



# Theology in the Contemporary Chinese Context

BAOPING KAN

*Nanjing Union Theological Seminary  
Nanjing, China*

PROTESTANT THEOLOGY IN CHINA HAS GENERALLY FOLLOWED THE THEOLOGY brought by western missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> As a result, it has not always quite fit the Chinese context. However, the light of God has shone into China also, and Chinese Christians have made an effort to express the Christian faith meaningfully to Chinese people in a Chinese way. I will deal with this topic in three chronological sections. During the first period prior to 1949, some Christian scholars attempted to shape a Christian theology appropriate to the Chinese context. In the second period (1950 to 1979)<sup>2</sup> Chinese Christians experienced social upheaval, and their theology was closely related to that situation. The third period, the most exciting and challenging era

<sup>1</sup>I refer to the old or western theology that emphasized doctrine and salvation without consideration of social issues.

<sup>2</sup>This is the period from the birth of socialist China to the end of the Cultural Revolution.

*BAOPING KAN is a lecturer in systematic theology and historical theology. The contextualization of Christian theology has been his special interest. He is a member of the Chinese Religious Association.*

*Prior to 1949, Chinese Christian theology was simply taken over from western missionary churches. An attempt at contextualization occurred between 1950 and 1979, resulting in Christian-Marxist formulations and the Three-Self movement. The task of developing a genuinely contextual and biblically based theology for the present rapidly growing Chinese church remains.*

of Chinese Christianity, started in 1979;<sup>3</sup> the Chinese church has been growing tremendously, but it struggles with vital issues that could defeat all its gains.

I cannot attempt a definition or description of contemporary Chinese theology in this essay.<sup>4</sup> I will make some points about the characteristics of Christian theology in China during the three periods, especially as that theology reflects the contexts of the period. I will also suggest what remains to be done by Chinese theologians.

#### I. THE EMERGING OF A CHINESE THEOLOGY (PRE-1949)

When the protestant church in China was virtually a western church, some Chinese Christians already realized that the western expression of the faith was not suitable to them. All kinds of theological and spiritual jargon, directly translated from English or other languages, and the broken Chinese spoken of the missionaries became formal church language. The solemn and glorious anthems that echoed in church buildings with steeples pointing to the sky did not sound familiar to Chinese people. Chinese culture had stressed harmony with people and with the world, but many Christian missionaries told the Chinese to hate the world. Could such a religion make any sense to Chinese people? Would Chinese benefit from such a religion? Would it be possible for Chinese Christians to achieve salvation through such a belief? A “Chinese church must have its theology done by Chinese”<sup>5</sup>—T. C. Chao’s claim corresponded to the thought of many Chinese Christian intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

Many Chinese theologians attempted to develop a Chinese theology. The paths they took differed, developing in two directions. The first was characterized by its emphasis on the transcendence of God and the separation of church from society. In the early ‘20s, democratic movements with socialist emphases were evident in many parts of the world. Many Chinese people were involved in the movement to change the old corrupt and vicious society into a new one. But in that context, this form of Christian theology suggested that people should merely stay home and pray. The rationale was that God takes care of everything in his own way and in his own time.

The other path laid great emphasis on the immanence of God and called the church to take an active part in society. That trend was influenced by the thought of Walter Rauschenbusch and his early twentieth-century social gospel movement.

T. C. Chao stressed the importance of the Chinese context for a Chinese

<sup>3</sup>This is the period since the reopening of China and of religion in China.

<sup>4</sup>There is no such thing as a Chinese theology, just as there is no American theology or Canadian theology. A theology must, however, deal with the issues of its day. Theology in South America must deal with liberation; theology in the United States must deal with the racial issue. Theology in China has never quite been able to deal with concrete social issues; it remains “traditional,” that is, it concerns itself primarily with doctrine and salvation.

<sup>5</sup>Tze-chen Chao, *Four Talks on Theology* (Shanghai: Association Press of China, 1948) 1 (Chinese original; my translation).

