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Gospel Art in Mainland China and the Sinofication of Christianity: Notes from Four Churches

Abstract

Over the past forty years, between forty and eighty million Chinese (from about two million in 1949) have converted to faith in Christ. At the same time, an earlier perception of Christianity as "*yang jiao*," or "alien teaching," that was almost universal in China in the early part of the century, and remains common in Taiwan, has been replaced by a perception even among non-Christian Chinese that Christianity has become a part of China's spiritual landscape. As the Chinese church has developed over the past forty years largely isolated from Western influence, some Chinese Christians try to relate their faith to Chinese culture: sometimes merely by using Chinese philosophy, music, or visual art forms to depict Christian themes, but often, by linking the narrative of Chinese spiritual history to what they see as its consummation in the truths of the New Testament, much as the early Christians did with Jewish and Greco-Roman tradition. In this paper I will describe the art in four churches, two in the central interior province of Hubei, two in coastal Zhejiang province south of Shanghai, and discuss how it engages Chinese traditions and thought.

In recent years, tens of millions of Chinese have become Christians.¹ Most of these conversions have come in the countryside, though there has also occurred a substantial movement to Christ among intellectuals. The vast majority of those in the countryside who have become Christian have had little if any contact with non-Chinese believers.² The size of the church in China has thus increased about thirty times during a period when missionaries were depicted in the official press as spies for imperialist powers and when Christians suffered a great deal of discrimination, as well as overt persecution. The result is a church that, while friendly to Christians from abroad, is extremely sensitive to its need to be "self-promoting" and "self-governed." The official Protestant church calls itself the "Three Self" church as an expression of

the importance of this awareness.³

The question I'd like to discuss in this paper, in a preliminary way, has to do with how the church perceives its relationship to Chinese culture. There are of course many aspects to this question, such as church music, or sources cited in sermons. And even if we focus merely on visual arts, there are tens of thousands of churches in China. To cut this subject down to size, I will discuss the art in four churches. Two are in central China, one in the city of Wuhan, another in the countryside nearby. The other two churches are in the coastal Wenzhou area, about eight hours by train south of Shanghai.

Three Models of Enculturation

Before discussing particular examples, perhaps it would be profitable to consider in general terms the ways in which belief can be encultured in a new society. There are at least three fairly distinct models of indigenization. The first is to popularize the new religion by adopting elements of the native culture that tend to transform the original belief. (*syncretism*) For example, early Chinese Buddhists adopted the Chinese story of Miao Shan. Miao Shan was a virtuous young woman whose father greatly resented her goodness and her refusal to marry his (highly questionable) choice of young men. Martyred for her virtue, she descended into *Yin Jian*, but her presence threatening to ruin the deterrent value of hell by turning it into paradise, she was expelled to the land of the living. When her father became sick, she used her own eyes to create healing medicine for him. What is interesting about the adoption of this story by Chinese Buddhists (who identified Miao Shan with Guan Yin, or Kannon), is the way in which Chinese Buddhism adopted a strikingly Chinese commitment to filial piety that is in sharp contrast to the more negative stance typical in early Buddhist literature towards the family.

When confronted by new cultural challenges, all belief systems tend to undergo a similar metamorphosis. Myths adopted in order to make the foreign faith more acceptable, become a vehicle for the evolution of core values of the faith itself. One notes a similar phenomena in the Marxist myths of Lei Feng in China, in the adoption of bloody Tibetan gods by the Tantric Indian Buddhist Phadmasambhava, and in the

substitution of a Guan Yin figure for Mary among hidden Christians in the Goto islands, for examples. A similar process of watering down has been blamed by some for the disappearance of Nestorian Christianity between the Tang and Song dynasties in China. A number of highly syncretistic new "Christian" cults have also appeared in mainland China recently that join indigenous occult practices to a magical use of the Christian Scriptures.⁴

The second means of enculturation is to describe new truths in familiar language, both to highlight commonalities between traditions, and as an iconographic translation. We might call this process *contextualization*. One notes, in the history of Christianity, how the idea of the Creator and Ruler of all was translated from *Yahweh* among the ancient Jews, to *Elohim*, to *Theos*, and then to *God*, as faith crossed cultural boundaries, without any necessary change in substantial doctrines. The early Jesuits, such as Matteo Ricci, were particularly adept at such translation in China, at least in terms of the Confucian aristocracy. Buddhism likewise adopted and changed somewhat the Taoist concept of *wuwei* to describe the Buddhist concept of detachment. During the Song Dynasty, Buddhist monks adapted literati abstract painting styles to promote Zen realization. For example, the Buddhist monk Mu Qi's naturalistic yet suggestively impressionistic paintings, such *Mother and Baby Gibbon in a Tree* and *Persimmons*, evoked the universal in the familiar with stunning brilliance; it "points to transcendence" and yet "lets the viewer know that all knowledge is but the foreground of something deeper and greater," as Heinrich Dumoulin put it. Yet even while building artistically on established traditions, and painting scenes that one might come across on any foggy day in the hills behind West Lake.

