



The “Cultural Christians” Phenomenon in China: A Hong Kong Discussion

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A CONTROVERSY OVER THE “CULTURAL CHRISTIANS” PHENOMENON IN CHINA arose in a series of articles in the Hong Kong weekly newspaper *Christian Times* during the fall of 1995 and the spring of 1996. The participants included four Hong Kong theological educators, three Chinese scholars speaking on behalf of the “cultural Christians” in China, and one theological worker from Taiwan. As a participant in that exchange I will attempt here to recapture its salient points.

I. THE CONTROVERSY ERUPTS

The controversy was started by Law Bing-Cheung (Lo Bingxiang in Mandarin *pin yin*), chairman of the department of religion and philosophy at the Hong Kong Baptist University in a two-part article entitled “The Chinese Apollos and the 1997 Crisis of the Hong Kong Theological World.”

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The discussion of Chinese “cultural Christianity” has sometimes pitted the academically oriented religious scholars of China against the churchly oriented theologians of Hong Kong. It is time now for a dialogue between faith and culture that will enable the inculturation of Christianity on Chinese soil.

The article began by referring to the present “religious fervor” in China as a “Macedonian call.” Religious fervor is found among the Chinese masses as well as in the study by intellectuals of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Law was impressed by this outburst of energy, especially in academic circles. He called it a Macedonian call to the Hong Kong theological world.

Law used the expression “the Chinese Apollos” to represent those Chinese intellectuals who have developed keen interest in Christian thought, borrowing the reference in Acts 18:24-28 to Apollos, a learned Jew from Alexandria who became an eloquent preacher on behalf of Jesus as the Messiah, but apparently with imperfect understanding. Liu Xiaofeng is a prototype “Chinese Apollos.” He studied foreign languages in Sichuan University and philosophy in Beijing University after the Cultural Revolution. An avid reader of European and Russian literature and philosophy, he was drawn to Christianity through Dostoyevsky and Christian existentialist writers. He later went to Basel to study theology and was awarded a doctor of theology degree. Though he was baptized somewhere along the way, he has had little connection with the institutional church anywhere. A prolific writer, Liu now does his research and editing under the sponsorship of the Tao Fong Shan Christian Institute in Hong Kong.

In his article, Law Bing-Cheung introduced other Chinese Apolloses, like He Guenghu, Zho Xinping, and Tang Yi, all of the Institute on World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and Zhao Duenhua, of Beijing University. All of them have written articles or translated books on Christian philosophy, but none is a baptized Christian.

What is the Macedonian call issued by these Chinese Apolloses or cultural Christians? According to Law Bing-Cheung, it is a call to the Christian theologians in a place like Hong Kong to rise up in response to the challenge of the religious-intellectual ferment in China.

Unfortunately, however, Hong Kong theological circles will find themselves in a crisis, come 1997, the year Hong Kong will revert back to China. Law sees four reasons for the crisis:

First, Hong Kong theological workers will lose their influence as theologians, because they will be no match for the academic output and erudition of the Chinese Apolloses. Those Chinese who are caught in the religious fervor will turn to the Chinese Apolloses rather than the Hong Kong theologians.

Second, the position of the Hong Kong theological educators is precarious. While Hong Kong is not without Christian believers who are in intellectual quest, they are not apt to find nourishment from the Hong Kong theological institutions and Christian publishing houses; instead they will turn to the publications of the Chinese cultural Christians, even though the latter’s understanding of Christianity has certain deficiencies.

Third, forced to the sidelines, the Hong Kong theologians will forfeit their golden opportunity to introduce Christian thought to the Chinese intelligentsia who are open to the spiritual quest; that opportunity will be taken over by Chinese

cultural Christians. Thus the Hong Kong theologians will lose their leadership role in the Chinese theological world.

Fourth, the Hong Kong theological community is ill-equipped to heed the Macedonian call from the intelligentsia in China: the theological output from Hong Kong is feeble; most theological workers lack a broad cultural outlook and are unprepared for dialogue with culture; and most Hong Kong theologians are not fluent enough in Mandarin to converse with the Chinese intellectuals.

What can be done to meet the crisis? Law appealed to his Hong Kong colleagues in theological work to expand their intellectual horizon beyond the institutional church, to broaden their cultural outlook, and to increase the depth of their writings.

