Making Christianity Chinese:

Sinicization Outside State Narratives

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Christianity is a religion with a perhaps surprisingly long history in China. Its presence can be traced back as far as 635, when the Syrian missionary Alopen arrived from Persia to Chang'an, then the capital of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and now modern-day Xi'an (Lian 2010: 3). In the international, cosmopolitan atmosphere of Chang'an at the time, Alopen's mission was quickly and easily received. Within five years, Emperor Taizong 太宗 decreed his favourable opinion of the "luminous religion" (*jingjiao* 景教), as Nestorian Christianity was then called, and ordered a Christian monastery to be built in Chang'an for those who had taken vows. For a decade, Christianity was permitted to flourish, with Nestorian Christian missionaries continuing to arrive from western Asia as the religion spread to other cities. In 845, however, Emperor Wuzong 武宗 issued a new decree expelling Buddhism and all other foreign religions, including Christianity (ibid.).

Thereafter followed repeated introductions and reintroductions of Christianity to China. During the thirteenth century, both Latin and Nestorian Christians were present in significant numbers in modern-day Beijing under the Mongols and among the nomadic tribes of the north, although this again faded by the end of the fourteenth century (ibid.: 4). In the sixteenth century, Catholic missionaries again entered China, this time via the port of Canton (Guangzhou) – arguably, the beginning of the continuous history of Christianity in China (Mungello 2012: 538). This wave endured – with its ups and downs, notably the willingness of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci to adapt Christianity to Chinese traditions, resulting in the "Chinese rites controversy" wherein conflicts over the accommodation of ancestor worship in Chinese Catholicism culminated in the banning of Chinese rites from Catholic practice, and then the eventual banning of Christianity from China once again – until the end of the eighteenth century, when numbers again rose.

The majority of modern Chinese Christians are Protestant, a presence that can be largely traced back to a wave of Christianity in China stemming from an influx of Western missionaries in the nineteenth century. The first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, arrived in 1807 in Canton from the United Kingdom, but the floodgates opened after the end of the Opium War and the treaties that China was forced to sign. During the nineteenth century, about 8,000 missionaries entered China; during the first half of the twentieth century, there were approximately 23,000 missionaries (about half of them American) working in China for varying periods of time, affiliated with more than a hundred foreign societies (Lian 2010: 6). However, by the end of the Republican period – before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 – Christians numbered a mere 0.2% of China's population; the missionary effort was widely deemed to have failed (Priestley 1952).

In the years following 1949, Christianity – and its strong associations with the West – was often the target of Communist Party ire (ibid.). For most of the latter half of the twentieth century, Christianity was thought to be effectively dead in China under Communist rule; it was assumed that "Christianity can have no future in Communist China: the new 'reformed' or 'progressive' church can be nothing but a Communist puppet which will be allowed to die quietly when its propaganda usages have spent themselves" (ibid.: 20). In the early years of the Korean War, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*sanzi aiguo yundong* 三自愛國運動) was officially founded under the auspices of the Communist government. On the surface, the purpose of the movement was merely "the indigenization and ecclesiastical autonomy of Chinese church" (Lee 2007: 284); in reality, it "sought to ensure that all Chinese Protestant congregations would submit to the socialist ideology" (Lee 2005: 68). During the Cultural Revolution, Christianity vanished almost entirely – at least, from public view.

After the death of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 in 1976, however, the number of Christians began to increase rapidly. By 2010, it was estimated that about 4.3% of Chinese – at the time, around 58 million people – considered themselves Protestants (Sun 2017). It became clear that during the Maoist period, Chinese Christians had not merely lain dormant in order to survive, but had in fact actively "refused to be subject to the control of the state. They ignored what they could not change in national politics and took advantage of the situation to preserve their strength, using limited resources to organize highly autonomous and diffuse worshipping communities,

which laid the foundation for religious revival during the reform period" (Lee 2007: 277-8). Furthermore, Chinese Christians spanned multiple demographic divides – they hailed from across the country, from both rural and urban areas, and across socioeconomic lines (Hunter and Chan 1993; Aikman 2003; Chen and Huang 2004; Huang and Yang 2005; Yang 2005; Huang 2014). Such was the growth and wide apparent appeal of Christianity that it led scholars to comment, "Today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe" (Bays 2003: 488). For a time, it seemed that if this rate of growth were to continue for another decade, China would soon have the world's largest population of Christians (Stark and Wang 2015).

