

# Editorial: Christians in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong during Moments of Crisis

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Throughout history, moments of crisis have challenged Christian communities to reflect on their faith for protection and as a catalyst for change. The Christians of the Sinophone world are no exception. Our special issue brings together five articles on Christians in specific regions (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong), with the aim of examining the efforts of Christian thinkers, clergy, aborigines, and activists to articulate theological ideas and pursue engagement through intellectual dialogue, social protest and transnational lobbying in times of crisis. The following introductory paragraphs discuss the rationale for the special issue as a whole before outlining the key findings of its articles.

## 1 Rationale of this Special Issue

In studying the complex relationship between Christian texts and Chinese contexts, Chloë Starr (2016) argues that the evolution of Sino-Christian theologies must be understood through the lens of indigenous literary and philosophical frameworks. The intellectual reasoning is relational and dialogical, engaging indigenous readers to think about the commonalities between Christianity and culture.<sup>1</sup> Because the indigenization of Christianity has never been a

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<sup>1</sup> Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

uniform process, Starr's insight draws attention to the concrete circumstances in which religious encounters take place.

The history of transnational and local Christian linkages in the Sinophone world challenges the teleological conception that Christianity came to China on imperialist Western gunboats. Rather than remaining a foreign religion (*yangjiao* 洋教), Christianity gradually transformed itself into a local faith tradition. The current political situation can create deceptive impressions. The efforts by the state to control the religious landscape of China has certainly had the effect of making Christianity less visible in public. This contrasts with the open propagation by Christian communities in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where the relationship between local Christian faith communities and the global Church is not affected by restrictive religious policies. This special issue contextualizes Christian actors as effective agents in maintaining global-local exchanges and within civil society. The individual contributions aim to move beyond approaches in which the Sinophone world often chimes with nationalistic or state-centered narratives of Christianity. Instead, we aim to demonstrate how religious ethics can motivate individuals to seek solutions in worldly activism in their real or imagined homelands. By examining the confluence of faith and politics, individual agency and institutional structure, the contributions in this issue shows a conscientious move towards micro-history, highlighting the evolution of Christianity in specific temporal and spatial settings.

The first two articles strike a balance between the micro-level analysis of Chinese theology and the study of broader political forces that influenced their intellectual orientations in modern China. John Sampson builds upon existing research on twentieth-century thinker T.C. Chao (Zhao Zichen, 1888–1979), analyzing his symbiotic correlation between theological reflection and historical context. T.C. Chao belonged to the last generation of Western-educated urban Chinese cosmopolitan elites or, to cite Daniel H. Bays, of the “Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment.”<sup>2</sup> Chao was critical of some pastoral and administrative barriers within the old missionary hierarchy that obstructed full autonomy for Chinese Christians. While teaching at Yenching University, Chao championed ecumenical fellowship and strove to find common theological ground for Chinese Christians across denominational boundaries. Chao's ethical concerns differed from churchmen such as Watchman Nee or Wang Mingdao, who emphasized individual piety and congregational self-governance. Chao is generally perceived as having been a liberal theologian in the 1920s and 1930s who, as Sampson argues, moved towards a Christocentric theology aimed at

2 Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

reconciling personal conversion with social ethics in his war-torn country. Chao's intellectual evolution was conditioned by his own experience of warfare and violent regime transitions. Chao took Incarnation as the point of entry into theology, and this Christological understanding was derived from his personal experience as a prisoner-of-war in Japanese-occupied Beijing after the Pearl Harbor attacks, as well as from his direct encounters with sinful acts committed by the prison guards. Unlike Karl Barth's Reformed Protestantism, Chao did not call for a Chinese Confessing Church. Instead, he encouraged the denominational churches to contribute to China's reconstruction after WWII and the 1949 regime change. But Chao's status as an international churchman made him suspect in the eyes of the Communist leaders after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, and thus his fall from grace in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement became inevitable.

