. He had established a substantial connection between Christianity and Confucianism by showing the theological compatibility of the Christian God and the core Confucian concept of Shangdi/上帝 or Tian. Actually, the original meaning of the Chinese word for God, shen/神, according to Dictionary of Chinese (1995), refers to the “heavenly ruler, creator of heaven and earth and all things.” Following in the traditional Confucians’ footsteps, the New Confucianism Movement aims at drawing the best out of the more than two thousand years of the Confucian tradition, “bringing them into dialogue with Christianity and Modernity, especially Western philosophical and scientific thought and democracy... re-mak[ing] the Confucian tradition into a living, creative dialogue partner for the West and the Rest, bringing its own distinctive contribution as one of many human partners in this Age of Global Dialogue.”<sup>32</sup> The Neo-Confucian scholar Yang Tingyun elaborates on the assimilation between these two essential concepts of Tian and God: “Confucians take Heaven as their root, thus, they know Heaven, serve Heaven, fear Heaven and honor Heaven, and this is the doctrine of the previous sages of China. This was as clear as the light of sun and of stars in the classics of Poems and Historical Documents. However, since the Qin Dynasty, the honor to Heaven began to be damaged. Since the Han Dynasty, the honor to Heaven began to degenerate. During the past 1600 years, no one knew the study of Heaven any more.”<sup>33</sup>

Yang’s synthesis of the Christian God and the Confucian Tian is acceptable because he rooted his arguments in ancient Confucianism. This is to say, for Yang, Tian and Shangdi are the same, and each of them should be understood as a monotheistic personal Deity.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the Confucian concept of Li or “principle” is an effective rebuttal against the argument that Confucianism, unlike Christianity, does not possess the nature of transcendence. According to Neville, Li which structures all things and human beings, functions as a bridge toward Christianity in a

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<sup>31</sup> From pages 307 to 342 in Dr. Paulos Huang’s dissertation *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation: A systematic theological analysis of the basic problems in the Confucian-Christian dialogue* (University of Helsinki, Helsinki 2006), there is a thorough list of books on this topic.

<sup>32</sup> Leonard Swidler, “Confucianism for the modern Persons in Dialogue with Christianity and Modernity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40 Winter/Spring 2003: 12.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted from Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

way that Christians may well be Confucians.<sup>35</sup> Arguing that human nature was originally given by God (the Lord of Heaven), Yang employed the concept of Li to explain human nature. For him, Li or Principle was given by God to nourish human nature, and he said, “The spirit (or soul), which the Lord of Heaven has given to human beings, was originally a clear thing, and all principles clearly exist. Thus, humanity, righteousness, ritual propriety and wisdom have been called “nature”. Since the Lord of Heaven has given me, thus, I have it. The bright virtue of the Bible is, in fact, the consciousness of Confucian.”<sup>36</sup>

In this way, the Confucian concept of Li was regarded by Yang as the core of human nature endowed by Heaven (= God). Yang aims to seek the objective source of Li in order to prove the universality of human morality. For Yang, God is the objective source of the heavenly principle of Li and of human’s capacity to act morally. The concept of God is also important for Yang in interpreting Li as morality, since common Neo-Confucians appreciate self-cultivation, and Yang emphasizes that God is the power for human beings to practice morality.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, the Christian ideas of Original Sin and Salvation could also lead Chinese people to place a greater stress on Li, since they help Chinese people to realize the sinful nature of human beings.

Buddhism entered China several centuries after the passing away of the Buddha. The various sects that were accepted in China synthesized the ideas of Confucianism, Taoism and other native Chinese traditions, with the result that this initially foreign religion came to form a natural part of Chinese culture and molded the people’s mindset. In the fruitful studies of the Buddhist-Christian encounter,<sup>38</sup> the core is on the Jesus-Buddha convergence and the nature of human. Though the Dalai Lama has said that mixing Buddhism and Christianity is like “trying to put a yak’s head on a cow’s body,” Chinese scholars like Xu Songshi and Zhang Chunyi have tried to synthesize Christianity and Buddhism, bringing forth the “Christian flavored Buddhism and Buddhist flavored Christianity.”<sup>39</sup> John Keenan’s exploration of how Mahayana world-view/philosophy can help in understanding and interpreting anew the Christian gospel, in his epoch-making book *Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology*, stands as an achievement in Christian-Buddhist comparative study.<sup>40</sup> Like

<sup>35</sup> Robert Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in Late Modern World* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2000) 6.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Huang 97.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück’s *Buddhism and Christianity: A Multicultural of History of Their Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 2001) and Lai Pichao etc. eds. 近代中国佛教与基督教的相遇 (Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Modern China) (Hong Kong: Daofeng Press, 2003) can be regarded as a milestone in the Buddhist-Christian encounter.