Much of this growth came specifically from Chinese Protestant "house churches" (*jiating jiaohui* 家庭教會), which comprise, if not the majority, certainly a very significant proportion of the Chinese Christian population today. What unites such churches – often also described as autonomous, independent, unofficial, or underground churches – is that they are "unregistered religious groups which, for differing reasons, are independent of the state and the officially sanctioned Protestant churches linked to the Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC)" (Koesel 2014: 573). Given their underground nature, it is difficult to accurately gauge the number of Christians in house churches; but regardless, it is generally agreed that more Chinese Christians worship in house churches than in officially sanctioned religious organisations (Koesel 2014). Due to their collective size and location largely outside of institutional control, house churches are often seen as a threat to state and religious organisations, and their members are aware of this. Locations of services may change regularly, and members are often wary of bringing in outsiders for fear that they may be state agents seeking to infiltrate the church.

When Xi Jinping 習近平 took office in 2012, he was faced with what he regarded as a "variety of challenges in the religious sphere that he perceived to be detrimental to his ruling objectives" (Chang 2018: 37). These included the increasing commercialism of Taoism and Buddhism, and apparent extremism and anti-Chinese sentiment among Muslims and Tibetans – as well as the persistent loyalty of Chinese Catholics to the Catholic hierarchy, and the proliferation of Protestant house churches outside of official state control. For Xi, the common thread he saw running between all these issues was a "failure (…) to accept and become integrated into 'fine traditional Chinese culture'" (*Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua* 中華優秀傳統文化)" (ibid.). Christianity and Islam were, in his eyes, especially guilty of this; their adherents' "lack of confidence in Chinese culture has apparently primed them to absorb Western values and extremism" (ibid.).

In 2015, the term "sinicization" (*Zhongguohua* 中國化) was officially introduced at the Central United Front Work Conference. In 2016, Xi became the first Party Secretary in 15 years to attend the annual National Religious Work Conference (*quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi* 全國宗教工作會議). In his address, he laid out the grand strategy of religious sinicization and asked the attendees to confront the issues of foreign infiltration and religious extremism.[1] Christianity needed to be reformed – Christian proselytism had to be eliminated, as well as the Christian teaching that the only path to eternal salvation was through Jesus Christ, on the grounds that it was "incompatible with pluralistic and harmonious (*duoyuan tonghe* 多元通和) Chinese religious traditions" (Chang 2018: 40). Above all else, however, Chinese Christians had to remember that they were Chinese – that they held a duty to reject all Western influences as a member of a shared Chinese community and destiny (Zhang 2011; Mou 2012; Zhuo 2017).

On a superficial level, sinicization is merely the state initiative to encourage religions in China to assimilate culturally. In practice, the enforcement of sinicization has tended to be somewhat muddled: the initiative has a broad, ambitious goal of, effectively, revitalising Chinese culture, but relies on a fairly self-serving bureaucracy to carry it out. On a deeper level, however, the ideological project behind it is reasonably clear: a concern with regime stability, and fear of religious subversion, especially as set against the spectre of the West. In particular, it imagines the growth of Christianity as inherently threatening to China. Underlying the logic of the state's goals is the "religious ecology" model, which conceives of a society's religious landscape as akin to an ecological system. Under this model, any dramatic growth of one particular religion will necessarily unbalance the whole system. It is similar to the religious marketplace model, where different religions effectively compete for adherents, according to the needs they fulfil; the relationship between different religions is, in these models, a zero-sum game. Thus, understood in this way, the rapid growth of Christianity in China is seen as a sign almost of disease, and if allowed to grow unchecked would eventually hasten the decline of Chinese civilisation at large.

