

## Article

# New Paradigm in the New Era: The Case of History of Christianity in China Today

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**Abstract:** During the 1950s, John K. Fairbank introduced the ‘Impact–Response’ paradigm for the study of the Christian mission in the non-Western world, focusing on the impact of Western civilization, including Christianity, in China, and the Chinese response. In the 1980s, Joseph Levenson and Paul Cohen proposed their ‘Tradition-Modernity’ and ‘China-Centered’ paradigms, respectively, shifting more focus onto the discovery of China’s own history. In 2002, Dana Robert adopted the concept of ‘globalization’ to the study of the Christian mission, yet remained ‘imperialistic’ and overlooked the consequences of the interplay between globalization and localization. It was in 2012, when Xi Jinping introduced his ‘China dream’, that Chinese scholars began to think more seriously about its implication and the significance of the ‘Sinicization of religion’. Zhuo Xinping, while exploring the concept of the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’, hinted at a new direction, where “China needs the world as the world needs China, ...in which Christianity would play an important role” (p. 227). Just as the study of Christianity can help one to understand the development of civilization in the Modern West, the paradigm of the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’ would help provide a better picture of the history of Christianity by seeing it through the interplay between globalization and localization and taking Western Christianity as merely a partial representation of the global Christianity developed in the West. Hence, in this paper, the author attempts to propose it as a new paradigm for the study of the history of Christianity in China today.

**Keywords:** history of Christianity in China; globalization; glocalization; re-conceptualization; new paradigm; Sinicization of Christianity; global Christianity; global–local perspectives



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## 1. Introduction: The Concept of Globalization/Glocalization

During the 1950s, John K. Fairbank proposed the ‘Impact–Response’ paradigm for a new understanding of the history of the Christian mission in China, focusing on the outstanding impact of Western civilization, especially Western Christianity, on China and China’s responses as a consequence (Fairbank and Teng 1954; Fairbank 1974). In the 1960s and 1980s, Joseph Levenson and Paul Cohen proposed their additional paradigms, such as the ‘Tradition-Modernity’ and ‘China-Centered’ paradigms, respectively, shifting more focus onto the discovery of changes and modernization in the Chinese history (Levenson 1964; Cohen 1984). Later, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh put forward the concept of ‘World Christianity’ as a new paradigm for the study of the Christian mission beyond the Western boundary, i.e., embracing both Western and non-Western countries (Walls 2002; Sanneh 2003). However, these paradigms were still confined within the Western agenda and looking at the history and spread of Christianity in China from the Western perspective.

On the other hand, though Chinese scholars were following the Western “Impact–Response”, “Tradition-Modernity”, “China-Centered”, or “World Christianity” paradigms, most of them believed that East–West cultural exchanges should work in both directions, and they wanted to move beyond these Western paradigms; hence, they turned out to focus more on the Chinese side of the story by adding alternative elements such as “Dialectical approaches to East–West cultural exchanges” (Zhang 1991, p. 3), the “Re-visiting of Modernization in China from the Chinese Point of View” (Shi 1991; Lin 1992, p. 1; Wang 1997a),

the “Reviewing of the Impact–Response paradigm in vice-versa interpretations” (Ng 2002, pp. 36–39), the “Re-writing of the history of Christianity in China from the Chinese perspective” (Leung 2001, pp. 533–53; Duan 2004) and the “Rediscovery of Chinese elements in the study of Christianity in China” (Ng 2012, pp. 67–90). Besides the work done by Chinese scholars, Christian church leaders have also voiced out their opinions regarding the proper understanding of Christianity in China. The most outstanding church leader was C.Y. Cheng, the youngest representative from the Chinese churches attending the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910.<sup>1</sup> He was allowed to give a seven-minute speech at the conference, which was judged to be “without question the best speech” presented at the conference (Ng 2012, pp. 133–42). Cheng declared at the conference: “As a representative of the Chinese Church, I speak entirely from the Chinese standpoint... Speaking plainly, we hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions. This may seem somewhat peculiar to some of you, but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always as a mysterious people to you.” He then further added, “...denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but sometimes he suffers for it” (Report of Commission VIII 1912, p. 196). This is a perfect example of how the Chinese people sought to understand the coming of Christianity in China. Cheng has spoken plainly and clearly that Chinese Christians wanted an indigenous, truly Chinese Church without any denominational distinctions. This was in 1910.