The third and most radical, but typically Christian, method of enculturation is to take the simplest and most basic traditional expressions of spirituality, and describe the "foreign" faith as a deepening or incarnation of the meaning inherent in those icons or myths. One traces the Gospel to the deepest roots of the culture, bringing out new life and truth that, in retrospect, seemed latent in those roots from the beginning. A common term used by Christians for these kinds of insights is *redemptive analogies*, a concept popularized in the modern era by missionary Don Richardson, whose *Eternity in Their Hearts* argued that God has prepared the cultures of the world for Jesus.

This is by no means a new idea. It is well known that the early Christians

saw the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a fulfillment of various aspects of the Jewish tradition. Jesus himself said, "Don't think I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to do away. . . but to fulfill."⁵ The New Testament is, among other things, a dialogue with Jewish history and theology, containing hundreds of references to the Old Testament that show Jesus fulfilling the Messianic expectations of the Jewish tradition.

What is less often recognized is the importance of this model in subsequent Christian history, art and philosophy.⁶ The idea that Christianity came not to "do away with" the deepest truths in non-Jewish cultures, but to "fulfill" them, was a dominant though often overlooked theme in St. Paul, Augustine and other early church fathers. This approach is part of the context in which Christianity has become the world's largest religion. Native peoples frequently saw it as a fulfillment of elements, even prophecies, within their own cultures, rather than as a foreign ideology offered them to replace their own traditions.

During the missions era, enculturation of any kind was looked on with suspicion by much of the missions community. Both Western missionaries and Chinese converts (with some interesting exceptions) took for granted that "East is East, and West is West," resulting in a psychology that was bitterly satirized in the observation that conversion meant "One more Christian, one fewer Chinese." As a consequence of the strained relationship between church and culture, and tensions arising from Western imperialism, conversion was rare: China was only .3% Christian by 1949. The victory of communism, paradoxically, allowed Christianity to cast off the stigma of Western forms and leadership. In Taiwan, I found that about 80 % were willing to peg Christianity with the derogatory term "*yang jiao*," or "alien teaching." In recent surveys I took in Mainland China, by contrast, only a small minority seemed comfortable with that term. "Christianity came from outside, true," was a typical comment, "But it has already become Chinese."

Over the past few decades, Christians around the world have become more aware of the need to relate Christianity to its roots within each culture. Don Richardson's *Peace Child* and *Eternity in Their Hearts* have been particularly successful in applying

the fulfillment model of St. Paul and Augustine, especially to the "folk customs" of tribal peoples around the world. In India, native Christians such as Vishal Mandalwadi, in *World of the Gurus*, Sadhu Sundar Singh, and Padinjarakara, in *Christ in the Ancient Vedas*, have suggested a dialectic middle path between the absolute negation proposed by conservative Christians who emphasize the other-ness of God's revelation, and the absolute affirmation, verging on syncretism, of some liberals. This middle approach has derived from two principle insights. First, as Singh put it, "We are offering Christianity in a Western cup and India rejects it. But when we offer the water of life in an Eastern bowl, then our people will recognize it and take it gladly."⁷ And secondly, more controversially, that there are elements within the Rig Veda in particular, and even the Upanishads and modern guruism, that hint at a consummation of the human drama such as that presented in the New Testament.⁸

The first insight was expressed in the early 20th Century by Zhao Zichen, who wrote, "If Christianity can unravel itself from this Western cocoon and wear a Chinese elucidation, the people will certainly be able to understand and accept it."⁹ Contextualization has been understood and adopted with particular dexterity and insight by the early Jesuits, and by missionaries like James Legge and W.A.P. Martin. The further insight that Christianity often fits the Eastern bowl surprisingly well, almost as if the one were made for the other; rather like a key in a lock, has been growing among Chinese Christians and Westerners interested in the Chinese church in recent years.

