

Christianity In The Eye Of Traditional Chinese

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Published in Global Missiology, Contextualization, Oct. 2003, www.globalmissiology.net

Abstract

Christianity should not be transplanted to China in a Western pot; it should be transplanted and rooted in Chinese soil. Second in a series, this article examines Christianity in China and the Western influence. Five aspects of westernized Christianity among the Chinese prior to 1949 are identified. The change in the ways and means that Christianity is to be preached in a culturally sensitive and contemporarily relevant manner to the Chinese is imperative.

First published in *Chinese Around the World*, July 1999 (A Ministry of Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism) and posted at <http://www.missiology.org>.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the last article entitled "Sailing in the Western Wind" (refer to March issue of CATW), we briefly examined the history of CHRISTIANITY TO CHINA and Western influence on CHINESE CULTURE. This time, we shall take a look at CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA and Western influence on CHINESE CHRISTIANITY. We have, in the first part of this six-part series, given an account of the historical facts from seven dimensions to show how extensively and how comprehensively Westernization is on contemporary Chinese culture. In this article, we shall identify and summarize five aspects of westernized Christianity among the Chinese prior to 1949.

First of all, several key terms are to be clarified at the outset. "**Westernization**" denotes and describes "the process/product of the influence/impact of Western culture on the Chinese"; whereas "**Christianity**" means "the belief of individual followers and the institutionalized communities/organizations of the faithful who venerate Jesus Christ as their Lord, the Bible as the Truth, the Church as the earthly agent of God, and the Kingdom of God as the ultimate end of human destiny". The term "**Christianity**" adopted here refers to inclusively the Nestorians, the Catholics and the Protestants of the period from T'ang to Ch'ing dynasties.

The term "**traditional Chinese**" here is refer to "non-Christian Chinese with strong Chinese cultural orientation and ethnic pride". This article is written from the perspective of a "traditional Chinese" (or "emic study" as employed by social scientists referring to "an insider's perspective"). Evangelical Chinese Christian readers might find this form of presentation too negative or too offensive. If that should be the case, it is somewhat inevitable yet regrettable. Hopefully, the serious evaluations and honest reflections attempted in this article could provoke concerned Chinese Christians to critically re-examine the history of Christianity in China and re-

orient their faith and the practice of faith in a scripturally sound and culturally relevant manner in the Chinese context.

II. CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA: THE SIGNS OF WESTERNIZATION

A. Importation and Impression: Transported By Gun-boat And Expanded Under Unequal Treaties

The importation of Christianity by Nestorian missionaries occurred during the T'ang Dynasty. After about 200 years, it had declined in China proper, except among the royal families of the Mongolians of the Yuen Dynasty. The Catholic version of Christianity was brought into China by the Franciscan missionaries during the Yuen Dynasty but was in conflict and competition with the Nestorian within China, which led to the demise of both.

While the imperial government in China declined in power and was devastated by corruption in the middle of the nineteenth century, European countries, on the other hand, were experiencing Industrial Revolution, and hence were more advanced in science, technology, commerce and navigation. It was also the time when they intensified in colonial expansion and missionary efforts. At the time of increased international interaction, the self-imposed isolation of China from foreign countries became ineffective and even impossible.

By then, foreign imports poured into China's many seaports, with opium being the most profitable and lucrative commodity in the 1830's. Beginning with the Anglo-Sino "Opium War" in 1839, China was repeatedly defeated by European powers, followed by those of Japanese's and Russians'. The opening of the five seaports (imposed on China in the Treaty of Nanking of August 1842 by the British) seduced other Western powers (e.g. the U.S. & France in 1844, Belgium in 1845, Sweden and Norway in 1847, etc.) to impose similar conditions onto China in their unequal treaties. Along with the establishment of extraterritoriality and commercial privileges, Western powers forcefully demanded the freedom for the propagation of the Christian religion on the land of China and the liberty to proselytize the Chinese. For decades, until WW II, Western encroachment on China's territory coincided with Christian missionary expansion in China. **The importation and the increase of missionary resources coincided with gun-boat policy and colonial expansion of the Western powers.** The association of Western military aggression and the missionaries' imposition with the Chinese national/ethnic humiliation was for decades repeatedly reinforced until WWII.

B. Form and Format: Garbed & Groomed in Western Manner

In approximately early 600 A.D, early Nestorian missionaries focused their efforts on the royal family of the T'ang Dynasty. In their vocabulary and literature, there was an extensive borrowing of concepts from Buddhism and Taoism. It was short-lived in the Sung Dynasty yet later survived with success among the Mongolians in Yuen Dynasty.