In 2002, an eminent Boston scholar of the Christian mission, Dana L. Robert wrote an article entitled “The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement between the World Wars”, which recalls that the Christian missionary movement could be seen as ‘the first globalization’ (Robert 2002, pp. 50–67). Prof. Robert argued that the Christian missionary movement was amongst the first religious groups who attempted a global mission in spreading the Christian gospel and Christian culture to the whole world, or using the classic phrase, ‘the evangelization of the whole world’ (Latourette 1962, p. 504). However, it also reminds Chinese scholars that when Christianity was brought to China, especially in the 19th–20th centuries, the missionaries were challenged and sometimes even condemned as ‘tools of Western imperialism’ by Chinese intellectuals (Zhang and Ng 1993, pp. 118–28). In December 2003, a conference was held by Zhuo Xinping at the Center for the Study of Christianity within the Research Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing. Coincidentally, the conference was on “Glocalization and the Study of Christianity”, in which a more creative and interactive approach was introduced to explore the vivid interplay between globalization and localization processes in the history of World Christianity. ‘Glocalization’ covers both globalization and localization and gives a richer and fuller picture of the development of Christianity throughout the centuries, especially regarding the global field of Christian expansion and the localized field of regional responses (Zhuo 2004; Ng 2007, pp. 180–88).

The debates over the interplay between globalization and localization also reminded modern scholars to review the works of many Chinese scholars who had already made efforts in studying “localization”, “contextualization” and “indigenization” processes in the history of Christianity in modern China, such as studies on the works of Francis Wei (Ma 1995, pp. 99–123; Zhou 1995, pp. 139–53)<sup>2</sup>, T. C. Chao (Xu 2002; Chen 2016)<sup>3</sup>, Wu Leichuan (Chu 1995; Chen 2008) and Wu Yaozong (Ying 2011). Since the 2003 conference in Beijing, Peter Tze Ming Ng had already claimed that ‘glocalization’ could be adopted as a new approach to the study of Christianity (Ng 2007, pp. 180–88). He affirmed that ‘globalization’ tends to view the process from a one-way direction and may turn out to be normative or imperialistic, whereas ‘glocalization’ emphasizes mutual, interactive relations. ‘Glocalization’ provides a new way of looking at the history of the World Christian Movement, embracing both ‘global’ and ‘local’ considerations, and giving more attention to the mutual interactive and harmonious relationships between the Western and Chinese perspectives (Ng 2012, pp. 32–33).

Looking through the long history of Christianity from this globalization perspective, the Christian movement started as one sect of Judaism, a local religion in Judea. And to become a world religion, it had to expand its social and cultural contexts, breaking through Judaism and beginning to move into the global Greco-Roman world. But when it became absorbed in the Roman world, it began to undergo the process of Romanization—hence the Romanization (*luoma hua*, becoming Roman) of Christianity, which later turned out to be one representation of Christianity in the Greco-Roman contexts. As Christianity was spread to all nations throughout the centuries, it was found to have undergone various processes of globalization and localization in all countries, and eventually, they all turned out to be various representations of global Christianity in different local contexts (*ibid.*, pp. 221–22).

In the American Academy of Religion's Annual Conference of 2006 held in Washington, DC in the USA, there was a special theme on "World Christianity in Local Contexts". Ng argued in his paper, "The Necessity of the Particular in the Globalization of Christianity: the Case of Christian Higher Education in China", that the term "local contexts" should be reckoned as a qualifier of global Christianity (Ng 2006, pp. 164–82). Though Christianity claims to be 'a global Christianity' in the West, it was recognized as 'Western Christianity' or '*yang jiao*', i.e., 'Christianity came from the Foreign (Western countries)' when it was brought to China, and hence was 'a localized Christianity'. Whether they are 'American Christianity', 'European Christianity' or 'Western Christianity', they are but simply 'localized Christianities' or partial representations of the 'global Christianity' (Ng 2012, p. 39). Christians from all over the world belong to "localized Christianities," representing global Christianity from various local contexts. There are European Christians, American Christians, African Christians, Indian Christians, Japanese Christians, Korean Christians as well as Chinese Christians, all are but representations of their localized Christianities. This, as Ng argues, is the way we should talk about global Christianity—"the global must become localized" (*ibid.*, p. 222). It is precisely in this way that we are justified to say that Christianity needs to be Sinicized into Chinese culture and to become localized/indigenized on Chinese soil or it would become merely '*yang jiao*', as Christianity was brought from the West but failed to become a localized or indigenized Christianity on Chinese soil.