Da Ye Pushi Christian Church

An interesting attempt at contextualization, putting the water of the Gospel in eastern bowls, can be seen in the Pushi Christian Church, in a small town about two hours drive from the central Chinese city of Wuhan. (Photographs 1-5.) This church is remarkable for Hubei Province, where Christians are still under one percent of the population. Founded by a doctor, to the right of the building pictured here stands a three story hospital, well-equipped, and largely staffed by local believers. To the left is a building with a traditional courtyard; this building serves both as a retirement home and as a training center where about fifty young Christians were undergoing training as church workers. Before liberation, a couple dozen Christians lived in this small town about two hours from Wuhan. Now there are about a thousand. As you enter the church, you walk over a mural of the earth (the name of the church means, "All the world") and find yourself facing a painting of a doorway on the far wall with a gate leading to a city (probably inspired by Bunyan's *Celestial City*; *Pilgrims Progress* is popular in China), with the legend "eternal life" over the door.

The artwork in the Pushi Church present a mixture of Chinese and foreign motifs, painting, architecture, and sculpture. In some paintings the figures appear Western or Jewish, in others Chinese. (Photographs 2, 3, and 4.) God is depicted with Chinese features, as is Jesus in some scenes. Chinese mountains and flowers appear in photograph 2.

Church members have made an attempt to express their faith in an original and contextualized fashion, stage-two enculturalization, in a way that is not unique, but still fairly unusual. By contrast, in other churches, all the figures, including God, appeared to be European.

Wuchang Church "God so loved the world"

Wuchang church is an older church that stands almost in the shadow of the Yellow Crane Pavilion, in Wuhan, Hubei Province. The Chinese have long seen this spot as one of great geomantic or spiritual significance. Yellow Crane Pavilion stands on the long, narrow Snake Mountain, that faces across the Yangtze River from Tortoise Mountain, a point of balance between north and south, *yin* and *yang*. The Tang poet Cui Hao composed a famous ode on this spot. ("The sun is setting, but what can I call home? The river's mists and billows make my heart forlorn.")¹⁰. Mao Zedong wrote a

more political reply here, comparing the turbulence of the Yangtse River to the era of history through which he was living: "The tide in my heart mounts as the waves foam." After the Sino-Soviet split, he erected the Great Yangtse Bridge to join the tortoise and the snake, a vehicle as well as a symbol of China's ability to develop independently, and of unity between north and south. The trains and vehicles crossing this bridge north to south, and boats east and west, make Wuhan, halfway between Beijing and Canton on the north-south axis, and between Chungking and Shanghai on the east-west axis, the "Crossroads of China." The Hubei Christian Council, China's largest seminary, which receives students from all over southern China, as well as an old and rather delapidated church, are located at this historical spot.

In the sanctuary hangs a new white marble plaque (photograph 6) with the first part of John 3:16 engraved in bright red, highly stylized Chinese lettering. Reading right to left, the plaque reads as follows: "*Shen* ('God') *ai* ('loves' -- top, second from the right) *shi* ('world' -- with three crosses) *ren* ('people,' a person kneeling on the ground) *shen zhi jiang ta de* ('to the point of taking his,' middle five characters) *du sheng* ('only begotten') *zi* ('son' -- highly stylized man on a cross) *ci gei ta men* ('and giving them')."

At first glance this may appear to be only a highly creative example of second-stage enculturation, using stylized Zhou-era seal script to express "Western" theology. But actually there are also elements of third-stage "fulfillment" indigenization here in

embryonic form. 1. The man on the cross may seem a rather free interpretation of 子, but one can still trace the relationship between character and form. 2. The man kneeling before the crosses is only a slightly stylized version of "person," 人. 3. Three crosses for the word "world" is a traditional form. Normally it is explained that *shi* also can mean "generation," and since the cross shape also means "ten," a generation can be thought of as three tens, or thirty years. But in Christian theology, the relationship between Jesus on the cross, and the two men who were crucified with him, and God's love for the world, could hardly be expressed more clearly than by this ancient form. Another form of the same character has one cross joining the central cross, while the other trails downward. The story of Jesus' crucifixion, and of the two thieves, one of whom joined himself to Christ, the other of whom rejected him, easily lends itself to rendering with this character. 4. The final character, the word 門 (men), is stylized to look like a door that can swing open. A door is a common Christian metaphor, (also from the Gospel of John) for salvation, and one that is particularly popular among Chinese Christians, perhaps because walls (from the Great Wall, to the wall that not too long ago surrounded every Chinese city, to the walls still built around temples, colleges, etc.) are so ubiquitous in China. The gate to eternal life is a very common theme in Chinese church architecture. The most striking example I am aware of is Tao Feng Shan, "Wind of the Tao Mountain," in Hong Kong, built in on the model of a Buddhist monastery by a Norwegian missionary who believed that Pure Land Buddhism was a corruption of Nestorian Christianity. When you walk through a "narrow gate that leads to life," you come to a fifty-foot cross on a bluff overlooking Shatin. Elderly Chinese come here in the morning to practice tai chi.

