

Between the Heaven and the Human:¹ History, Paradox and Trend of Sino-Christian Theology Movement

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Introduction

When You Xilin² once wrote about Sino-Christian Theology,³ he asked, “Shouldn’t we understand it as ontological ‘Destiny’ of our society or ‘God’s Great Plan’, in a sense that goes beyond individuals’ will?” From the viewpoint of human history, “Destiny” or “Providence” is often realized through intentional and unintentional actions of human beings. Therefore, “inquiring into the relationship between the Heaven and the human (究天人之際)” (in the great Chinese historian Sima Qian’s words) is the necessary premise to “understanding of the changes from the past to the present. (通古今之變)”

1.

For the past two decades, many scholars have called Liu Xiaofeng and me as “Fathers of Sino-Christian Theology.” It means that the two scholars initiated the Sino-Christian Theology movement since mid-1990s in China. But I do not think so. Rather, I would like to emphasize that the concept of “Sino-Christian Theology” was raised firstly by Liu and then spread with Daniel Yeung, with resources of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong. Liu and Yeung did greatly contribute to the spread of this concept in mainland China, and I just gave some exact definition to it, arguments for its basis and significance, and discussions on the methods and approaches to it.

More importantly, I would like to emphasize that Sino-Christian Theology is just a Christian theology worked and written in Chinese language, in terms of the cultural resources and existential experiences of the Chinese. This theology can be traced back to the Chinese Nestorianism in 7th century and has begun with the Catholic missionaries in China at the turn of 16th and 17th centuries. If we say that Sino-Christian Theology began in mid-1990 with Liu Xiaofeng, Daniel Yeung and He Guanghu, how would we face the brilliant Christians from Matteo Ricci to Zhao Zichen who offered us those great works written in really beautiful classic and modern Chinese language?

Over the past two decades, I have explored the broad concept of Sino-Christian Theology and distinguished the “Christian studies or researches” from “Sino-Christian Theology.” I wrote in the introduction of *Sino-Christian Theology Reader*⁴ as follows.

Most of the essays of the three generations of the Chinese researchers in this field after the “Cultural Revolution” are not theological works in a strict sense, but works in Christian studies or at best, some writings about or on Christian theology.

The purpose of Christian studies by the “non-Christian” researchers is to learn some insights from Christianity and, with the insights which they think valuable, to reflect upon the problems in Chinese society. Of course, such efforts are beneficial to the Chinese people’s life. But, however, Christian theology is a discipline that explains and interprets the Christian belief systematically and methodically. It seeks to help people better understand and practice the Christian belief, to help them make their life better in this world, and eventually to help them free from the sin. Such understandings can be shared by the Christian and non-Christian Chinese researchers, so they have been working together in this field, disregarding the difference in their personal faith, having some common sense that Sino-Christian Theology has great value, which is important to the life of Chinese people.

Therefore, we can say that, according to *Study Guide of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies*, Sino-Christian Theology (漢語神學) is a component and the core of Sino-Christian Studies (漢語基督教研究).⁵

2.

Historically speaking, we can find the appearance of Sino-Christian Theology in China is necessary. Here I would like to state the necessity of the theology from the viewpoint of Christian Philosophy of History.

From such a viewpoint, I once argued, in my essay *Cancer and Rebirth*⁶, that classical civilization developed in Greece and Roman Empire collapsed or died in the 5th century AD, after suffering from some “civilization cancer” caused by the distortion of human nature of many society members, which could be compared to the cancer in the human body. Then Christian civilization or Western Civilization was born in and grew from that cancer-affected body (i.e. in the same area and the same peoples). This became eventually a wholly new civilization. The spiritual features of Christianity, the life styles

and institutions created by Christians are essentially different from those of classical civilization, hence the term “Christian Civilization.” Finally, the modern civilization, which developed from it, has been leading the trend of the world from then on.