II. HONG KONG THEOLOGIANS RESPOND

The first Hong Kong theological worker to respond to the challenge posed by Law Bing-Cheung was Leung Gar-Lun (Liang Jialun), a lecturer at the seminary of the Missionary Alliance. He also wrote a two-part article entitled "Is It a Debt We Owe?"

Leung welcomed the phenomenon of religious interest within the ranks of the Chinese intelligentsia and commended the rise of the cultural Christians. Yet, he was more guarded in his estimate of the intensity of the so-called religious fervor and the numerical strength of scholars and writers on religion. Further, he pointed out that these intellectuals are rarely steeped in the historical development of Christian thought and are likely to be attracted to certain isolated theologians or bits and pieces of theological learning.

Leung did not think that the appearance of cultural Christians is an uncommon phenomenon in history. The rise of the Chinese Apolloses should not pose a threat to the more thoughtful Christians in China or Hong Kong. But he reiterated that some of the Chinese intellectuals who are interested in the study of Christian thought approach the subject totally out of context, so that they cannot really make an impact on Chinese culture. Leung Gar-Lun took note of Law Bing-Cheung's appeal to the Hong Kong theological workers to broaden their cultural base and to open themselves up, but he felt that the Hong Kong theological educators have enough on their hands in preparing people for service in their church. To ask them to assume the added responsibility of evangelizing the one billion Chinese on the mainland is unrealistic. Besides, why should that be a debt owed by the Hong Kong theological educators?

Next, Kaung Tai-Wai (Jiang Dawei) of the theology division of Chung Chi College, the Chinese University, made a brief response. He was highly appreciative of the contributions of Liu Xiaofeng and other Chinese cultural Christians through their research and translation work, but he could not see how they would pose a threat to Hong Kong churches and seminaries. Most church leaders have no interest in what these intellectuals are saying, and the Hong Kong theologians, assuming they have something to say, cannot presume to address theological issues for all of China.

Then I myself submitted a piece (also in two parts) entitled “The Self-reflection of the Hong Kong Theological Workers and the Appearance of the Chinese Apollos” (under my Cantonese-spelled name, Lee King-Hung, or Li Jingxiung in Mandarin *pin yin*).

I began by rejoicing in the emergence of the Chinese Apollos. Cultural Christians have made a great contribution by translating into Chinese writings from abroad and by recording some thoughtful reflections, though I thought that western China watchers tend to overdo their excessive enthusiasm. I was not as worried as Law Bing-Cheung about what he saw as the crisis facing the Hong Kong theological world. I shared Leung Gar-Lun’s concern not to add an extra burden to the Hong Kong co-workers beyond what they could carry. Yet I felt that they should look beyond the cloistered walls of the seminary. In recent years more and more well-trained theologians are returning to Hong Kong, so that Hong Kong now has no small gathering of Christian intellectuals. I concurred with Kaung Tai-Wai’s point that the Hong Kong theologians cannot really speak for all of China.

The second part of my paper turned to encouraging my Hong Kong theological colleagues to reorient their thinking and tasks, thanks to Law Bing-Cheung’s warning of an imminent crisis. I preferred to see such a crisis as an opportunity for creative response at a critical moment. I would not play down the theological seminaries’ responsibility to equip people for ministry and to prepare them for evangelistic outreach. Evangelism, however, need not be confined to preaching the gospel to individuals in order to save their souls or to mass evangelism in the American style. It is essentially proclaiming the good news to those who have not heard it before—and the potential audience includes the intelligentsia, a group who are Dr. Law’s primary concern. I, too, share this concern, except that I am more modest in my expectations of the Hong Kong theological co-workers than he. Not only are their responsibilities for the Hong Kong churches heavy, but their primary calling is to do theology in and for the Hong Kong context. (Theology must always be contextual.) Granted, it is increasingly a Hong Kong-China context; but, nevertheless, they should begin where they are—in Hong Kong—and only then expand the horizon toward greater China. If they provide an authentic contextual theology, it will speak the word of God in the given context; even then, however, Hong Kong theologians should be humble and modest.