Many Catholic missionaries who entered China from Macau [e.g. P. Valignani (范禮安) in 1578, Michel Ruggieri (羅明堅) in 1579, Matteo Ricci (利瑪竇) in 1581] impressed the imperial rulers with their Western learnings (in mathematics, geography, etc.) and earned the royal favor accordingly. These missionaries of old school also humbly learned the Chinese

customs and traditions from their Chinese masters. They studied Chinese classics, strove to show their admiration and appreciation of Chinese cultural heritage and successfully adjusted themselves to Chinese custom. Their genuine humility and cultural sensitivity earned them respect and trust of Chinese rulers and scholars. Outstanding Chinese Christian leaders such as Hsu Kuang Ch'i (徐光啟), Li Zi Zao (李之藻), Yang Ting Yun (楊廷筠) etc. were both faithful converts of Christianity and reputable Chinese scholars.

However, the cases listed above were exceptions rather than the norm. **Many foreign missionaries and Chinese converts took advantage of the trend of Westernization and exploited the circumstances of Western domination in China for the sake of Christian proselytization and missionary expansion without cultural sensitivity and missiological contextualization.** The administrative form (e.g. management), organizational pattern (e.g. denominationalism, mission style), leadership development (e.g. co-education), architectural structure (e.g. Gothic design), worship style (e.g. extensive use of classical music, organ, piano, Western religious artifacts, etc.), curricular design (e.g. Catholic convent style or Protestant Bible school format), etc., were all but Chinese. The type of Christianity promoted by Western missionaries and practiced by Chinese converts, with all its trapping and wrapping, was unpretentiously Western.

In the case of Westernization in terms of publication of the Holy Bible, there are over a dozen versions of Chinese translations of the Bible but the Union Version (和合本) of 1911 has been the most popular and widely used one. The success of this version is not without its historical elements. Riding on the trend of the May Fourth era and as the result of 27 years of the labor of many missionaries/translators with the help of Chinese assistants, it is decidedly non-conformative to traditional Chinese form and format: translated in the style of the vernacular Chinese (白話文) instead of the archaic literary Chinese (文言文), using the style of Western grammar (i.e. with voice, tense, case, gender... of Greek, Latin, German, English...), in the format of Western punctuation system and binding, printed horizontally (not the traditional way of vertical arrangement of words) and from left to right (not the tradition way of right to left), etc.

C. Methodology: Served on Western Plate

The strategy of early missionaries (especially the Nestorian and Catholic) was to befriend the royalty and impress them with Western science and technology (e.g. calendar and geography, medicine and astronomy, etc.). Later the Protestant missionaries joined in, offering to the Chinese government and general populace their social, medical, educational, etc. services. They indeed made tremendous contributions to the social improvement, socio-cultural development, etc. of modern China. Yet at the same time, they, along with many Chinese Christians, became a catalyst in the Westernization of China. **Subsequently, Chinese people perceived Christianity to be a Western religion, in contra-distinction to the indigenous Confucianism, Taoism, "sinocized Buddhism", folk religion, etc.**

The outlook of Christianity represented by Western missionaries in China and practiced by new Chinese converts had all the appearance of a Western religion: the methodology of evangelism, the design of church building, the seating arrangement at worship services, the hymn book and

the musical instruments used, the format of worship program, etc., all these objective phenomena confirmed the historical fact of Christianity being imported by Western missionaries from European countries, in addition to the subjective perception. Therefore **it is not a simple matter for a traditional Chinese to become a Christian and whoever does would be considered a "cultural traitor"**, henceforth the saying, "one more Christian conversion; one Chinese less in population". (多一個基督徒便少一個中國人)

D. Operation: Seasoned with Western Flavor

One of the characteristics of the history of Christianity in the West is the on-going debate, division, and damaging internal conflicts between factions due to theological, ecclesiastical or practical differences. From the centuries-long christological controversies (thus the calling of ecumenical councils and formulation of creeds), to the division of the Eastern and Western churches on the issues of "filioque" and the use of icon, to the fight between the Catholic and the Protestant on doctrine (e.g. "salvation by faith alone, by grace alone...") and ecclesiology (e.g. the authority of the pope or the priesthood of the believer) in the Medieval period, high-church vs. low-church, Calvinist vs Arminian, liberal vs. fundamentalist, charismatic vs. the non-charismatic, evangelical vs. non-evangelical, World Council of Churches vs. World Evangelical Fellowship, etc. Divisions in western churches are obvious.