Calligraphy is, of course, the primary Chinese art; and the Chinese character the principle visible symbol of Chinese civilization. C. H. Kang and Ethel Nelson have published popular books, in English and in Chinese, arguing that many key Chinese characters contain a Christian meaning.¹¹ While one may find some of their interpretations may seem a bit fanciful, even non-Christians often express surprise and intrigue at how easily Christian teachings can be found in some of the most meaningful Chinese characters, such as 春、福、船、造、世、and 来. Such analogies put the relationship between "Western" religion and Chinese culture in a new light, revealing a surprising familiarity and relevance to the "alien" teaching.

Enculturalizing the Gospel in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province

Wenzhou has been called the Jerusalem of China, with probably between twenty and thirty percent of the six million people in the district identifying themselves with Christianity.¹² Different theories have been offered as to why Christianity has been so successful in this area. One is that "relatively benign" local authorities allowed Christians to continue to meet during the Cultural Revolution, giving them a jump start on the rest of the country after things loosened up.¹³ One informant attributed it to the widespread occurrence of miracles. He told me how he had been instantly healed of throat cancer during prayer, at which time he saw a vision of Jesus. He noted that he and his colleagues continued to pray for the sick and see physical healings, resulting in many conversions. But the history of the church in the area undermines the unique importance of such factors, relative to other parts of China, and suggests that cultural factors may have been at least as important. In 1949 the number of Protestant Christians in the area was already 95,000, about 13% of the total for China as a whole. If there are 700,000 Protestants in the Wenzhou area in the year 2000, that likely amounts to less than 2% of the present total for China. In other words, while Christianity has grown more than seven times in Wenzhou, it has shrunk by a factor of six or seven as a percentage of Christians in the nation as a whole. So it seems more reasonable to me to look to the years prior to 1949 for the secret to the Gospel's success there. While I have not conducted an extensive survey of the history of Christianity in the area (which ultimately goes back to the Tang Dynasty) so far, three possibly relevant facts related to the perception of Christianity as a "foreign religion" have come to light:

(1) Unlike cities like Amoy, Shanghai, and Ningbo, there was no foreign occupation of Wenzhou. At the same time, as a seaport with trading interests, incentive to throw out what Westerners were in town was likely undermined by commercial considerations to some extent. Thus, while opposition to "Western" religion was virulently expressed at times, conversion may not have seemed quite as radical a betrayal as it would have in Canton or Shanghai, where foreign soldiers walked the

streets, on the one hand, nor would foreigners have seemed quite as alien and extraneous as in inland provinces.

The first China Inland Missions worker, the Scotsman George Scott, was in addition fairly sensitive to these tensions. He has been described as polite and quiet, he went dressed in Chinese clothing, and the fact that he was disabled (and his first Chinese evangelist was also paralyzed) may have made him less threatening. (The history of the Church in China is nothing if not an affirmation of the insight, shared by Lao Zi and St. Paul, that God accomplishes through weakness what men cannot accomplish through strength.) Furthermore, the CIM church was built in Chinese style, with tile roof and a large courtyard.

(2) Two Buddhist abbots converted to Christianity in the 19th Century, bringing their followers with them, and converting their temples into churches.

(3) The church in Wenzhou had become largely independent of foreign control long before 1949. By 1951, one half of Protestants belonged to three indigenous Chinese fellowships, with the Local Church being the largest. Another quarter belonged to churches of the China Inland Mission, which placed a great deal of emphasis on indigenous leadership. In 1927 the China Inland Mission church in Wenzhou changed its name to the "Independent China Inland Mission Church," to further emphasize its Chinese character. So only a bit more than a quarter of Protestants belonged to overtly Western denominations.¹⁴