<sup>39</sup> For details see Xu Songshi, *Jidujiao de Fowei (The Christian Flavor of Buddhism)* (Shanghai: Youth Association Press, 1935) and Zhang Chunyi, *Laozi Tongshi (A Thorough Analysis of Laozi)* (Chongqing: Commercial Press, 1946).

<sup>40</sup> John Keenan, *Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryhill, New York: Orbis Books,

Christianity, Buddhism also began as a reformist movement, and there are clear parallels between the Buddha and Jesus in terms of their reformist tendencies, and this certainly gives Chinese Buddhists a perspective for appreciating Jesus. According to José Ignacio Cabezón, Mahayana Buddhists would accept the idea that Jesus is the embodiment of a deity or is “a particular quality or attribute like wisdom (Sophia) or ‘the Word’ (Logos).” Cabezón believes that many Mahayana Buddhists would admit such a possibility, since “Jesus could at least in theory have emanated from a divine source.” Jesus is characterized as a teacher of “subversive wisdom,” and His teachings “are crystallizations of insight which, either radical in themselves or radical in their application, frequently embody the theme of world reversal. They are invitations to see differently, bringing about a shattering of world.”<sup>41</sup> Such a “Zen-master Jesus” is certainly appealing to Buddhists and acceptable to the Chinese.

Both Jesus and the Buddha have sights into the nature of human and care about his suffering in life. The Buddhist conception of the physical-spiritual human as rooted in Wuyun/Five Aggregates, that is, the five components of a human being, is comparable to the Christian view of human as possessing both humanity and divinity; the purity of a human’s nature in Buddhist terms parallels the nature of human before the Fall in Christianity; and the salvation of human in the pure land of the Buddha is always interpreted by Chinese as the eternal heavenly kingdom of God. Both Jesus and the Buddha had devised a spiritual life of redemption to the marginalized people, by stressing the cultivation of their interior life. Jesus, like the Buddha, teaches human an enlightening way of wisdom.<sup>42</sup> Jesus prioritizes humbleness and his suggestion of a new way of being through terminating the old is none other than an “internal spiritual-psychological process very similar to Buddhist ‘emptying’ and ‘letting go.’”<sup>43</sup> In this vein, Thurston asserts that “the Buddha and the Christ are both characterized by generous self-giving and the willingness to share the fruits of their personal enlightenments with the people. The Buddha’s compassion for all human beings is heard in his invitation, ‘Let the doors to Deathlessness be opened to all who are able to hear!’” The Buddha’s compassion, which is “undiscriminating, spontaneous, and unlimited compassion for all sentient beings, springs from his essential selflessness.”<sup>44</sup> It is also true of Jesus, who, in

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1989).

<sup>41</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, “Jesus Christ through Buddhist Eyes,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19.1 (1999): 61. For more on the discussion of the Jesus-Buddha parallel, refer to Marcus J. Borg, “Jesus and Buddhism: A Christian View,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1999): 93-97.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) 97.

<sup>43</sup> See note 36.

<sup>44</sup> His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *A Human Approach to World Peace* (London: Wisdom, 1988): 11. Quoted from Bonnie Thurston, “Gautama the Buddha through Christian Eyes: A Christian’s Appreciation of the Buddha,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19.1 (1999): 121-28.

the words of St. Paul, “emptied himself” and “humbled himself” (NRSV Phil. 2: 7, 8).<sup>45</sup>