In this, then, to examine sinicization is to examine a dense nexus of overlapping and conflicting flows of power and discourse. The state perception of Christianity as a religion that is unlike other religions in China due to its foreign associations is rooted in contemporary concerns over the status and boundaries of Chinese culture, and the ability of the CCP to bolster its claim to being the ultimate representative and champion of what it means to be Chinese. Indeed, Yang (2021) has recently argued that *Zhongguohua* should be translated not as sinicization but "Chinafication," because it is not a project that is actually about cultural assimilation, but rather about political conformity and obedience. Its claims to concern over indigeneity and assimilation are largely – as Yang points out – a smokescreen.

In recent years, scholars of Chinese Christianity have often followed this line of approach and tended to focus on the influence of the state on Christianity, pointing out that "the effect of any religion's institutional features on its growth is contingent on the sociopolitical context of the religion, and that the state is the most powerful actor in creating and shaping that context" (Sun 2017: 1664). Persecution has profoundly shaped Chinese Christianity (Stark and Wang 2015), and scholars have examined the complex interplay between an authoritarian state and religious institutions (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Vala 2013; Koesel 2014; Sun 2017; Reny 2018), showing how the flourishing of Christian churches

1. "習近平: 全面提高新形勢下宗教工作水平" (*Xi Jinping: Quanmian tigao xin xingshi xia zongjiao gongzuo shuiping*, Xi Jinping: All-around improvement of the standard of religious work under new circumstances), *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 23 April 2016, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm (accessed on 6 June 2023).

since reform and opening up has not necessarily meant lessened control but rather has often opened up new avenues for state monitoring of Christian activity (Potter 2003; Leung 2005; Palmer 2009).

After all, sinicization's prioritisation of Christianity – as a religion associated with the West – as a threat over religions seen as more indigenous or Chinese such as Buddhism or Taoism reflects the anxieties of the state over the status and boundaries of Chinese culture, and the loyalties of Christians themselves. In this light, sinicization has not necessarily been a unique or singular decree; rather, it has been part of a larger bundle of government policies aimed at tightening religious regulations and increasing crackdowns on unauthorised religious activities. For instance, the "three rectifications, one demolition" campaign (*sangai yichai* 三改一拆) between 2013 and 2016 – which ostensibly sought to rectify structural integrity, permit violations, or other similar building issues, but in practice was widely recognised as targeting Christian sites – has been the focus of much recent academic attention. Scholars have analysed the campaign's targeted removal or destruction of rooftop crosses and other such public signs of Christianity (Cao 2017); how these structures have been understood as Christianising agents (Chambon 2017); the theological implications of how targeted Christians conceive of and frame their faith (Talbert 2018); and the ultimate limits and failures of the campaign (Yang 2018), often with a focus on state-religion relations (Ying 2018).

In reaction, others have argued that an overwhelming focus on the state, and the split between state and religion, presents "too stark a picture of the vectors of power by reducing them to disparate, antagonistic arenas" (Yuan 2021: 199). The form and features of a distinctively Chinese Christianity have been fundamentally shaped by persecution and state control; yet, it has also continued to develop in ways that are primarily aimed internally, and formed in response to Chinese social issues and anxieties. In a sense, the ongoing development of Chinese Christianity may be seen as part of how Christianity has, within the last few decades, become a "primarily non-Western religion in terms of both numbers of adherents and local practice. For the near future it may be more useful to view Chinese Protestants as part of that new centre of gravity outside Europe and North America, rather than to discuss it in terms and categories more familiar in the West but now increasingly distant from Chinese reality" (Bays 2003: 503-4). As Yuan has argued, "Without reducing the very real impacts that government actions have had on religious life-worlds, ethnographic attentiveness (…) can reveal multiple dimensions (…) beyond those of the state" (Yuan 2021: 199).