<sup>6</sup>T. C. Chao, a leading Chinese theologian, graduated from seminary in the United States in 1917.

Christian theology. For him, theology must be done in light of its concrete context.<sup>7</sup> The particular Chinese context had been overlooked by many earlier Chinese Christians. For them, the Christian gospel transcended Chinese culture and any social status. Therefore, culture and the social situation were to be ignored in order to maintain the “pure gospel.” It seemed that the gospel was an abstraction. Christian theology was other-worldly and anti-intellectual and stood over against Chinese society. In response, Chao made an effort to develop a theology that was integrated with Chinese culture and recognized the Chinese context. He claimed his *Christian Philosophy* to be “the first book on religious philosophy by a Chinese Christian.”<sup>8</sup> In the book, Chao argues:

The western missionary realized that we are not on opposite sides of an un-crossable gap. The missionary can cross to our side, and we can cross to his. The love of God that he talked about made sense from his standpoint....The western missionary does not believe that human beings are able to save themselves by trying their best to be good. We [Chinese] believe that human beings are both able and unable to save themselves, while we, too, try our best to be good persons. What he believes we do not reject, but have our own clear and certain knowledge that we cannot abandon. What he claims as certain we are willing to claim as certain, also. Our experience and our ideas of morality, however, shine to us and we have to follow that light. The western preacher who is advanced in age finds it hard to change his theological perspective. We do not blame him for that; rather, we love him. What we find strange is that even many young preachers, who have time to learn and think, would rather become like people of the fourteenth century...rather than people of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

For Chao, the old fundamental theology of the missionaries did not take Chinese culture seriously. The old theology attempted to reshape the Chinese body to fit a western suit. For Chao,

the time has come for people to have a free spirit, a new personality, and to make their choice of belief freely. It is time for the spiritual freedom of Chinese churches. In this time, old history will not be able to confine new life, and old theology has to examine its way of thinking.<sup>10</sup>

The old theology, criticized by Chao and still lingering in China, carries all five characteristics of the so-called TULIP theology of the Calvinist Synod of Dort: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints. With this kind of faith, Chinese Christians cannot remain an integral part of their own society. Such theology must be revised.

Y. T. Wu, another leading Christian theologian, found the same sort of difficulties in older theologies. He rightly pointed out that Christianity in China was not playing its proper role and that the situation of Chinese Christians is mournful:

<sup>7</sup>Chao, *Four Talks on Theology*, 2.

<sup>8</sup>T. C. Chao, *Christian Philosophy* (Suzhou: Chinese Christian Literary Press, 1925) 11 (Chinese original; my translation).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 293-294.

While China was undergoing a tremendous change, the like of which had never happened, Christianity in China could not say or do anything other than convey an attitude of self-pity and escapism.<sup>11</sup>

Wu attempted to interpret the American social gospel movement in a Chinese way. For his efforts, he was labeled “without faith” by those who claimed to be “conservative” Christians.

When the political climate changed suddenly, theologians like Wu and Chao found themselves facing a new task.

## II. THE SHAPING OF A CHINESE THEOLOGY (1950-1979)

After the new China was born, western missionaries could no longer play a leading role in the Chinese church. Chinese Christians assumed leadership and made decisions according to local needs. Following the outbreak of the Korean war, missionaries were expelled from China, because their home countries were fighting against the Chinese army that came to the aid of North Korea. The Chinese church became independent. This provided the opportunity for Chinese theologians to develop their own theology.