Since Christian missionaries were among the first Westerners to study Tao Te Ching, it is not surprising that they connected Taoism with Christianity. There are many parallels between the New Testament and Tao Te Ching. According to Lin Yutang, celebrated as a Chinese expert in both Eastern and Western religions and philosophies, the Taoist founder Zhuang Zi is the Chinese Blaise Pascal, and the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount is fully expressed in Tao Te Ching,<sup>46</sup> as can be seen in 49:2: “To those who are good I am good and to those who are not good I am also good, and thus all get to be good. With the sincere I am sincere, and with the insincere I am also sincere, and thus all get to be sincere.” Chapter 42 of Tao Te Ching is perceived as exemplifying the Christian Trinity doctrine:

THOU (Tao) gave birth to Unity;

Unity gave birth to Duality;

Duality gave birth to Trinity;

Trinity gave birth to the myriad creatures. (Translated by Jerry C. Welch)

Taoism and Christianity are parallel in terms of their basic structures and their common goal is to follow a pure path and to devoid oneself of earthly ambitions like wealth and desires so as to attain the ultimate goal of immortality.

In his *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity*, Martin Palmer recounted how the Chinese Christian “Sutra of Origins” (compiled around 650 C.E. in China) interpreted God’s creation as wuwei/无为, a traditional Taoist term for “actionless action—effortless, unforced action beyond the dichotomy of acting and not-acting.” In this sense, God embodies wuwei, originless origin, and non-substantial substance.<sup>47</sup> Palmer employs the term “Taoist Christianity” and narrates how Christianity spread eastward, encountering and adapting itself to indigenous communities and cultures. Its most striking instance was the Chinese culture in Tang Dynasty where Taoism exerted the most prevalent religious influence. China’s Christian monasteries, with the guidance of “harmonious coexistence of the different”, tried to accept Christianity in Taoist terms, resulting in a fusion of the heterogeneous religions. The Sutras were, to a considerable extent, similar to traditional Christianity but with modifications or even changes as a result of sinicization.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> For more details, refer to Lin Yutang, *林语堂自传 (Ling Yutang’s Autobiography)* (Xi’an: Shanxi Normal University Press, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Leo D. Lefebure, “Review of the book ‘The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity, by Martin Palmer,” *Christian Century* 119 Feb 2002: 46.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1985). As an example, original sin in the Sutras becomes the goodness of original nature.

The most telling Christian linkage to Taoism is none other than the meaning of its two essential concepts, Tao/道 and Wu/无. Tao, the key concept in Taoism, can be translated as "way," "path," or "route," signifying the fundamental or true nature of the world. The biblical line "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1) is translated into Chinese as "In the beginning was the Tao, and the Tao was with God, and the Tao was God." Michael McCauley discusses the mysterious nature of God and human's inability to achieve a complete understanding of Him or a verbal definition of Him. He compares it to the mysterious Tao which Lao-Tzu calls the Nameless: the Name that can be named is not the eternal Name.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the Chinese readers might better understand Christianity in a more Taoist manner due to the use of the term Tao in John's Gospel.

In Tao Te Ching, wu/emptiness is related to the Tao, or the Creator and Sustainer of everything in the universe. Wu can be termed quiescence because the attainment of quiescence is also the state of returning to the source. Instead of a closure of action, Wu is deemed "transference" between two states of being. Lao Zi further elucidates it in Tao Te Ching: "When the extreme of emptiness is reached, and quiescence rigidly preserved, then all things are simultaneously produced... All things, after flourishing like the herb yun, return each to that from which it sprang. Returning to this source is called quiescence, and this implies a reversion to the original ordinance (of heaven)..." (Chapter 16)

Here, as an inter-religious dialogue and inter-cultural synthesis, the Taoist view of emptiness or quiescence is understood in the Christian terms of Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection, in Taoist terms, is interpreted as "he returned to where he sprang from, and implies a reversion to the original ordinance of heaven." The action does not come to an end because "When the extreme of emptiness is reached, and quiescence rigidly preserved, then all things are simultaneously produced." Thus to the Chinese Taoists, this is none other than the reason for Christ's resurrection, and the action is executed by God rather than human. Then, to human beings' understanding, it is Wu.<sup>50</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks: Two Tentative Solutions for the Contextualization and Localization of Christianity in China**

Sinicization, or Sinification, is understood as the assimilation of terms and concepts into the language and culture of China. In a broader sense, it refers to the process of "becoming Chinese." From what I have argued above, for Christianity to become Chinese Christianity in the Chinese religious, cultural and socio-political contexts, it has to go through contextualization

<sup>49</sup> See Michael McCauley, "The Deep Mystery of God," *America* 191 Oct 2004: 16-18.