## 2. Sinicization of Christianity in China

In 2012, President Xi Jinping (习近平) introduced his 'China dream' and the 'One Belt One Road' plan, which encouraged Chinese scholars and religious leaders to think seriously about the implication and the significance of the 'Sinicization of religion' (Tang 2018, p. 17). Zhuo Xinping, the Director of the Institute of World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Beijing, affirmed that the 'Sinicization of Christianity' was indeed the continuation of the study of the 'localization', 'contextualization' and 'indigenization' processes of Christianity in China since it was brought to China in the Tang Dynasty (Zhuo 2017, pp. 42–43). Zhuo also affirmed that the beginning of Christianity was started in Asia as one sect of Judaism, embedded with Asian cultural flavor and characteristics. It was only when Christianity was brought into the Greco-Roman world and became a national religion undergoing the process of Romanization in the Greco-Roman world that Christianity turned out to be developed as a 'global' religion and one strong pillar of Western cultures (*ibid.*). When Christianity was brought back to Asia, it was taken as a 'global' religion representing Western 'imperialistic' culture. However, when it came to China, Christianity became a 'Western Christianity' (*yang jiao*, or Christianity clothed with Western culture) that had to undergo again the processes of 'indigenization', 'contextualization' and 'localization', to seek ways to merge into Chinese culture; hence, Zhuo further affirmed that the 'Sinicization of Christianity' signified the continuation of the Chinese scholars' reactions to the Western paradigms, verifying again their earlier efforts in the studies of the 'indigenization', 'contextualization' and 'localization' processes of Christianity in China throughout the 20th century (Zhuo and Zhang 2013, p. 2).

In launching out academic studies of the Sinicization of Christianity in China since 2013, a series of books were published under the leadership of Zhuo Xinping and support

from Zhang Zhiguang, a professor at Peking (Beijing) University (e.g., [Zhuo and Zhang 2013](#)). In the preface to the first volume, they said, “When Chinese culture accepts and absorbs advanced Western cultural elements, including Marxism, Christianity should not be completely rejected. In the sense of cultural development and construction, China’s all-inclusive culture (‘like a sea opens to all rivers’) should be compatible and tolerant with Christianity, even absorbing the outstanding elements of Christian cultures. Let our own culture continue to expand and grow. Hence, promoting the Sinicization of Christianity in China is in fact a most positive and proper gesture to integrate Christianity into the Chinese culture” ([Zhuo and Zhang 2013](#), pp. 2–3). So, the Sinicization of Christianity in China is both proper and timely, and relevant steps are being taken by Chinese scholars today.

### 3. Why Reconceptualize the History of Global Christianity?

In his study of the history of global religions, Zhang Zhiguang discovered some significant and regular patterns relevant to the study of the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’ ([Zhang 2016](#), pp. 21–29). He referred to the work of Hans Kung, affirming that early converts were called ‘Christians’ from the city of Antioch in Syria<sup>4</sup> and most of Paul’s Letters in the New Testaments were written in Greek; hence, while undergoing globalization, early Christianity had already been undergoing the processes of localization, such as the Hellenization (*xila hua*, i.e., becoming Greek) of Christianity (*ibid.*; [Zhang 2017a](#), p. 16). Zhang quoted from the conclusion of Kung, who confirmed that “Chinese Christianity needs to be grounded in the soil of Chinese culture” and argued that Christianity must undergo the processes of ‘localization’ and ‘indigenization’ in China too (*ibid.*, pp. 16–18). Zhang was also conscious of the fact that ‘Westernized Christianity’ had had the ambition to Christianize China with the dominance of Christianity as one ‘global’ religion; hence, Zhang strongly recommended that the process of ‘Sinicization’ is significantly relevant to the development of Christianity in China today ([Zhang 2017b](#), pp. 5–6). And, in referring to the work of Mou Zhongjian (牟钟鉴), an expert in the study of religions in China, Zhang recalled Mou’s rediscovery of Chinese cultural merits, which, he affirmed, could help contribute to the study of the Sinicization of Christianity in China. The five religious cultural merits are as follows: (1) seeking harmony in the midst of diversity; (2) emphasizing moral education and the teaching of virtues; (3) working together, ‘loving one’s country and loving one’s religion’; (4) keeping pace with time to reform and innovate; and (5) the uplifting of one’s humanistic qualities ([Zhang 2017a](#), pp. 22–25). Hence, Zhang proceeded to argue that China can contribute to the study of Christianity by adding the above merits to it, including ‘the spirit of inclusiveness’, ‘harmony within diversity’ and ‘loving one’s country and loving one’s religion’, in the realization of the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’ in China (*ibid.*). Zhang also added, “The inevitable path to the Sinicization of religion is to integrate into Chinese culture...to jointly carry forward the excellent Chinese cultural traditions of putting people first, seeking harmony within diversity (和而不同), and being inclusive, ‘like a sea open to all rivers’...so as to guide the majority of religious believers to work for the Chinese nation and give more positive, constructive and important contributions to the development and progress of Chinese society” (*ibid.*, p. 25).