Arnold Toynbee identified twenty and more civilizations, but most of them have already diminished. On the one hand, Hindu or Indian, Islamic or Arabian and Confucian or Chinese civilizations have got much closer to modern civilization in the material aspect and, to lesser degree, in institutional aspects, i.e. are closest in the material aspect and second closest in the institutional aspect. On the other hand, the farthest is the spiritual aspect in which these old civilizations have been preserving their traditions and, to some degree, opposing the modern civilization.

Well, let me have a brief look at the history of Confucian civilization and its current situation, so we can see the necessity of the rise of Sino-Christian Theology in the Chinese civilization.

3.

Judging from scripts and relics of the Yin or late Shang dynasty (from 14th century BC.), Chinese civilization, from its birth to early adolescence, had a kind of religion as its spiritual basis. A basic characteristic of early Chinese civilization was the belief in “Supreme God (*Shangdi*)” or “Heaven (*Tian*).”

Two kinds of ancient scripts (i.e. oracle bone script and bronze script) were invented for religious needs and used for religious activities such as divinations and rituals. Ancient Chinese civilization and its political regimes had considered religion as important for the state, and had deemed obedience to the will of God or Heaven to be most important.

On the one hand, Chinese civilization required monarchs to “respect the Heaven and love the people,” but on the other hand, it accepted rulers as the “Sons of Heaven” (*Tian Zi*). The latter concept can be described as a “cancer gene” of Chinese civilization.

For three thousands of years, Chinese people had used the term “Son of Heaven” referring to the supreme leader in Chinese politics, since the rulers of Yin and Zhou dynasty (1066-256, BC.) held up their ancestors as sons of Supreme God or Heavenly Emperor (*Tiandi*), and equated worshiping Heaven with enshrining their ancestors. This insistence reflects the mythological thinking in the primitive and early civilization periods, that is, the belief that humankind's earliest ancestor is not humankind. Such an understanding that appeared in the early period of Chinese civilization has, for thousands

of years, not been abandoned, but rather been inherited.

We can understand that all the human beings were considered as descendants of “Supreme Being” in the early period of civilization. But we cannot understand at all that only one person, just for his political power and for no other reason, should be regarded as the descendant of “Supreme Being” or “Son of Heaven.” From modern or reasonable viewpoint, it is extremely absurd. Tragically, however, although the title “Son of Heaven” has been abandoned with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Chinese people still have such a concept in their minds consciously or unconsciously even today.

The concept “Son of Heaven” mistakes the imperfect as the perfect, the worldly as the heavenly, the political as the religious, and the relative as the absolute. It distorted the Chinese civilization, made it into an unhealthy condition, bringing about many tragedies and disasters in Chinese history. However, “Son of Heaven” has already become a very important concept in Chinese political culture, and the political system established on this idea has been dominating all the fields of culture in China. Consequently, it is this “cancer gene of Chinese culture” that will eventually lead the whole civilization to an incurable state.

The concept “Son of Heaven” might absolutize monarchical tyranny by sanctifying it. Such absolutization had already taken place since the first Emperor of Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) and had been institutionalized through reforming the “feudal system” into the “centralization system.” This institution has been inherited for over two thousand years. Confucians and Confucianism emphasized the idea that “Son of Heaven” should always “respect Heaven and love the people.” We can see that such a Confucian idea, which did not support the absolute authority of monarch, had been preserved, as was made clear by Mencius’s saying, “The people are to be valued most, the state next, the ruler least.” But such an idea could not bring about any effective governance system beyond monarchy. In the Chinese history, some Confucians resisted monarchical tyranny but failed. In the long terms, many of them fell into miserable situations, and Confucians, as an intellectual class, became obedient to and cooperated with the absolute monarchy, and so they gradually lost their dignity and trustfulness, especially in Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (1271-1911).

On the other hand, Buddhists were conscious that “Son of Heaven” should be respected and relied on in China. Therefore the Discourse on “Monks’ Not Paying Homage to the Ruler”⁷ had changed into the assertion “Without reliance on the sovereign, it is difficult to sustain Buddhist practice.” Taoism, once enjoyed the rulers’ support during Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties in the middle ages, had been oppressed

together with folk religions and faded during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Since then, the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism has become smaller than that of secular novels. The idea of “politics above religion” and the “pseudo-sanctification” of politics have led the whole society to “real secularization.”