The "Self-Establishment" movement that led to the independence of half the Christians in the Wenzhou area had been gaining momentum throughout the first decades of the Century. One incident gives a picture of the motivation for this movement, and also its particular affect on the churches in the Wenzhou area. In 1925, Japanese troops fired on protestors in a silk factory in Shanghai, killing one and wounded seven more. English troops reacted to a demonstration by firing on the crowds, killing and wounding more. A Wenzhou pastor, You Xuxun, learned of the details of this incident. Returning to Wenzhou, he assembled a group of twenty pastors and leaders and approached the local English Methodist missionary demanding that he take a stand in opposition to this violence, and allow the church to become more independent. The missionary replied, "Be careful not to blame the English. This incident was a matter of the Chinese reaping the penalty for their own wrongdoings,

because they've been deceived by the Russian communists."¹⁵ As a modern Wenzhou believer put it, the Chinese believers came to the conclusion the missionary was "A jackel in the same hill" with the imperialists. They founded a rival denomination, which within a few decades had half as many members in Wenzhou as the mother church. The church in the area they established themselves seems to still be striving to affirm its Chinese character. I heard an excellent sermon in Shanghai by a young pastor named Pastor Xie, from that part of Wenzhou, in which he made a point of quoting Confucius and Mencius as well as the Bible. He told me that the church in that area also makes use of Chinese-style antiphonal style singing (对歌).

Huang Tian Christian Church

In some ways Huang Tian church is more typical of Chinese churches than the Da Ye church. The auditorium seemed embarrassingly Western. Across the roof hung a series of pennants with figures of Santa Claus. But outside the church was a courtyard with a more traditionally Chinese feel, the sort of place you might listen to a story teller and drink tea. The pillars of the courtyard and adjoining rooms were all covered with 春廉, *chun lian*, the poetic seven-character phrases that are placed on either side of the doorposts at the Chinese New Years, which generally wish good fortune for the family within, and frequently for everybody else as well.

Many Chinese find *chun lian* an apt way of expressing their faith in the Chinese context. For starters, there are many fascinating parallels between Passover and Chinese New Years. Every New Years the Chinese would clean up their homes, as the Jews did before Passover. They stayed at home on New Year's eve, some say because some evil creature out of doors might devour those who stray outside. (The angel of death?) The Chinese bake unleavened bread and eat bitter herbs, as did the Jews.

In some parts of China, people dabbed chicken blood on the door-posts, as did the Jews when they were about to make their exit. In most of China, however, a pair of red lettered-seven-character couplets, one on either side of the door, with four letters on the top, mark the entryway to Chinese homes, looking much as Jewish homes must have looked at Passover. Furthermore, the sayings that are pasted on the doorways even by non-Christians, often have to do with blessings from God, or the hope that some

day the human race will find freedom from death. Here is one typical couplet that I found in Henan Province before New Years, for example: "Let spring fill the cosmos and happiness fill this house." "God (*Tian*) adds years and man increases the length of his life." Not only does the meaning of many *chun lian* frequently hint at some Messianic consummation, the Chinese words for "spring" and "happiness" and "God," which are especially popular in this context, also carry connotations that can be surprisingly congruent with Christian beliefs.

To Christians, Passover is of course not just an obscure ancient Jewish custom. Jesus died on Passover. The symbolism of Passover is intertwined with the core of Christian ritual and hope. Jesus is the "lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the earth," and Passover was a foreshadow of the redemption Jesus would bring the world through his death. To Chinese Christians, the coincidences between Passover then are not of merely scholarly interest, but point to the crux of the Christian message. Passover is one of the elements that allows Christianity to be a key that fits the lock of Chinese culture, rather than a blunt weapon of an intrusive foreign ideology, like a battering ram.

It is not unusual to find *chun lian* outside of Christian homes and in churches like Huang Tian, that speak of "The lamb of God" and emphasize the redemptive hope of Christianity. This seems more than simple enculturalization, a translation of alien thoughts into a Chinese context. Rather it brings meaning inherent in the cultural expression, the concept of sacrifice and redemption within Chinese culture itself, to the attention of the viewer.

The Tao Became Flesh

Christians in Wenzhou spoke admiringly of the many new cathedral-style church buildings that rise five or six stories above the rice fields, with Roman domes and pillars. Taking a bus north from Wenzhou, I got off the bus just before the city of Yueqing to take a closer look at one of these edifices. (Photograph 7) Believers escorted me through the newly finished auditorium, with the scent of fresh wood still in the air, up the stairs past balconies, to the paneled conference room on about the fifth floor, and to a balcony on the sixth floor. There we surveyed our surroundings, the wind blowing off fields thick with ripe grain, and three story homes and cottage industries beyond the fields in every direction. My guide pointed to crosses that raised themselves above some of the surrounding buildings within a mile of the church; one of these other churches, he told me, was even larger than their own.