Xu Yihua, a professor at Fudan University, Shanghai, also emphasized the importance of reconceptualizing the history of global Christianity. He suggested that there were two steps towards the Sinicization of Christianity in the new China, the first being the ‘three-selves movement’ that was started by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and its affiliated Protestant churches in the 1950s; the second step was the seeking of self-independence in a deeper level, being related to church polity and the theological thinking of Chinese Christianity ([Xu 2015](#), pp. 7–9). Why did we need the second step of the Sinicization of Christianity? Xu further explained that for a long time, Christianity has been accused of being a foreign religion in China. Lots of social movements in the new China demanded that the label of foreign religion should be removed. Though the TSPM and its affiliated churches started the first step of the Sinicization of Christianity, which helped the Christian churches to achieve ‘Three Self’s’—namely, ‘self-govern, self-support and

self-propagate'—yet in the reconstruction of Chinese Christian theology, the mind-set was still based on a Western framework. Hence, Xu suggested that the second step of the Sinicization of Christianity was needed, which should aim at 'taking off the hat of foreign religion (*yang jiao*)' in the construction of Chinese theology (Xu 2016, pp. 45–52). Without the process of moving beyond the boundary of the 'Western theological framework', Chinese Christianity could never be truly 'Chinese Christianity' in itself. This again justifies the significance and the urgent need of the Sinicization of Christianity in China today. Here, we may also be reminded of the work of Wang Wei-fan (汪維藩), a former professor of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, who made a profound suggestion 28 years ago (in 1996) that truly Chinese Christian theology should be constructed from 'Three Returns' (「三個歸回」), namely (1) a return to the Chinese theologians since the May Fourth era; (2) a return to the Christian Bible; and (3) a return to Chinese cultural traditions (Wang 2011, p. 543)<sup>5</sup>. It is obviously correct to affirm that a truly Chinese Christian theology should be based on the combination of the Bible and Chinese cultural traditions. But the most important and of top priority as the first 'return', as Wang suggested, is to follow the steps, not of the Western theologians throughout the past centuries, but of our Chinese theologians since the May Fourth era. The simple reason being that our Chinese theologians during that period of time have all been knowledgeable and have highly respected Chinese culture. Wang noted some of them, including T. C. Chao (趙紫宸), Xie Fuya (謝扶雅), Jia Yuming (賈玉銘), Wu Yaozong (吳耀宗), Lew Tingfang (劉廷芳), Xu Baoqian (徐寶謙) and Wu Leichuan (吳雷川) (Wang 2011, p. 28). Though some might have been educated in the West and learned in Western theology, yet they also understood well the Chinese cultural traditions and social context of their times, especially the demands from Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement (Wang 2011, pp. 29–31). Hence, their construction of Chinese Christian theology was grounded firmly on their understanding of Chinese cultural traditions (Wang 1997b, pp. 2–5). This is probably what Xu Yihua was also concerned with when he was talking about the second step of the Sinicization of Christianity for Chinese churches today.