In this way, to regard the monarch as the “Son of Heaven” and to consider absolute monarchy as a sacred principle have resulted in despotism. A desire for “infinite power” or “worship of power” is the universal sin of mankind. Historically, there are countless examples that committed such crimes happened in different civilizations. Histories of two large areas, however, have the most striking contrast -- the western and eastern sides of the Eurasian Continent.

On the western side of the Eurasian Continent, the Roman Empire (1st century BC -5th century AD) headed for military worship with its egotism and vanity, and its ruling class' greedy desires and arrogant pride caused the loss of social morality, which led to the destruction of the Empire. As the residents in that area had gradually become devoted to Christianity, the western side of the Eurasian Continent had experienced some rebirth, and a wholly new civilization was built, which had eventually developed to the most advanced and most influential civilization on the globe.

On the eastern side of the Eurasian Continent, after the Confucian principle “Worship the Heaven and Protect the people” (the rational part of theocracy) was put aside, and the nominal monarchy of Zhou dynasty was superseded by Qin's centralized tyranny (221 BC), Chinese civilization had fallen into a radically difficult situation. Because the idea “Son of Heaven” had not been changed even after repeated internal rebellions and external invasions, Chinese civilization had remained the state of autocracy, or even worse. In addition to “pseudo-sanctification” resulting “real secularization”, there was “high centralization” leading to “deep disorder.” The Xinhai Revolution (1911) abolished monarchical system on the surface, but in fact Chinese civilization did not avert actual autocracy, due to various wars and domestic conflicts. Because economic reforms from the 1980s to the present have not touched the political system, bureaucratic/crony capitalism combined with the centralized autocracy has further exacerbated the social condition, thus causing “completely decayed” situation.

Culturally speaking, all this is because of the institutionalization of worship of power that absolutizes and sanctifies political power. That corrupts human nature. The Chinese political culture can be traced back to the concept “Son of Heaven.” Such a “cancer genes of culture” has corrupted the human nature of Chinese bureaucrats and people since Qin dynasty, and has further infected the civilization. This kind of “cancer”

has corrupted the huge nation in just two decades with accelerated speed, like a “gene bomb”. So, nowadays the Chinese not only have to live with the polluted water, land and air, but also have to bear with the polluted human nature of more and more common people, especially of the numerous bureaucrats at all the levels, hence the numerous and enormous unjust things in everyday life.

Chinese civilization is now standing at a crossroad of life and death, and thus China must reconsider the great changes and their profound lessons from the past to the present in the neighboring countries as (the South and the North) Korea and Japan, also on the eastern side of the Eurasian Continent. And China must throw away the narrow and exclusive understanding of “national character,” and reconsider the history and its lessons of the revival or rebirth of civilization on the western side of the Eurasian Continent. After all, China needs philosophical and spiritual “reform and opening-up” and must accept, study, think and absorb Christianity.

“Theology” explores the divine nature, talks about God and denies the possibility of human being’s becoming “Son of Heaven” or the justification of secular being’s being sanctified. Therefore, it is urgently needed as a bitter but best medicine for the Chinese civilization. Actually, since the “reform and opening-up” in 1980s, some Chinese academics have come to study “Sino-Christian Theology” which disappeared 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, with many other humanities and social sciences in China. Now the revival and development of Sino-Christian Theology (and some other disciplines) are necessary for the survival of Chinese civilization and the development of China’s history, therefore it is inevitable. And on the other hand, since the rebirth and growth of theology are beyond the ability of the academics especially in China’s condition, such a surprising development can only be said, from the perspective of Christian Philosophy of History, to be a Providence or a Plan of God.

4.

In the same way, the Plan of God is beyond human consciousness and prediction. From this point of view, there are possibilities that unimaginable even irrational things could take place in the reality.