The church includes three hundred out of the over one thousand families in the village. (In rural Wenzhou, the tendency is to identify with the faith of one's family.) Before liberation there were "only a few" believers in town. Their number has steadily increased since religious freedom was allowed in the early 1980s, and is still increasing, though more slowly. Five to six hundred people come to church on a given Sunday. Believers spent three million yuan, or about \$400,000, on their new church, an average of about \$1300 per family.

Church members were plainly proud of their magnificent new worship house, and doubtless of the prosperity which it implied both for their village in particular, and perhaps for China in general. It appeared there might also have been a bit of friendly competition with neighboring villages, not unlike the competition between towns in medieval Europe over who could build the taller cathedral! Attractive new Buddhist temples were likewise springing up in every town along that part of the coast. (Further up the coast, after about thirty kilometers past Tian Tai going towards Ningbo, I would find temples and churches both less visible.) To one side of the church, a more subdued but still very attractive three-story building had been built for cooking and to put up visitors and church workers. The grated metal fence that surrounded the property seemed to fence the church off from the village, but of course there are walls around all the temples in China as well. In a few short years, it seemed the church had made the same jump, as in Constantine's day, from home fellowships (that had

been necessary during the Maoist period) to Roman-style cathedrals. By contrast, all around arose new Buddhist temples that had fully assimilated Chinese architecture and looked at home in the rice fields. I tried to breach the question of whether the churches' Western architecture style might not seem a bit out of place, but my hosts hardly seemed to understand what I was asking. After all, they were Chinese. They had built what they wanted to build, in the style they liked. Like much new Chinese architecture, it was exuberant, cold, and colorful, the very antithesis of social realism or Bauhaus or anything purely functional; or purely traditional.

A few days later I had the chance to talk about the Western style of such churches with the senior pastor of the Ningbo Hundred Year Worship Church. He told me, "You foreigners always want to see things that look Chinese. But we want to build churches in the Western style. It seems more holy and awesome. You can feel the presence of God." Of course a desire for such a feeling of God's awesome transcendence was also the goal of cathedral architecture in Europe.

In the courtyard of the dazzling new European-style Protestant church in Yueqing, however, was a piece of landscaping art that not only assimilated, but also challenged and modified Chinese culture in the third sense of artistic expression discussed above.

In the center (picture 7) stood a stone monument about ten feet high, surrounded by a small traditional Chinese rock garden. Facing the street was the single word "*Ai*," love, which of course is common both to Christian and traditional Confucian morality. (Mozi anticipated St. John by some hundreds of years in noting that since God was love, our relations with others should also be grounded in love; and *Ren Ai* was the centerpiece of Confucius' morality. In a survey of Chinese I once took in Taiwan, I found that "love" was usually rated as the "most important virtue.") On the far side, facing the church, was a notation explaining that the church had been dedicated on Christmas, 1999, and that the monument was built on New Year's day. On the south (left, facing the church) side of the memorial were carved the words of John 3:16.

On the opposing side was engraved the first part of John 1: 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The term used for Word (or *Logos* in Greek) is rendered "*Tao*" in the Chinese Bible. (Written *dao* in mainland phoneticization.) *Tao and Logos* share a range of philosophical meaning that is unusual between two languages, and the relationship between the two terms has been a matter of considerable fascination for Chinese Christians.

The *tao* is one of the defining concepts of Chinese thought. Originally the term referred merely to a path or road, the primary meaning it still retains. Confucius used the term to describe the ultimate principle of right living, the path of goodness. Lao Zi expanded the term to refer to the principle of being and the source of all that is in the universe, the unmoving mover. The term has continued to retain all of these meanings in Chinese thought and art. The *tao* is often symbolized in Chinese thought by a stone. In the writings of Lao Zi, the *tao* is associated with *pu*, the "uncarved block," and in later Chinese landscape, a stone in the center of the landscape often makes use of this symbol. At the summit of Mount Tai in Shandong Province is a blank stone pillar about twenty feet high that was erected by the co-founder of the Han, Han Wudi, symbolizing his inability to express the ultimate nature of truth in words. As the Dao De Jing puts it, in one of the most familiar phrases in China, "The Way that is spoken (*dao ke dao*) is not the true Way." As for the *tao* in itself:

"There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name

So I style it 'the way.'