The task for the Chinese church at that time was to play a prophetic role in society, according to theologians like Wu and Chao. Wu reexamined Christian thought in the social context and concluded:

What can Christianity contribute to the present world? It does not have a concrete program for either social reform or world peace. What it can contribute are some principles, a kind of spirit, an attitude. All of those, however, are too abstract.<sup>12</sup>

For him, Christianity itself cannot save China. It cannot make a concrete contribution to the new China unless it accepts socialist ideas. According to Wu, Christianity and dialectical materialism are not mutually contradictory, but rather mutually enriching.<sup>13</sup> In his view, incarnation reveals the love of God, a love that Christianity must manifest in a new society.<sup>14</sup> He called the church to play an active role in the construction of a socialist new China. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement was part of that effort.<sup>15</sup>

Wing-hung Lam discovered that Chao had had doubts about communism before it finally emerged victorious in China. After experiencing the new society, however, Chao came to the point of saying:

Now, a native theology starts to take its shape. It covers creation theory, historical philosophy, the idea of life, and the atonement theory of Christ. If such a theology

<sup>11</sup>Yao-tsung Wu, *Light and Darkness* (Shanghai: YMCA Press of China, 1949) 183 (Chinese original; my translation).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 319.

<sup>13</sup>Yao-tsung Wu, *No One Has Ever Seen God* (Shanghai: YMCA Press of China, 1948) 95-127 (Chinese original).

<sup>14</sup>Wu, *Light and Darkness*, 56.

<sup>15</sup>“Three-self” stands for self-administration, self-reliance, and self-evangelism. All three pointed to the independence of the Chinese church from the control of foreign missions.

is going to be developed...it must have something to do with Chinese culture and the dynamic immanence of Marxism.<sup>16</sup>

Both Chao and Wu supported the social programs initiated by the people's government. It was a time of dialogue between Christianity and Marxism. It was also a time when Christianity revealed its ability to fulfill its social commitment.

Before a Chinese theology with a new outlook was well shaped, however, the great Cultural Revolution began. Churches, along with schools and universities, were closed, and theologians had to stop their endeavor to contextualize their theology.

### III. THE CHURCH IN STRUGGLE (AFTER 1979)

In 1979, the church in China was reopened. Since then, it has been growing rapidly. Many Christians both within and without China are so excited about the numerical growth that they expect China will soon be Christianized. Is the future of the Chinese church all that bright?

Two theological themes emerged from the experience of the Cultural Revolution. One, based on the New Testament story of the five loaves and two fishes, was sharing among Christians regardless of theological or denominational differences. The other, reunification, laid emphasis on identification by Christians with other Chinese people. It did not take long, however, before the fervor of building new church buildings and making new converts overcame the development of these two themes.

Most Chinese Christians are conservative, understanding themselves as evangelicals. The five elements of TULIP theology are still dominant. Opposition to social involvement, and anti-intellectualism, are held over from the old theology. A theology developed by Chinese within the Chinese context is still a dream. People talk about Wu and Chao, but nothing concrete has been done. Bishop K. H. Ting apparently understands what they were trying to do. He calls Wu a forerunner of a theology done according to the Chinese context, noting that "Yao-tsung Wu is an outstanding Christian figure in China. His characteristic is his attempt to dialogue with his age and go forward with his age."<sup>17</sup>

That observation is correct. Wu's understanding of the role of the Christian church in China is fundamental. The sad thing is that his thought has received so little response in China since the reopening of the church. Without appropriate theological support, the Chinese church will be unable to administer such a rapidly growing movement.

The China Christian Council is not a decision-making body. Its relation to provincial Christian councils is consultative, as is the relation of provincial councils to local councils. Faced with the difficulties and issues arising from rapid

<sup>16</sup>Wing-hung Lam, *The Life and Thought of Chao Tze-chen* (Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 1994) 294 (Chinese original; my translation).

<sup>17</sup>K. H. Ting, "What Shall We Learn from Y. T. Wu Today?" *Collection of Chinese Theological Essays* (Nanjing: Amity Printing Press, 1992) 236 (Chinese original; my translation).

growth, local churches must find their own ways to cope. What kind of church polity will be able to direct the development of the Chinese church?

The present Chinese church is in a post-denominational stage. This is challenged, however, by the revival of denominations and sects supported by some Christian individuals and organizations from abroad. What is the theological basis for safeguarding Chinese Christian unity? A well-shaped ecclesiology is an urgent need.