<sup>50</sup> The idea of Wu and Christ's resurrection is based on Peter Chung-hang Chiu, *A Historical Study of Nestorian Christianity in the Tang Dynasty between A.D. 635-846*, Doktorsdissertasjon, South-western Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, 1987.

and localization. Yet meanwhile, a considerable number of Christians hold that Christianity is universal, unailing and transcendental, and therefore does not need any media like history, language, culture, etc.. Some Christians even argue that there is no Asian Christianity or Chinese Christianity. Such arguments would inevitably hinder the localization of Christianity in countries such as China. Within the context of cultural globalization, Christianity has to adapt itself into the indigenous context to carry out its evangelization. Even though this theory is now often being pointed out by sociologists and theologians, its actual practice is yet to be fulfilled. My proposal is that, in the Chinese case of Christian evangelization, the local color movement and adapting Christianity to Chinese practicality would be the two appropriate solutions.

The “Local Color” Movement started in the 1920s, when Chinese Christian thinkers like Ying Yuandao and Xie Fuya sought to construct a theology with Chinese characteristics and mould Christian believers with Chinese features. To Ying, local color refers to a Chinese Christian church that belongs to Chinese people, accords with the Chinese experience, synthesizes Christianity with Chinese culture, suites the Chinese national spirit and psychology, and accommodates Chinese Christian life with the Chinese social environment.<sup>51</sup> This can be seen as an external adaptation of Christianity with the local culture, or in other words, acculturation. For instance, the missionaries spoke the native language, played local music and wore local clothing so as to fit into the local customs. The “Local Color” Movement enables Christianity to be accepted and absorbed by the local culture, while its true color stays intact. As is verified by history, local color will inevitably lead to inculturation. By inculturation I mean Christianity permeates the Chinese culture, fuses with it and achieves mutual reformation and re-creation. As the Bible says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1); and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth (John 1:14),” it can be safely concluded that the relationship between evangelization and the local culture is analogous to that between Word of God and the physical body of Jesus. Therefore, like the incarnated Jesus whose divinity is not lessened in a particular cultural and historical context, Christianity, through transformation or modifications, need to enter the local culture and people’s life to experience truth and witness to the faith.

Though Christianity, as a religion, tends to concern itself with transcendence, eternity and absolute truth, yet in a country like China where religions are interconnected with the social, moral and ethical aspects of life, it has to be adapted, that is, to cater to Chinese people’s practical mentality. The Chinese interpretation of contextualizing Christianity means that, like engaged

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted from Duan Yi, “Zhonguo Jidujiao de Bensehua (The Local Color of Chinese Christianity)” *Journal of Chinese Social Science Academy* Feb 2003.

Buddhism and Taoism in China, Christianity should also take on practical responsibilities because, to Chinese, “religion is inseparable from people’s social life; the economy, interpersonal relationships, and even eating all have a close relationship with religion.”<sup>52</sup> Most Chinese people resort to religion for very practical and mundane purposes like a better life or an immortal life as what they expected from the longevity pursuits of Daoism. As a result, it is commonplace to find in rural China many peasants and old people, as well as women, starting to join the Christian groups or even becoming Christians, because they could thereby expect a more satisfying form of existence, psychologically at least (i.e. when going to the church to pray or talking about their problems with other believers).

Meanwhile, the Chinese urban intellectuals and employees also need a kind of spiritual consolation when they are dealing with the pressures generated by vehement commercialization and career competition. They want to know more about Christianity and to seek a pure land out of the postmodern maze of consumerism and materialism. And such tendencies are beginning to be included into the consideration of the government officials of China. As we have seen, historical events have at times caused the Chinese society to look rather critically or negatively at Christianity. If the Chinese Church exhibits degrees of reconciliation with Chinese people’s socio-ethical interests, that would mean an important step forward for both Christianity and China. Entering into dialogues with the seminal Chinese religious culture and the majority of Chinese citizens by means of adaptation and local color movements is crucial for Christianity to become contextualized and localized in China.

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<sup>52</sup> Wu Ziming, *Christianity and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Beijing: 2002) 359.