Zhuo Xinping also echoed this with a similar attempt at reconceptualizing the history of Western Christianity and China's globalization. In his study of the development of Western Christianity and the cultural context of China today, Zhuo argued that "China needs the world, and the world needs China" and "Christianity as a significant part of Western civilization would play an important role in between" (Zhuo 2013, p. 227). China needs the world as China is opening up herself, entering into the world again and beginning to take up significant roles in global affairs. So, Zhuo suggests, in order to work out a healthy relationship with the world, China should not 'isolate' Christianity, which has been firmly embedded in Western civilization today; rather, China should move ahead and attempt to understand Christianity and treat it in a friendly way (*ibid.*). However, Zhuo proceeds to argue that the Christianity brought to China by the Roman Catholics since the Ming-Qing dynasties and by the Protestant missionaries during the 19–20th centuries was embedded with 'some hidden issues within Western Christianity', such as the spirit of supremacy and exclusivism, which need to be clarified or transcended in Chinese cultural contexts while we are working out the process of the Sinicization of Christianity in China today (*ibid.*, pp. 223–27). Christianity needs to be distinguished from its Western cultural embedment, especially the hegemonic dominance of 'Western Christianity'. It is also in this way that 'China needs Christianity and Christianity needs China too', and hence it is both proper and timely to launch the 'Sinicization of Christianity' in China today (Zhuo 2023, p. 329).

#### 4. A New Paradigm for a New Era

As a matter of fact, the Sinicization of Christianity can be taken as a new paradigm in this new era of the study of Christianity in China today. While exploring the theoretical foundation of the Sinicization of Christianity, Leung Incheng (梁燕城), the founder of the Culture Regeneration Research Society (CRRS), affirmed that the original Christian faith was universal but when it was brought to China, it was embedded with 'Western'

cultural traditions (Leung 2017, pp. 28–41). In Christian theology, ‘Incarnation’ is one core content of Christian faith, which has been interpreted as ‘contextualization’, or in Paul’s words from the Bible, “To the Jews I became as Jews, in order to win Jews...To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, no matter where Christianity was brought to, “the Word would become flesh” (道成肉身), the gospel was preached to the local people, in their own language, into their own culture, where it “dwelt among them, full of grace and truth”.<sup>7</sup> The best examples were found when Christianity was brought to the Greco-Roman world; it underwent processes of Hellenization and Romanization and became Greek Christianity and Romanized Christianity. As Leung remarked, “Christianity was brought to the Western cultural world and, through the processes of Hellenization and Romanization, being embedded and formed the theological tradition of Western Christianity. When Western Christianity was spread to the world by the missionaries, the Christian faith had already been interpreted and reformulated in a Westernized framework. When it encounters another huge culture, such as the Chinese worldview and values, it would become incompatible and even inconsistent or in the state of collision (with the Chinese culture)” (ibid., p. 29). And Leung added, “It is not enough to talk about contextualization alone in China, because the contextualization perspective is taken from a missionary perspective for the purpose of evangelization. Its shortcoming is that it has already assumed that there is a set of Western orthodox Christianity which is the universal truth, and for the purpose of evangelization in China, the missionaries would attempt to make some simple adjustments to suit China’s immediate situations (which is not enough)” (ibid.). Hence, Leung strongly recommended that we should transcend or move beyond the Western cultural and missionary-orientated framework, to rediscover the original Christian faith from the Bible before establishing any truly Chinese Christianity and its Chinese theology (ibid., pp. 29–30).

Leung’s theoretical study of the Sinicization of Christianity corresponds well with the scholarly works cited in this paper. As reported in this paper, Chinese scholars like Zhang, Zhuo, Xu and Ng are working on the study of the Sinicization of Christianity and are also seeking a new paradigm for the study of global Christianity today. Zhang is seeking some regulative patterns from global Christianity and has discovered that Christianity, while becoming global, has already undergone processes of localization such as Hellenization and Romanization in earlier centuries. In response to the hidden cultural framework behind Westernized Christianity, Zhang proposes that China can help contribute a new understanding of Christianity by adding Chinese cultural merits to global Christianity in the process of the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’ in China. Zhuo, on the other hand, makes clear that the Christianity brought to China by Roman Catholicism and Protestantism was embedded with ‘Western Christianity’, which needed to be moved beyond or transcended by the processes of localization and adaptation to Chinese cultural contexts. Xu even proposes that the second step of the Sinicization of Christianity should be aimed at ‘taking off the hat of foreign religion’ and moving beyond the boundary of the ‘Western theological framework’ in the construction of a ‘truly’ Chinese theology. Hence, the Sinicization of Christianity in China can help by breaking through and moving beyond the Western orientation boundary. In Ng’s study of the concept of glocalization/global–local perspectives, he suggests that whether Christian theologies are Greco-Romanized, Germanized, British or Westernized, or even Americanized today, they all should only be recognized as ‘localized Christianities’. In order to claim Christianity as a global religion, we need to understand that the global must be localized, and all are but partial representations of global Christianity, including Western Christianities. This is another way to justify the claim that the Sinicization of Christianity is needed too.