After all, Christianity's history in China stretches back – in reality – almost 1,500 years. The complete expulsion of Western missionaries during the Cultural Revolution meant that native Chinese Christians were left to "face the state's harassment by themselves" (Lee 2007: 282) – but that they had also been left solely in charge of the affairs of their churches (Stark and Wang 2015). Even before 1949, the majority of Chinese Christians were converted to Christianity by other Chinese, not by foreign missionaries, which remains true today (Bays 2003: 503), where local social networks are key to conversion in China (Hunter and Chan 1993; Stark and Wang 2015). Christianity in China has repeatedly moulded itself to the shape of Chinese society. Despite state persecution during the Maoist era, Chinese Christianity was kept alive and even spread – in ways that mirrored traditional Chinese culture and social hierarchy where junior members of the community and family are required to obey elder members. Conversions, for instance, followed a pattern where the "Christian patriarchs, mostly older men and women, instructed the younger members of the family in the faith, because family and marriage ties involved a sense of loyalty to household leaders" (Lee 2007: 287). This practice "guaranteed a steady church growth and maintained the continued adherence of the Christians to their faith. When Christianity became a family religion, Jesus Christ publicly replaced the ancestor as the focus of worship and created a new religious and social identity to hold different generations of a Christian family together. Christian patriarchs saw conversion, baptism, and church affiliation as essential filial duties for their children" (ibid.: 287).

In examining sinicization in the sense of Christianity in China becoming Chinese over time, we therefore enter into questions of where and how Christianity changes and localises. Christianity's global presence today is, undeniably, often the consequence of flows of missionaries following in the wake of colonialism and imperialism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986; Mills 1997), even as Christianity adapts and changes according to local values and norms (Orsi 1985; Orta 2004; Robbins 2004). Under these circumstances, Christian converts around the world have grappled with what it means to be Christian and what an indigenous, localised Christianity looks like, and Chinese Christians have not been exempt from such considerations. As scholarship has detailed, Chinese Christianity too has been and is still in a continual process of conversation, adaptation, and engagement with Chinese society and history. Such processes of syncretism and inculturation have produced rich and varied lived religion and practices. Scholars have traced the parallels between the moral teachings of Chinese Protestantism and Confucianism (Hunter and Chan 1993); others have noted growing links between Christianity and business in the wake of reform and opening up (Chen and Huang 2004), a counterbalance to previous stereotypes of Chinese Protestants as predominantly poor, rural women (Cao 2010). Chinese Christianity contains many conversations that are primarily by and for themselves, such as arguments over heterodoxy and the management of diversions from what "true" Christianity should be – discussions that are wrapped up in local, Chinese concepts of culture and identity, and that "attach to social bodies, reproduce anxieties about mobility and disorder, and generate modes of suspicion and self-scrutiny that are highly gendered and classed" (Yuan 2021: 178). At the same time, this indigeneity is not one that has formed in isolation from the rest of the world. Christianity has been strongly associated in China with Western cosmopolitanism and modernity (Cao 2010), and this prestige is itself an important component of Chinese Christianity (Hunter and Chan 1993). The missionary legacy remains strong; visitors to urban Chinese churches during the early 2000s often noted a strong resemblance to British church services (Buchan 2001).

The three articles in this special feature offer a view of Chinese Christianity that shows how sinicization is a complex and ongoing process, woven into how Chinese Christians think and conceive of

themselves as both Chinese and Christians – as well as how others such as the state may think and conceive of them in turn.

Drawing on nearly two decades of ethnographic fieldwork, Yujing Zhu and Yun Chen examine the eastern port city of Wenzhou, which was once the epicentre of the "three rectifications, one demolition" campaign. They analyse state regulation of Chinese Protestantism – but do so through a close anthropological examination of the actions and concerns of local bureaucrats on the ground, especially how they mediate between the national and the local, and balance between tolerance and control. In particular, rather than framing bureaucracy as simply a local game to be played, they illustrate the ambiguities, tensions, and inconsistencies between central policy and local regulatory practices. The bureaucrats they describe are on the frontlines of the implementation of policies such as sinicization, and enjoy considerable personal discretion in how to carry out their directives. Many of the complaints often levied against state religious policies – such as selective implementation, with some churches targeted while others are ignored – are shown to be the result of bureaucrats making calculated decisions and compromises in light of resource scarcity. Through their account, we gain a fine-grained, detailed understanding of how exactly sinicization as a sweeping, national-level decree becomes something that affects how everyday Christians live and experience their faith.