From the perspective of Christian Philosophy of History, the rebirth and growth of Sino-Christian Theology is “a large paradox”. Behind the large paradox, there were many various small paradoxes such as that most academics engaging in it came from other specialist fields, all of them were raised up in the atheist and anti-Christian settings,

nearly all of them took a positive even sympathy attitudes towards Christianity even though they were not Christians, while the non-Christian academics in the West took some negative attitudes to it. Observers noticing the anti-Christian tendency of Confucians and Communists in China (who have dominated Chinese culture) would say it would be impossible to influence the mind of much more Chinese people with Christian thought, but nowadays we seem to see the possibility emerging from the “impossibility.” That means that we seem to be witnessing a kind of miracle in salvation history happening in China.

In fact, if we shift our perspective from the small paradoxes in the small academic group in China today to a grand stage of the Chinese history and the world Christianity, we will be able to find the large paradox. It is a historical dialectic, in other words, that shows to us some positive meaning of historical “evil”, as it was argued in the “Theodicy.”

Since the so-called “family learnings system”⁸ in Han Dynasties (206 BC-220 AD) was superseded by the imperial official examination system in Sui (581-618 AD) and Tang (618-907 AD) dynasties and continued to Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD), nearly all the Chinese intellectuals, as officials, have become the dependents of emperors, except the few elements with independent dignity thrown into some miserable situation. In final analysis, the power of autocracy and the dependence of Confucianism had come to strengthened each other. On the other hand, for Buddhism and Taoism, the idea “It is difficult to sustain religious practices without reliance on the sovereign” had been widely accepted and that had led to the situation of “politics above religion.”

Such a situation came to be worst for Christianity and Christian theology in the Chinese history. Because Christianity holds that only Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the humankind are creatures of God, so in front of God, all human beings are equal and sinners. Therefore, no monarchs could be raised up to the status of Son of God. So Christian theology is a theory against the concept “Son of Heaven”, the core of China’s traditional political ideology. For this reason, it is very difficult for Christian theology to be accepted by the Chinese rulers. This might be, at least unconsciously, the ideological reason for the so-called “China Rites Controversy” during Emperor Kangxi’s reign (1661-1722) in Qing dynasty. However, Christianity was harshly oppressed and persecuted many times in the Chinese history. Those oppressions were not only for political causes but also for ideological reasons.

However, what very unreasonable is that, as the political and cultural situations got worse and worse, sometimes even very dangerous, Christianity came to China during

Tang dynasty (in the 7th century), reentered China during Yuan dynasty (in the 13th century), rooted in China during late Ming dynasty (during the turn of 16th and 17th centuries), with the entry of Protestantism at the beginning of 19th century, and eventually spread all over China from mid 19th century to mid 20th century.

In the 20th century, China's political, social and cultural situations experienced dramatic and radical changes. Culturally speaking, during the first half of last century, the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions lost their influences due to the emergence of democratic and scientific ideas, but during the second half of the century, atheist and communist ideology had dominated China.

Furthermore, from the beginning of the 2000s, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions have remarkably revived, and have come to get support from the political authorities. All the situations were disadvantageous for Christianity. But, however, the world has witnessed with surprise such a large paradox---- even after being oppressed to death or swept out from the society of mainland China in 30 years from 1950s to 1970s, Christianity has risen from ashes and have been growing very rapidly.

5.

In 1976 when Mao Zedong died, if anybody talked about Christianity, not to mention any theology, he would surely be recognized as a madman or idiot came from the Mars. In the 1980s, however, when *A Dictionary of Religion* (宗教詞典) and *Chinese Encyclopedia* (中國大百科全書) were published, the terms and entries about Christianity were included, so the knowledge about Christianity was introduced in objective manner for the first time since 1949. In late 1980s and early 1990s, the Sino-Christian Theology movement (in narrow sense, i.e. the trend of Christian studies by Chinese academics at that time) occurred and rapidly developed. Then during the turn of 20th and 21st centuries, numerous writings on or about Christianity began appear and flourished, including research papers, essays, monographs, translations, anthologies, journals, dictionaries and popular readers. And the influence of all the writings has expanded to different walks in life, including academics, businessmen, artists, lawyers, and possibly journalists and officials. These studies have a momentum which can be compared with the growth of Christianity in China today.