Another important justification Leung finds in his theoretical study of the Sinicization of Christianity is the innovative thinking on Chinese Christian theology, hence the Chinese way of approaching theology in China. While Zhang proposes that China can help contribute a new understanding of Christianity by adding Chinese cultural merits to

global Christianity in the process of the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’, Leung proceeds to affirm that “Chinese culture will help Christianity to construct truly Chinese theology, by combining the Confucian view of humanity and the unity of heaven and man, the Taoist cultivation of emptiness and inaction, ...which can open up innovative thinking in Chinese Christian theology” (Leung 2017, pp. 37–38). Indeed, there is much to be added from China’s excellent cultural traditions, such as Apocalypse Thought (天启), The Book of Changes (易经), Taoism and the Confucian teaching of Love and *Ren* (爱与仁), etc., which can open up innovative thinking in Christian theology (ibid., pp. 35–39). This is also another way to justify the claim that the Sinicization of Christianity can make a good contribution to Christian theology.

In his article, “A Theological Exploration of ‘Sinicization’ of Christianity,” Leung recalls Xi Jinping’s announcement of his ‘China dream’ and the plan of ‘One Belt One Road’ for the years to come. Leung affirms that the construction of Christian theology can work in the same direction of this new path of China’s modernization (Leung 2017, p. 40). He trusts that loving the Christian God does not preclude Chinese socialist culture, especially regarding the identification with and participation in suffering with the Chinese people (ibid., pp. 30–35). He also argues that the construction of Chinese Christian theology would help to remove the spirit of hegemony and exclusiveness embedded in Western Christianity. Leung even quoted the example of Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary during the Ming Dynasty who had demonstrated high respect and appreciation of Chinese cultural traditions in his association with Chinese officials and intellectuals (ibid., p. 41). Leung even proposed that the construction of Chinese Christian theology could be grounded well on Chinese cultural traditions, and Christian theology would be enriched by its being integrated into Chinese cultural contexts, with the application of Chinese conceptual analyses such as ‘Harmony between man and nature’ (天人合一), ‘Inside Sage and Outside Kingly’ (内圣外王), ‘Benevolence and Heavenly Law’ (仁爱天理) and ‘Harmony of the Great Way’ (大道和谐) (ibid., pp. 37–41; Leung 2019, pp. 108–12). Hence, this will be the most proper way to launch the Sinicization of Christianity, which can bring forth an adequate contribution to the construction of a truly contextual, Chinese Christian theology too.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

After Xi Jinping’s introduction of his ‘China dream’ and the ‘One Belt One Road’ plan which encouraged religious leaders to think seriously about the implications and the practice of the ‘Sinicization of religion’ (Xi 2016, pp. 7–8), Western scholars responded instantly, and they held a meeting at the University of California at San Diego in 2018. A conference proceeding was edited by Richard Madsen and published by Brill in 2021, entitled *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*. In the proceeding, it was suggested that there are two kinds of Sinicization in China. One is ‘Sinicization from Above’, which is controlled and guided by the Chinese official policy towards religion. The other is ‘Sinicization from Below’ which is carried out by different levels of religious intellectuals, leaders, and lay believers (Madsen 2021, pp. 1–2). One contribution that probably representing the conventional Western religious intellectuals’ viewpoints is entitled “Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond”. The author suggests a new English translation for ‘Sinicization from Above’ as ‘Chinafication’, which emphasizes more the control and guidance from the Chinese government and is closer to the Western understanding of ‘political domestication’ (Yang 2021, pp. 16–43); hence, it is both proper and timely for the present paper to clarify the Chinese understanding of the introduction of the Sinicization of Christianity in China and the Chinese scholars’ justification to move beyond the Western orientation boundary.