Of course, this sounds a little impersonal to equate with the Christian God, and so most missionaries and Chinese believers (and even many non-Christians, such as the Kang Xi emperor) have equated Yahweh instead with the ancient Chinese concept of *Tian* or *Shangdi*. But others have become fascinated with Lao Zi's classic.

In 1989, a prominent young philosopher who has been closely involved with the Democracy movement, Yuan Zhimin, fled to France, and then went on to Princeton, in the United States, to continue his studies. There he became a Christian. Citing many parallels between the *Dao Dejing* (as he understood it) and the Bible, he wrote a book called *Lao Zi vs. Shengjing (Lao Zi vs. the Bible)*, which was also published in a shorter version and with a slightly different name in mainland China. Yuan Zhimin disputed the usual notion that the *tao* to which Lao Zi referred was impersonal. His translation of the passage above into modern Chinese, for example, gave the *tao* a more hands-on character:

"Before the creation of Heaven and Earth, there was that which was integrated and whole.

Silent, and empty! Self-existing, forever changeless. It moves all the Heavens, yet is never tired.

You could call it the Mother of Heaven and Earth and all things.

I don't know what it is called, so I write the word 'Tao,' and style it 'Great.'"

Yuan made a claim about this age-old Chinese classic as bold as a cathedral rising from the rice fields:

"Do you know the Tao of Lao Zi? You think you know it, but are not quite sure, perhaps? Let me tell you a mystery. . . Lao Zi was a great prophet of God. And what he preached was the true Tao of God: the 'holy person' he wrote about was in fact Jesus."

Not all Chinese Christians would go so far, of course. But this is an expression of a spirit that is common in China, a desire that the best of east and west should

meet in modern China, and bring a renewal of civilization. It was eloquently expressed by a college teacher in Shanghai of Hui ancestry, not quite a Christian, who told me, "The world needs Chinese culture. Chinese culture needs Western culture, especially the Christian spirit. Put the two together, and they become complete."

From a Christian perspective, that which had been inexpressible, the divine Logos from whom all things come, is in Jesus revealed, and becomes complete. Thus it is appropriate, in the Christian view, that the "uncarved block" should have words on it. When John says, "In the beginning was the Tao. . . and all things were made by Him. . . ." he is expressing a truth that all traditional Chinese would agree with. However, a few sentences later, he says something that speaks not merely negation of traditional Chinese thought, nor merely affirmation, but challenge. "The Tao became flesh and dwelt among us." This is, of course, the claim of the Gospel, and also the meaning of this monument: that in Jesus, the inexpressible love of God has been expressed.

Conclusion

Christianity is one of three belief systems that have succeeded in entering the mainstream of Chinese culture from the outside. The first was Buddhism, which first arrived in China about the time of Christ, and over the succeeding six centuries came to be adopted in some form by all levels of society, but undergoing a remarkable metamorphosis through that process. One of the less-important but more striking and symptomatic aspects of that change was the move over the course of the Tang Dynasty from an artistic portrayal of Buddhism in Indian terms, in the early part of the dynasty, to a later depiction of Buddhism in more Chinese terms, including Buddha himself with Chinese features.

The second belief system to succeed in China, at least for a short while, was Marxism. While Mao Zedong's relation with Chinese culture was largely iconoclastic and destructive, in a sense, he was among the most Chinese of the early members of the Chinese Communist Party. He never traveled abroad or learned a foreign language, and admitted to being deeply influenced by the "Grass-roots hero" Chinese tradition of folk revolution, as exemplified in such tales as the Water Margin, Journey to the West, and Romance of the Three Kingdoms, even before being exposed to Marxism.□ While

violently iconoclastic in reference to the most prominent and socially acceptable strands of the Chinese tradition, early on, Chinese Marxism asserted itself under his leadership as an independent and self-consciously Chinese derivation of Marxism-Leninism. And that self-assertion was, and in a sense continues to be, a part of its success. On subway trains in Shanghai, the government mixes moral exhortations from Confucius, Song philosopher Zhu Xi, and P.L.A. hero Lei Feng, for example.

