

Classroom Christianity: How theology is flourishing in China

by [Chloë Starr](#) in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue



Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an City, home of the Institute of Religious Studies. Some rights reserved by [Dr. Leonid Kozlov](#).

It is no secret that China's leaders have officially delayed the once-imminent arrival of socialist utopia and accepted that religion can continue in the meantime. But Christianity's place in Chinese society remains complex and multifaceted. At the same time that underground Roman Catholic seminaries were being closed in Inner Mongolia in 2012, Christians in other provinces were being elected to municipal positions. Christian churches flourish in many places, while official speeches hint at the limits of tolerance.

In a speech to the Communist Party Congress a year ago, for example, President Hu Jintao spoke of the threat of "international hostile forces" that are "plotting to intensify their imposition of Westernization and division in China." Such remarks implicitly target religions like Christianity that have strong foreign ties. Though Christianity has been present in Chinese culture since the seventh century, it is still widely seen as a foreign import and is vulnerable to worries about Western infiltration. There is some justification for this—almost all of the unregistered Protestant seminaries use American study materials, for example.

In between such political speeches, however, religion has been thriving. Why is Christianity becoming more acceptable to the Communist Party? A cynical view suggests that when religion is out in the open it is more easily controlled. Others point to the social cohesion that Christianity is perceived as bringing—and China is very interested in reducing levels of corruption and economic crime. The belief that the Protestant work ethic brought great benefit to European and American societies still lingers, and leaders have openly discussed how to emulate this source of strength and encourage citizens to become good Christian-style economic operatives. A more liberal stance toward religion is also, of course, a corollary of encouraging economic growth and individual enterprise. It's difficult to encourage entrepreneurship while cracking down on private lives.

One sector of Christianity currently flourishing in China is that of academic theology. University-based theology is a developing feature of Chinese Christianity, and its leaders are distinct both from the top church leaders approved by the state—such as the president of the China Christian Council and the members of the national council of the Three Self Patriotic Movement—and regional church leaders, whether linked to the national TSPM or to unregistered churches and seminaries. In this sector, there are more than 40 master of arts programs in different aspects of Christian studies available in Chinese universities as well as clusters of academics who specialize in such topics as Chinese Christian history or Christian philosophy.

An annual conference on Christianity hosted by the head of the religion department of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences features scores of papers covering a range of theological disciplines. Smaller conferences on these topics abound, as do summer schools on aspects of Christianity for graduate students and young academics. Government cadres join Chinese and foreign academics to tour the U.S. on fact-finding trips about religion. Hong Kong and Beijing academics have been advising the Chinese government on such matters as legalizing house churches.

The Chinese universities support various journals in Christian studies, and every week a new scholarly article appears on a Christian topic, from Augustinian philosophy to canon law to the history of Christianity in Yunnan province. Scholars with doctorates in biblical hermeneutics hold faculty positions in comparative literature and religious studies at state universities, where they generally have free rein to do research and teach. Popular Christianity in China is a major topic of research, and recent volumes like Lian Xi's *Redeemed by Fire* [see ["China's homegrown Protestants"](#)] have done much to promote an understanding of

nonmainstream churches and sects.

Academics in China have been pivotal to the growing acceptance of Christianity in official circles. They demonstrate that Christianity is a valid academic discipline. Intellectuals have long been leaders in Chinese Christianity, and they have often played an important part in negotiating its relationship with the state, such as during the previous period of growth in the Chinese church and flourishing in the academy in the 1920s and '30s. At that time, a Christian academic, Wu Leichuan, was chancellor of Yenching (Peking) University.

The late bishop Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting), the leader of the Protestant church in China for many decades, once noted that the country's best theology was coming out of the universities. (Seminary degrees are not accepted in the state university system, so students with seminary degrees usually cannot move on to graduate study in mainland universities.) Early in the 20th century, when the Chinese church was parting ways with its missionary past and creating new national structures, Christians looked to academics for leadership, and these academics provided a natural voice for the church. Yenching University's religious studies faculty included presidents of the World Council of Churches as well as internationally renowned theologians. Apart from Ding Guangxun himself, most people would be hard-pressed now to name a Protestant theologian who is based within the Chinese church.