I really meant to offer a word of encouragement to my Hong Kong comrades. I know their impediments—e.g., sectarianism, parochialism, and institutionalism—but I wanted to see them break out of their confinements, and I believed they could, collaborating and upholding one another more than before. Supporting Law Bing-Cheung’s interest in dialogue with culture and in interdisciplinary endeavors, I said that his university, the Hong Kong Baptist University, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong have within their respective structures ample opportunity for faith-culture dialogue and cross-disciplinary studies. Moreover, the religion or theology departments of those universities can act as links between secular learning and the church or seminary. I concluded by saying that, if the Hong Kong theologians have an authentic word of God, they have every right to

be theological spokespersons; even if there are few star soloists, they can sing as a chorus. Then, perhaps, a few of the cultural Christians or intellectuals from mainland China will listen.

III. CHINESE SCHOLARS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Li Ciuling, associate professor of philosophy at the Chinese People's University, Beijing, who happened to be visiting Hong Kong at the time, read the discussions by the Hong Kong theological workers. Before returning to Beijing, he offered his comments, printed in a four-part article entitled "So-called 'Religious Culture-Fervor' and 'Christian Culture-Fervor.'"

In the first part, Li admitted that in recent years there has indeed been considerable interest shown by Chinese intellectuals in the study of religious phenomena in general and in the understanding of Christian thought in particular. He said that that is a healthy phenomenon, following the collapse of the Marxist dogma that condemns religion as an opiate of the people. Among the intelligentsia are those who have begun to realize that religion need not be an opiate but can be nourishment for the human soul. Li would not go so far as to say that China now witnesses a religious revival. For a good many of the intellectuals, the quest is for knowledge rather than for religious faith.

In the second part of his article, Li delineated three types of scholars who might be called cultural Christians. The first type includes those who pursue objective research on religions, including Christianity, with no religious commitments. They form the largest group, and their research covers a wide range of topics in historical, cultural, and social phenomena. The second type consists of those who, while approaching the study of religions with objectivity, show varying degrees of sympathy with Christianity without necessarily calling themselves Christians (Li includes himself here). They form a smaller group than the first. The third type of scholars confess their Christian faith. A few of these scholars have come to faith as they have pursued their studies, while others had already received a theological education and then decided to follow an academic career. The third group (of which Liu Xiaofeng is an eminent representative) is even smaller than the second. Li Ciuling questioned the suitability of the expression "cultural Christians" for all three types of religious scholars; he also feared that the term "Chinese Apollos" had connotations that are too ambiguous.

The third part of the Li paper goes into a technical discussion of the issues involved in the academic study of religion. Li argued that religion is a valid object of scholarly study and that the scholar has no accountability to religious authority for his or her research as long as that research is conducted in accordance with the canons of scientific study. He raised the subject of belief, that is, the believer as subject, and then quickly shifted to the Hong Kong scene where he saw the tendency on the part of some Christian believers to confine themselves to a narrow framework. He allowed for the possibility of inter-subjective communication, and he made room for the believer to critique scholarly research. However, he was wary of a self-styled orthodoxy which shuts off communication or dialogue.

In the last part of the paper Li commended the work of indigenization, contextualization, and inculturation that is being advocated or attempted in some circles. He seems to have suggested that in the process the persons involved in theological study or reflection can carry on meaningful dialogue. He concluded with a reference to Liu Xiaofeng's work as the editor of *Tao Feng* (published in Hong Kong), which is devoted to the development of "Han [Chinese] language theology" as an instance of the contextualization process. Li's paper echoes my own concern for dialogue and interaction.

Another Chinese scholar, Zhang Xianyong, chimed in next. Having taught theology at the Nanjing Theological Seminary, Zhang is presently pursuing a doctor of theology degree at Basel University (without the endorsement of the leaders of the church in China).

Zhang's paper, entitled "Response to the Chinese Apollos Problem," looks at the issue in terms of three circles. A circle, in Zhang's use of the image, has an inner and an outer ring.

The first circle is the "sacred-secular double ring." Just as in the Acts account of Apollos, the apostles, including Paul, belonged to the inner, sacred ring and took Apollos to be in the outer and less sacred ring, so the institutional churches in China and Hong Kong tend to look upon the Chinese Apolloses as belonging to the periphery and as being less spiritual.