Keeping in mind the extremely difficult situation that political pressures have become more and more severe and the censorship on Christian books and journals has been systematically strengthened, I cannot imagine any other word better than “miracle”

to describe this development.

On the other hand, Sino-Christian Theology, with its small group of scholars, facing this old and giant political culture, the hard and totalitarian regime, and the enormously complex social and academic problems, is just like young David facing the giant Goliath. Only mention the academic area, Sino-Christian Theology, which has to stay on the marginalized status, has to deal with many multidimensional and interdisciplinary problems, including dialogue between Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism and Islam; clashes among civilizations; relationships between ancient and modern cultures, between China and the West, between politics and religion, among the denominations and sects in Christianity, between modernity and pre-modernity, between modernism and postmodernism, between Christianity and the humanities such as literature, history, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics; between Christianity and social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, political and juridical sciences; and environmental problems, and so on.

Talking about the role played by Sino-Christian Theology in China's future, Daniel Yeung, Director of the ISCS⁹ said, "Sino-Christian Theology can promote the dialogue and integration of Christianity with various Chinese cultural traditions, and engaged in contemporary social improvements." It could join the reflection on, analysis of and criticism of the important issues regarding Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Marxism and many social, ethical and environmental problems, "with Christian resources." Christianity could provide valuable ideas, proposals and solutions for many complicated public problems from its unique point of view.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that such studies experienced in the past a course from "Christian Culture Studies" through "Christianity Studies", to "Sino-Christian Theology." However, in terms of the social influences, we could see a trend from the intellectuals in humanities, through various walks in life, to the Chinese culture or Chinese civilization. So, we could hope that the trend of Sino-Christian Theology will enable it to play an important spiritual role for the rebirth of Chinese culture or Chinese civilization.

Notes

¹ This [abridged translation of] treatise is based on Prof. Dr. HE Guanghu's lecture, delivered at Doshisha University on November 9th, 2016. Footnotes were added by Li Jianfeng, Chinese-Japanese translator.

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- ² Professor at College of Chinese Literature, Shaanxi Normal University and Director of the Institute of Christian Studies at Shaanxi Normal University.
- ³ Sino-Christian Theology has broad and narrow meanings. The broad meaning refers to all Christian Theological Studies in Chinese language, while the narrow one refers to Christian (Theological) Studies in the areas of humanities in mainland China, which began in the 1990s.
- ⁴ He Guanghu and Daniel Yeung (eds.) *Sino-Christian Theology Reader* [漢語神學讀本] (2009) pp.7-15.
- ⁵ Sino-Christian Theology is a component and the core of Sino-Christian Studies [漢語神學是漢語基督教研究的核心與歸屬]
(<http://www.iscs.org.hk/Common/Reader/Channel/ShowPage.jsp?Cid=224&Pid=3&Version=0&Charset=gb2312&page=0>) (Accessed July 6, 2017)
- ⁶ He Guanghu, *Holding a Candle in the Tunnel* [秉燭隧中] (2014) pp. 108-126.
- ⁷ This is a Buddhist idea that appeared in the Eastern Jin (317-420 AD) period. According to this idea, monks stand in a position of leading the masses on the path of enlightenment, drawing a line with the secular or imperial law. In the Tang(618-907 AD) period, Monks or the Buddhist law had become inferior to secular power or imperial law. In the Song(960-1127 AD) period, Monks had come to be completely obedient to secular power. That is to say, the politico-religious relationship between Buddhism and political power in China can be understood in the above three stages.
- ⁸ The early Confucianism had an education system in which a teacher invited to a family educated its children and relatives. In Han dynasties, the official scholars Boshi (Doctors) and then Confucian teachers passed their learnings to the students from generation to generation, the later generations just followed their teachers. In those stages, independence and freedom of learning were preserved. Such Confucian education and academic system was called Jiafa (家法).
- ⁹ *Communication of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies*, Hong Kong [漢語基督教文化研究所通訊] (2013).
(<http://www.iscs.org.hk/Common/Reader/Channel/ShowPage.jsp?Cid=340&Pid=8&Version=0&Charset=gb2312&page=0>) (Accessed July 7, 2017)