Church members are flocking into churches and church buildings are mushrooming. At the same time, all kinds of heresies with a more-or-less Christian character<sup>18</sup> attract hundreds of thousands of people, including many Christians.<sup>19</sup> One of the reasons people are attracted to heretical groups is that so often the theology taught in their own churches is antiquated. Local pastors are not able to respond to the issues arising from the present context, and their teaching is not always relevant to the daily life of people. A theology to safeguard Christianity and the Christian gospel must be developed from a serious study of the Bible that takes account of both past and present contexts.

China is undergoing social reform. The rate of economic growth in China is miraculous. Chinese people, on the whole, are content with their standard of living. Because of the freedom now enjoyed, however, crime is seriously disrupting the reform process. Secularism—a result of the rapid economic growth—challenges the church and threatens to ruin society. What can the church offer Chinese society at such a time? Is the church's only function to castigate or condemn the society? What is our theological position on the many social issues confronting modern China? The Christian church in China seems impotent in its response to these concerns.

Christian faith in China is generally seen as personal conviction. It is, therefore, easy for Christians to equate social service with secularism.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the church cannot adequately perform its social function. What is the meaning of a church in society if it has no social function?<sup>21</sup> How shall we understand the church's prophetic role in theological terms? How can we develop an appropriate Chinese Christian social ethic?<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup>These movements are labeled heresies not only because of their teachings that falsely interpret the Bible (sometimes in a purely political way), but also because of their illegal behavior, including swindling and rape, that disturbs the social order.

<sup>19</sup>Many leaders of heresies claim to be Jesus or God. Some Christians have been attracted by these unusual teachings and claims, and have left their churches.

<sup>20</sup>The driving force of secularism is the desire for separation from community for the sake of the sensual satisfaction of individuals. That is why secularism always has a close connection with materialism (not the type of materialism meant by Marxism) and individualism. If a church confines its role only to making converts, it is in danger of falling into this kind of secularism.

<sup>21</sup>Some people may argue that a church should not have a social function. Its task is to promote individual repentance and conversion. But society cannot be purified (if it can ever be purified) only when every individual repents. What, in fact, is meant by individual repentance when social structures make sin necessary? The prophetic role of the church in society is not only to speak of heaven and hell, but also to assure that society is on the right track. That is what the Old Testament prophets did.

<sup>22</sup>Christian ethics in China is usually understood personally. It is really Christian morality for individual behavior without social implication.

All the issues I have raised above are contextual ones. For a church to play a prophetic role in society it must know its identity. Walter Kasper speaks of two extremes: if a church intends to fulfill its social responsibility, it is in danger of losing its identity; if a church attempts to keep its identity, however, it may fail in performing its social function.<sup>23</sup> The way of survival seems narrow. But Jesus' advice is to "strive to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24). Or again, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt 7:13-14). Jesus suggests that there is no contradiction in a church's attempt both to keep its identity and to fulfill its social responsibility. In fact, a church will not be able to keep its identity if it does not perform its social function. By the same token, a church will not be able to fulfill its social function if it fails to keep its identity. A contextual theology will correlate the two.

China is developing. The Chinese church is growing. Under the surface, however, these two significant movements are not integrated. China has made great achievements in economic development that improve people's standard of living. The church in China preaches to its congregations mainly about how to achieve personal salvation. While the crime rate that comes with reform increases, Christians focus their attention on internal contemplation.

The Chinese church will cool down from its excitement over numerical growth. It is time now to review and reexamine the church's past. Based on that re-examination, the church must also reinterpret the Bible in the light of its own context to see what God is saying to the present context. Tradition tells us where we have come from. We must energize that tradition, however, by applying it to a new future and giving it a new meaning.  $\oplus$

<sup>23</sup>Walter Kasper, "Contemporary Issues on Christology," *Christian Culture Review*, vol. 1, trans. Deyou Yang (Guizhou: People's Book House, 1990) 231.