Western missionaries who brought Christianity to China also took with them the practice of internal conflicts among factions of Christian groups. As early as 1631, Dominican missionaries, joined by the Franciscan, petitioned Pope Urban VIII to investigate the Jesuit missionaries' lenient stance on Chinese custom by permitting Chinese converts to continue the traditional practice of ancestor-worship (祭祖), worship of Confucious and "t'ien" (祀孔及天) (i.e. burning incense, kneeling to and venerating of the above). The diverse opinions, different doctrinal convictions, divergent policies, later deteriorated from theological debates to power struggle, thus turning China from a mission field into a battle ground. Added to these matters were issues such as the proper interpretation of the Chinese characters and concepts of "t'ien" (天), "shen" (神), "shang-di" (上帝), "t'ien zhu" (天主) (All these characters mean Heavenly God), the translation of the Bible (between the Protestant and the Catholic), etc., eventually led to the confrontation between the papal authority of Rome and the imperial throne in China in the well-known and well-documented "rites controversy" (禮儀之爭). Subsequently, for an extended period in the 18th and 19th centuries, Catholicism was forbidden by the imperial government, suppressed by local government and resisted by common folks. Often times anti-Christian violence (反教) and anti-foreign riots (仇洋) broke out, e.g. the Nanking Missionary case (南京教案) in 1616, the Tientsin Missionary case (天津教案) in 1870, Tien-psin Massacre (庚子教難) in 1893, and the Anti-Christian Student Federation (非基督教同盟) in 1922, etc.

E. Meaning: Transplanted in Western Pot

There were nine articles on "contextual/indigenous church" (本色教會) in the "Church Declaration" (教會的宣言) that was drafted at the "National Christian Council of China" meeting (中國基督教全國大會), held in May 1922 in Shanghai attended by 1,180

representatives including both Chinese and foreign missionaries. The main thrust was negatively calling for the correction of the fact that Christianity was too Westernized and positively calling for culturally contextualized Christianity. **In other words, both Chinese delegates and Western missionary representatives agreed that Christianity should not be transplanted to China in a Western pot; it should be transplanted and rooted in Chinese soil.** (This issue will be discussed in the next article, i.e. the article in the coming Sep issue of CATW.)

III. CHRISTIANITY IN THE EYE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE

In the mind of traditional Chinese, Christianity is what imported and imposed from the West. This perception is strongly ingrained in the Chinese mind and the resentment is deeply harbored in the heart of patriotic Chinese. First the introduction and later the increasing missionary activities in China^掣 were all a form of Western aggression, like the practice of extraterritoriality of European countries in Chinese land and the injury to Chinese sovereignty of the imperial governments.

IV. RESENTMENT AND RESISTANCE BY TRADITIONAL CHINESE

Non-Christian traditional Chinese usually resent anything Western, including Christianity, which is totally Western in style. Some of the reasons are: the perception that Christianity is Western in origin, the importation by Christianity as part and partial of European aggression, a sense of national humiliation of the imperial government of the Ch'ing Dynasty in the forceful hand of Western military domination, resentment against Western encroachment on China^掣 territory, ethnocentrism against foreigners and foreign religion, etc. Having such an orientation and harboring a sense of resentment, traditional Chinese people are very resistant against Christianity, especially that of Western orientation and style, form and format.

V. CONCLUSION

To a non-Christian with strong traditional Chinese cultural orientation of pre-1949 China, Christianity appeared to be like a young local-born Chinese in the U.S. who though ethnically a full-blood Chinese but was garbed and groomed in the U.S. as an American. He dresses and talks exactly like an Anglo-Saxon American. Expecting a traditional Chinese (with ethnic pride, "cultural superiority complex", anti-Western sentiment) to embrace a Western-style Christianity is like requiring him to eat rice and noodles with fork and knife, seasoned with butter and cheese, served on a Royal Albert plate with French cognac. Presenting a form of Christianity without contextualizing it to Chinese culture is as unappealing to a traditional Chinese as giving him a bamboo plant that has been transported by a Yankee from China, transplanting it in a Revere pot with New England soil, Scott fertilizer, and Charles River water, decorated with Christmas lighting and fixture.

On realizing that the Western powers have been creating a stumbling block to traditional Chinese, due to their ignorance of the reality of a Western version of Christianity promoted by Western missionaries in China and practiced by Chinese Christians, there is no excuse for us to repeat their mistakes and bring cultural insensitivity to the Chinese and to be a stumbling block to others (1 Co 8:9-12).

To put spiritual aversion aside, it is high time for Chinese Christians to come to the realization on how extensive and how comprehensive his version of Christianity being Western is and thus offensive and repugnant to traditional Chinese culturally. It is as unreasonable as the Jewish Christians of the Jerusalem church (Act15) who imposed their Jewish cultural tradition on the new gentile converts, making cultural assimilation a prerequisite to spiritual conversion and maturation. It is the responsibility of Chinese Christian leaders and educators to contextualize Christianity in the presentation and promotion of a biblically based but culturally relevant form of Christianity.

The change in the ways and means that Christianity is to be preached in a culturally sensitive and contemporarily relevant manner to the Chinese in evangelism, discipleship, church planting, etc. is imperative. The challenge to Chinese Christian researchers and scholars is to employ evangelistic methodology, develop church polity, explore worship style, cultivate musical and literary expression, formulate contextual theology, etc. that are biblically valid and culturally relevant. These issues of contextualization will be discussed and developed in the next article (i.e. in the Nov. issue of CATW).

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(This article appeared in *Chinese Around the World*, July, 1999.)

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