Naomi Thurston continues the story into contemporary China, where university-based Christian scholars sought to engage with the study of political theology as a field of enquiry and a way towards civic engagement. The recent debates on political theology in China and Hong Kong point to an emerging indigenous intellectual space at the intersection of global and Chinese theologies. Within this space, Thurston introduces new thinkers, and discusses their concerns and subjectivities, who made a significant contribution to contemporary Chinese Christian thought. Both Sampson and Thurston provide us with solid guidelines for navigating the changing Chinese theological landscape and the problematic relationship between Christian intellectuals and the Communist state. Whilst the latter has imposed considerable restrictions, Christian intellectuals have managed to carve out a limited space for spiritual empowerment.

The third and fourth articles focus on Taiwan. Focusing on relevant time periods and geographical locations, Victoria Yun-Ching Shen investigates the significance of overseas Taiwanese clerical activism in the 1970s. While there has been a wealth of literature on the prophetic and democratizing influence of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan during the Nationalist (Kuomintang KMT) post-war decades, little attention has been paid to the transnational inputs from the extensive Taiwanese Presbyterian diaspora. Shen revisits several public statements drafted by overseas Taiwanese Presbyterians in the 1970s, criticizing Taiwan's political repression. The significance of these statements lies in the fact that the Presbyterian clergy were among the first group of intellectuals to envision a multi-ethnic Taiwanese democratic identity. These statements illustrate the transnational nature of Taiwan's Presbyterians and their determination to confront the KMT's monopoly of political power. Another facet of Christianity in Taiwan is the fast growth of congregations amongst

the aboriginal Taiwanese populations. Olivier Lardinois draws on decades of pastoral experience and field research to explore the multifaceted meaning of the pig sacrifice ritual among Tayal Christians. Lardinois argues that Tayal Christians defend their ancestral culture with references to the Bible, which strengthens group solidarity, and builds sustainable agriculture in the aboriginal highlands.

The last article looks at Hong Kong Christians' participation in the 2019 anti-extradition protests because of a deep sense of identification with their native city. Akin to Taiwan's Presbyterians of the 1970s and 1980s, Christians in Hong Kong spearheaded protests from the colonial era into the present. This included publicly criticizing the postcolonial government's hasty decision to introduce a cross-border extradition bill in 2019. The ensuing protests against police violence and in favour of democratic governance are the topic of Matthew Tsz-Him Lai's article. With the suspicious death of Christian student Chow Tsz-lok as his focus, Lai argues that local Christians and non-Christians gave a new meaning to the ritual of grieving during the peak of the 2019 anti-extradition protests. Drawing on Judith Butler's conceptualization of grief and public mourning, the author analyses how victims of police action were embraced by certain church leaders not only as a spiritual expression of sorrow and divine despair, but also a clearly political act. The parallels between this experience and the confrontation with the Maoist state witnessed by T.C. Chao, as well as political life in Taiwan under KMT rule, seem obvious.

Two important lessons can be discerned from these articles. Firstly, theologians in both mainland China and Taiwan circulated their theological and political writings beyond their initial audiences, an action regarded by the state as potentially subversive. In criticizing current politics, these writers and clergy became actively engaged with the public inside and outside their churches. By re-conceptualizing Christianity as a potential source of legitimacy and of moral dignity, our contributors explain how T.C. Chao, overseas Taiwanese Presbyterians, Taiwan's aboriginals, as well as Hong Kong and Chinese Christians contributed to a public consensus on political governance and of civil society.

The second lesson is methodological in nature, namely that biographical sources, theological discourse, and oral history can be combined to research divergent meanings of Christian activism. Apart from highlighting the pivotal role that local Christians have played in their civic engagement in the Sinophone world, this special issue creates a dialogue between experts on Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. Faith-based activism thus expressed itself in the Presbyterian critique of authoritarianism in Taiwan, the Tayal

Christians' appropriation of a communal ritual, the public mourning of Hong Kong protesters, and the evolution of Chinese theologies. Such activism can express itself against direct state repression but can also make itself felt in peaceful civic dialogue. If this message shines through all five contributions, then the purpose of this special issue has been achieved.