While urban Wenzhou has been called the "Jerusalem of China" (Cao 2010), Jianghua Yang and Yujie Wang turn their attention to rural churches in the central province of Henan, which has been dubbed by some the "Galilee of China" (Hattaway 2009; Liu 2014) for its role in producing high numbers of Christian disciples. Arguing that previous emphases on modernisation theory and a religious marketplace model fail to account for rural conversion to Christianity, Yang and Wang argue that the growth and development of rural churches can best be understood and explained as the result of a dynamic fusion of contextual and institutional factors. Their case studies examine four Protestant churches in Henan, two officially associated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and two "underground" or "house" churches, each with different approaches on how to gather believers and grow. Some, for instance, deliberately sought institutional legitimacy and a closer relationship with government power; others, in contrast, prioritised their understandings of faith over official recognition, even at the risk of government crackdowns. Taking a sociological approach, Yang and Wang propose a theoretical framework for understanding how different churches are able to develop and perform within the wider socioreligious landscape, based on legitimacy (social, institutional) and organisational capacity (leadership, resilience, openness, and strategy). They show that these factors are interrelated with themselves as well as with both internal and external factors, and argue that this meso-level model presents a productive analytical framework for understanding the development of urban churches as well. In doing so, they provide a profound and structured look at how rural Chinese churches navigate intricate and constantly-shifting relations with the state.

Finally, Alice Yeh analyses how Chinese Catholic confessional politics are mobilised in the service of religious callings, moving Chinese Catholics from rural to urban China, and from China to Overseas Chinese communities in the United States. Focusing on Hangzhou and New York City, Yeh demonstrates how Chinese Catholic churches under the auspices of the Patriotic Catholic Association (PCA) have been sinicized not so much in accordance with Xi Jinping's directives but in response to it. Specifically, Yeh argues that transnational mobility – generally considered a privilege, especially for Chinese Catholic priests who nowadays almost always have rural backgrounds – is often logistically enabled by the vocational economy of the PCA, and then politically justified by leveraging Sino-Vatican politics. Examining the account of Father Chen Sheng'an – a man in his fifties who was born in a Shaanxi Province village, was trained in the Philippines, and then worked in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou before settling in a parish in Queens in New York City – Yeh discusses how Father Chen draws on Catholic narratives about "calling" and "listening" to God in connection with his "risky" approach to the logistics of visas and crossing national borders. In doing so, Yeh's account of Chinese Catholicism counters prevailing notions of Catholicism as a predominantly rural phenomenon in China that struggles with modernity – and shows how the politics of sinicization is not just something imposed upon Chinese Catholics, but is also a resource for strategic positioning and the claiming of a legal and spiritual identity.

Together, all three articles in this special feature push forward a view of sinicization and Chinese Christianity that complicates state narratives of what it means for Christianity to become "Chinese." Xi's policy of sinicization has been impactful across both Catholic and Protestant Chinese Christians communities, in both rural and urban areas – and even overseas. All three articles move in and out of contact with the state, weaving accounts that are connected to but also independent of state influence and control of Chinese religion. They show how Chinese Christians are almost inevitably affected in some way by state demands; at the same time, they also demonstrate that Chinese Christians – just as under the oppression of the Maoist era – nevertheless draw on resources of their own in forming their faith and religious practices, whether it be through strategic engagement with local bureaucracy (Zhu and Chen), dynamic fusions of contextual and institutional factors (Yang and Wang), or the leveraging of vocational narratives in the pursuit of transnational mobility (Yeh).

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