The second circle reveals the "Hong Kong-China divide syndrome." In Zhang's reading of the Hong Kong theological world, there are those who consider the Hong Kong churches to be the inner circle (Law Bing-Cheung and Leung Gar-Lun) and the Chinese intellectuals (Christian or otherwise) on the outside periphery (although Law and Leung differ in their strategic response to the "outsiders"). Zhang didn't see the same Hong Kong-China divide in Kaung Tai-Wai and myself (Lee King-Hung), who to him seemed to maintain an "ecological balance" or call for inculturation as a step toward dialogue between Hong Kong and China.

The third circle suggests the "Han-barbarian tension." Zhang thought that some of the Hong Kong inner-circle people still consider Liu Xiaofeng and the other Apolloses to be on the fringe because the latter's contributions lie mainly in the translation of foreign works. Zhang found that to be a misjudgment of Liu Xiaofeng, who, he maintained, has the commitment to write, and to encourage others to write, Christian theology in the Han (Chinese) language for Chinese people. If that puts Liu on the periphery, so be it, because being in such a boundary situation facilitates dialogue between the Chinese Christians ("Han") and the Christians abroad ("barbarians").

IV. A SHARP HONG KONG/CHINA TIT-FOR-TAT

Leung Gar-Lun, who had been the first Hong Kong theological educator to respond, in a tempered tone, to Law Bing-Cheung's article on the Chinese Apollos, now became more outspoken in his retort to Zhang Xianyong. Zhang's piece was clever but ambiguous at points, and Leung was impatient. In an outburst, Leung

reacted sharply to a remark made by someone from China that Liu Xiaofeng's move to Hong Kong was like entering a no-man's land; Leung said that he could provide a long list of able theologians in Hong Kong. Leung reiterated the importance of the Christian tradition for theological teachers and students as well as church people. Further, he defended the special mission and concerns of the theological schools, which are different from research institutes that carry on research in a vacuum. He reacted against those intellectuals who look down on the scholarly level of theological professors and students, accusing them of "intellectual hegemony" and being out of touch with the masses. Leung was not against inter-disciplinary studies, but said that, given the tightly constructed curriculum in a theological seminary, they are easier said than done. The high-flying intellectuals may take delight in hovering from discipline to discipline but, if they are Christians, they should have roots in the Christian tradition.

Leung's article provoked a four-part response under the general title "Whose Christ? Which Tradition?" from someone with the pseudonym Po Fan, who is apparently from China. From the subtitles it can be inferred that the article sets up straw arguments to be knocked down: "Pride and Prejudice," "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy," and "Which Tradition?" The whole piece is long and wordy but does not speak to the real issues and falls prey to *ad hominem* arguments. It would have been a sorry ending to a spirited exchange of views, but for a thoughtful message from Taiwan.

V. AN ANALYTICAL RESUMÉ FROM TAIWAN

Cheng Ch'ing-P'ao (Zheng Cingpao), a theological worker from Taiwan (a Ph.D. candidate in an American university?), sent a piece entitled "Conflicts in the Hermeneutics of the Chinese Theologians' Linguistic Turns."

At the outset the author noted linguistic ambiguities in the expressions "Chinese Apollos," "Cultural Christians," and "Han [Chinese] language theology." All these terms are associated with Liu Xiaofeng, actually the central figure in the whole controversy, who, curiously enough, never spoke a word in person in the exchanges. Cheng, in the style of Wittgenstein, analyzed three conflicts in linguistic usage by the Chinese theologians (Hong Kong and China):

1. Hong Kong language vs. Beijing language. From the start, Law Bing-Chung called attention to the Hong Kong theologians' ineptness with the Beijing language (Mandarin). Behind that fear was the perceived superiority of the Mandarin-speaking intellectuals. Others from Hong Kong, however, have a different view of one's right to speak as a theologian, whether fluent in Mandarin or not. The Beijing scholars' language is indeed of a different style, as may be seen in Po Fan's analysis of the Hong Kong theological world.

2. Churchly language vs. scholarly language. Those who are immersed in the institutional church speak a language totally different from that of the scholars. The former can hardly tolerate the latter, and vice-versa.