While many Chinese still see Christianity, for better or for worse, as part and parcel of Western culture, Christianity is succeeding in China today in part through a process of enculturation that is less strenuously iconoclastic than Marxism proved itself to be, but also generally less syncretistic than Buddhism. While Chinese Christians readily continue the sacramental and artistic forms they inherited from Western missionaries, and even expand on them in surprising ways (such as Santa Claus in the eves of a church), both Christians and non-Christians have largely come to perceive Christianity as an element in the Chinese landscape, rather than an alien intrusion. (Perhaps it is even this very lack of tension that allows Chinese Christians to borrow without apology from Western forms.) At the same time, some Chinese Christians have begun the work not only of contextualizing their message in Chinese forms, but also of presenting the Gospel as a continuation and fulfillment of the concepts, rituals, and beliefs of Chinese tradition. In doing so they expand on a relatively little-noticed narrative of the Christian tradition (canonized by Jesus, Paul, and Augustine, and later expanded by St. Patrick, Matteo Ricci, and some early Protestant missionaries) and introduce the Christian message to the millennia-old dialogue that is Chinese culture.

End Notes

¹ For the best overall picture of Christianity in modern China, including the most conservative outside estimates of the number of Protestants in particular, see Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions: The Costly Revival*, OMF 1999.

¹ There are quite a few outside mission groups that have had some affect on the rural church, but many of the most successful of these appear to be those run or largely staffed by overseas Chinese, including the Far Eastern Broadcasting Company and China Ministries International.

¹ Networks of house churches, and other churches that fall outside of the official state-sanctioned church, tend to state their independence in less strident tones, but their independence is also more complete, in that they allow no more control by the government than by outside mission groups. The second leg of the tripod, self-financing, is often interpreted in a less strenuous manner by the Three Self church, which accepts financial help from outside of China. Many historic Buddhist temples in China have also been rebuilt in part with funds from overseas Chinese Buddhists.

¹ Such as the Ling Ling sect, Disciples, Shouters, and Lightening Out of the East. See *Shou Wang Zhong Hua*, May-June 1997; Bi Dan, *Zhong Guo Yu Jiao Hui*, Nov.-Dec. 1992; Tony Lambert, *Global Chinese Ministries OMF International*, December 1997- January 1998 and *China Insight*, November-December 1992.

¹ Matthew 5:17

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, though he confuses these three forms of indigenization somewhat, does a good job of describing the Western portion of this history in *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. For a sharper focus on redemptive analogies and their place in missions history, see Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, and David Marshall, *Jesus and the Religions of Man*.

¹ Cyril J. Davey, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, STL Books 1950, p.66

¹ See Ram Gidoomal and Mike Fearon, *Karma N Chips: The New Age of Asian Spirituality*, Wimbledon Publishing Co., 1994, for a discussion of the *Upanishads* on this subject.

¹ Gu Weimin, *Jidujiao Yu Jindai Zhongguo Shehui*, Shanghai Peoples' Publishing Company, 1996, p. 455

¹ Translated by Zhang Tingshen and Bruce Wilson, *100 Tang Poems*, 1989

¹ Two of them are *The Discovery of Genesis*, Concordia Publishing Company; also *Shang Di Gei Zhongguo De Yingxu (The Promise God Gave to China)*, published in Taiwan.

¹ Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions: The Costly Revival*, OMF, 1999.

¹ Two local Christians suggested this theory. Lambert, who I am quoting here, also seems to lean to this view, though he also brought up some of the facts about the early CIM work that follow.

¹ Zhi Huaxin, *Wenzhou Jidujiao*, Zhejiang Provincial Christian Council, 2000, p. 20

¹ Ibid. p. 13

¹ See Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China*, p.127

Photograph #1 Pushi Church, Deye, Hubei Province. Note the word "ai" (love) just below the cross and the name of the church, and below that, the seven candle sticks; (a symbol of the churches from Revelation) both motifs are also present in the Yueqing church as well.

Photograph #2 Pushi Church. Note the Chinese landscape and facial features of the disciples in this painting of the crucifixion.

Photograph #3 Pushi Church. Pictures of various Biblical scenes adorn the front wall of the balcony. "The Risen Jesus Ascended into Heaven and Sits at the Right Side of God." I don't know who the other figure is.

Photograph #4 Creation.

Photograph #5 Near the entrance of Pushi Church. The image of Jesus as a shepherd is particularly popular in the Chinese Church.

Photograph #6 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." Wuchang Christian Church, Hubei, China.

Photograph #7 A new church in rural Yueqing, Wenzhou district, Zhejiang Province. The words on the church read simply, "Christian Church." Notice the same

combination of candlestick with the word "love" on the monument facing the entrance, as with the church in Hubei.

Photograph #8 "In the beginning was the Tao, the Tao was with God, the Tao was God." Rock garden and monument at church in rural Yueqing, Zhejiang Province.