As discussed in this paper, we have hereby affirmed that the study of the Sinicization of Christianity can be reckoned as a new paradigm in the study of Chinese Christianity for the following reasons: Firstly, the introduction of the Sinicization of Christianity helps to go beyond the conventional paradigms that are based on a Western agenda and looking at the history of the Christian mission from a Western perspective; it helps also to strengthen

the application of the concept of ‘glocalization’ as a key to go beyond the ‘globalization’ paradigm which tends to be ‘imperialistic’ and serve the purpose of evangelization, embedded also with Western supremacy in Christianity as a global religion. The emphasis on the interplay between globalization and localization verifies again the earlier efforts made by Chinese scholars in their studies of the ‘indigenization’, ‘contextualization’ and ‘localization’ processes of Christianity in China throughout the 20th century. Secondly, the introduction of the Sinicization of Christianity also helps by paying more attention to ‘the Chinese side of the story’ in exploring the history of Chinese Christianity. Especially regarding the spirit of denominationalism embedded in Western Christianity, Chinese Christians/theologians like C.Y. Cheng, Francis Wei and T.C. Chao have already shared their Chinese views, which was made clear by Cheng’s saying in 1910, “...denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but sometimes he suffers for it.” ([Report of Commission VIII 1912](#), 196). Thirdly, the study of the Sinicization of Christianity opens the eyes of Chinese as well as Western scholars to the fact that it is right and proper to recognize all Christianities, whether they are ‘Western Christianity’, ‘American Christianity’ or ‘Chinese Christianity’ as ‘localized Christianities’ or merely ‘partial representations of the global Christianity’. For the Christian religion to become a global religion, Christianity brought from the West needs to be localized in China in order to let Chinese Christianity become part of the global Christianity, as has already happened in the West and in America. Fourthly, as Zhang Zhiguang and Leung Incheng both agreed, Chinese culture would help the construction of a Chinese Christian theology, and more significantly, with the Chinese spirit of ‘inclusiveness’, ‘seeking harmony within diversity’ and ‘like a sea open to all rivers’. Hence, the introduction of the Sinicization of Christianity helps to justify the Chinese scholars’ attempt to move beyond the boundary of a ‘Western theological framework’ in the construction of a ‘truly’ Chinese Christian theology. It is both timely and appropriate for Chinese scholars and church leaders to attempt the construction of a Chinese Christian theology that could remove the spirit of hegemony embedded in Western Christianity.

Zhuo Xinping has rightly concluded in his recent book, *Research on Religious Trends in the Contemporary West*, that “We need to assess the situation... While actively promoting international dialogue and advocating multilateralism and pluralistic coexistence, we still need to see clearly and realize the latent shadow and metaphor of the desired ‘supremacy’ (一枝独秀) reflected in the kaleidoscope of contemporary Western spirituality” ([Zhuo 2023](#), p. 329).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cheng was appointed to be the Vice-Chairman of the China Continuation Committee in 1913, the General Secretary of the National Christian Council, which was started in 1922, and also the Founding President of the Church of Christ in China formed in 1927. See [Ng 2012](#), pp. 133–42. For a clearer picture of the Chinese side of the story behind the Edinburgh Missionary Conference, see also “The Other Side of 1910: The Development of Chinese Indigenous Movements Before and After the Edinburgh Conference” ([Ng 2012](#), pp. 67–90).
- <sup>2</sup> For example, Ma Min recalls Francis Wei’s beliefs that Christianity and Chinese culture could be harmonious and complementary, not mutually contradictory. Wei would fully support the process of the indigenization of Christianity in China (See [Ma 1995](#), pp. 99–123). Wei also discovered that Christian denominations in China had been fighting against one another for their own territorial domains; hence, he said, “The astonishing thing to the Chinese is that the Christians do not respect each other... It is denominationalism rather than denominations that has been a hindrance to the Christian enterprise in China” ([Wei 1947](#), p. 158).



- <sup>3</sup> T.C. Chao was the Dean of the School of Religion at Yenching University, 1928–1952. While working for the indigenization of Christianity in China, Chao said, “The (Chinese) Church is weak because she is still foreign (*yang jiao*), both in thought and form, and is divided, by Western denominationalism” (Chao 1923, p. 2).
- <sup>4</sup> *New Testament Bible*. Acts of the Apostles 11:26.
- <sup>5</sup> Wang Wei-fan gave a speech at the Joint Meeting of the National China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Council (*Liang Hui*) in 1996, and it was reported in *Selected Papers on the Sixth National Conference of Chinese Christianity Shanghai: Liang Hui*, 1997.
- <sup>6</sup> *New Testament Bible*. I Corinth 9:20–23.
- <sup>7</sup> *New Testament Bible*. The Gospel of John 1:14.

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