3. English-American language vs. continental language. Whereas the Hong Kong theological educators have mostly received their higher degrees from uni-

versities in America and the United Kingdom, some of the Chinese scholars have been absorbed in the works of continental European and Russian writers. I might note, in parenthesis, that the European and Russian writings are less familiar than the English-language writings and, for that reason, the interpreters of the former seem to have a certain mystique.

Cheng Ch'ing-P'ao contended that the various languages cannot remain static and must undergo changes or "make turns," but when Chinese theological writers, whether in Hong Kong or China, cannot adapt themselves to the changes, they get into difficulty.

Cheng then devoted the second half of his presentation to the conflict between church-oriented theology and humanities-oriented theology. He used the label "radical hermeneutics" to characterize Liu Xiaofeng's theological stance. From Cheng's characterization, Liu's radical hermeneutics falls under the influence of Karl Barth's insistence on the absoluteness of the word of God as the "primal origin" of the life of faith. Does this mean that Liu can rise above tradition and context? Cheng was not clear. Yet Liu claims to aspire to promote Han (Chinese) language theology. Can Liu square the Barthian "wholly-otherness" of God with his interest in culture? In his brief comments, Cheng did not take up the question. Cheng did suggest that Liu does not extract himself from culture but takes an open attitude toward it. In contrast, Leung Gar-lun is seen by Cheng Ch'ing P'ao to be a representative of a church-oriented and tradition-bound theology. Actually Leung, too, pleads for going back to the original source of the Christian faith, but, nevertheless, if Cheng Ch'ing-P'ao's reading is correct, Leung frequently finds himself falling back to an apologist's position. In my opinion, such a characterization of Leung Gar-Lun is at best a half-truth. From my acquaintance with him as a church historian and theological educator, he is keenly interested in examining the interaction of the Christian faith and Chinese culture, and he is not indisposed to interreligious dialogue and bold theological explorations. At any rate, Leung is definitely much more church-bound than Liu.

Whether or not Liu Xiaofeng and Leung Gar-Lun are the prototypes of humanities-oriented theology and church-oriented theology, respectively, these two theological orientations do exist in Hong Kong. I do not think that they need to be mutually exclusive; rather, they should be brought into complementary interaction.

Cheng Ch'ing-P'ao complimented me for being the most clear-headed of the Hong Kong theological spokesmen. I wish to thank him for that. Returning the compliment, I find his article seminal at two points: (1) his Wittgensteinian linguistic analysis helps to clear up a picture that was getting murky, and (2) his invocation of Barthian thought opens up the question of a viable theology of inculturation (the question of "the freedom of culture for the praise of God").*

*Robert J. Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture: the Freedom of Culture for the Praise of God* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1983).

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Looking back, in my initial response to the controversy, I probably painted too rosy a picture of the Hong Kong theological scene. On the one hand, I may have underestimated the entrenchment of the church-oriented mentality in Hong Kong (and China); on the other hand, I may have overestimated the capacity of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Baptist University to blaze trails for a faith/humanities dialogue (even as some of the western China watchers may have overstated the vibrancy of the religious-cultural ferment there). Law Bing-Cheung's warning on the crisis facing the Hong Kong theological community should not be lightly dismissed. Nevertheless, I repeat, I would like to view 1997 as a *kairos* for greater things to come. I still believe that there is enough talent in the Hong Kong theological community, as well as in the secular academia, to act as a catalyst for a faith/culture dialogue and for the inculturation of Christianity on Chinese soil. At the same time I am of the opinion that in the post-1997 era Hong Kong can serve as a viable venue for church-oriented and humanities-oriented theological interactions rather than becoming a cul-de-sac (as Law Bing-Cheung feared). That makes me an incurable optimist, a compliment or accusation that I have heard before. Ironically, Liu Xiaofeng is now located in Hong Kong, and I have heard both him and He Guanghu (another cultural Christian) say that Hong Kong is a place conducive to theological and cultural dialogue because of its concentration of talented minds and its freedom of thought. After 1997 Hong Kong will be "Hong Kong, China." If tiny Hong Kong is really a good place for dialogue, then let the Hong Kong theological and academic communities open their doors more widely to welcome scholars and cultural Christians from the mainland—and Taiwan, too!—to come to exchange views, so all may challenge one another and learn from one another and enrich one another's faith and understanding. ⊕