The development of Christian thought outside the church has brought it to a much wider audience, though it has also caused anxiety for some. In the early days of the new academic theology movement, in the 1990s, there was almost no connection between this theology and the churches. Many of the proponents were not affiliated with churches (even if some of them were closet Christians), and the church for its part had little contact with the universities. Since then, a series of small rapprochements have occurred. Some university lecturers now also teach in church settings or open up their courses to local Christians. Some of the younger university academics are professing Christians and work not in fields such as philosophy or cultural relations but in church history or biblical studies—areas closer to church interests and more likely to be part of a seminary syllabus. There are also new initiatives, such as that at Renmin University, in which select former seminary students (current ministers) are able to pursue M.A. degrees in the secular system.

The general level of education in the Chinese church is low—including among pastors, many of whom have gone straight from high school to a regional Bible

school—so academic theology is not really competing with church teaching; it is operating in another sphere. As the general level of church education rises, we can assume that the contacts between church and academy will grow and academic works on Christianity—which are widely available in bookshops (unlike “Christian” publications)—will make their way into the consciousness of churchgoers.

As the number of well-educated urban Christians grows in China—and the old paradigm of a rural church full of elderly women fades—the demand for theological depth among the laity, especially students, is increasing. Some of these young Christians who are studying at key universities want to combine their faith with their academic studies, and the way forward for them is to earn an M.A. in a discipline (such as comparative literature, philosophy or Ming history) that allows them to explore theological questions. For their teachers, a Christian lens often provides a way to move beyond Marxist frameworks or introduce new ways of thinking about ethics into academic life. For many students, Christianity is not just a way of thinking but a way of life.

Working outside the church, academics have had more leeway to develop their own thinking on aspects of Christianity, from church-state relations to philosophical theology. This freedom is not total: academic papers are still censored before publication, and conferences with the terms church or biblical in the title may not get funding (as a result, there are a lot of conferences on the topic “East-West relations”). Nevertheless, academics’ degree of freedom is significant.

What is academic theology like in China, and what is its function, if not to serve the church? *Sino-Christian theology* is the English term for *Hanyu shenxue* (literally, “Chinese-language theology”). One of the first agendas of the movement was to have Christian theology recognized as an academic discipline—a goal that has largely been realized. The movement is also succeeding in making theology a form of public discourse and in generating a body of public intellectuals. Sino-Christian studies, its early protagonists hoped, would form an interpretive bridge between Chinese academia and society. It would enable Christianity to put its insights and its call for social justice in service to the state.

The applied nature of this vision of the discipline is clear. Although this stream of Chinese theology allows for elements of the sacred, it has generally not offered a theological rationale for its own existence or even posited God as its subject. (As more professing Christian academics have entered the debates, this stance is being

challenged.) Sino-Christian theology is, in general, rational and nonconfessional, focused on issues of language and literature, history, political science and sociology. Much work has been done on ethics and sociology of religion, and scholars have also tackled the question of Chinese Christian identity that so troubled earlier generations of Chinese Christians.

The original scholars involved in the Sino-Christian theology movement were historians, philosophers and sociologists, drawn into theology from other disciplines. This development reflected the absence of theological studies in the nation from the 1950s until the late 1970s. With few trained theologians around, scholars entered the field from philosophy or other disciplines. Much of the earliest work in Sino-Christian theology was concerned in one way or another with the question of language, and this stream has continued in the more recent interest in linguistics and semiotics. The current generation of younger students is much less restricted in its focus. Biblical studies, doctrinal studies and church history are beginning to make their way into the academy. A large number of essays are still published each year comparing Christianity with Confucianism, or comparing the work of individual Christian thinkers with Confucian or Buddhist thinkers. A range of newer interlocutors has come into play. A recent article by Renmin University's Yang Huilin comments on the poetry of the 17th-century Christian mystic Christopher Smart, in a reading which takes in the work of French theorists Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze as well as the Chinese classics. Critical theorists, especially those on the radical left, like Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek, are frequent dialogue partners for the Sino-Christian theologians.

The rapid development and unsystematic nature of Chinese academic theology makes it difficult to categorize, but since the mid-2000s it has stressed the recovery of older threads in Chinese thinking. A three-volume anthology compiled in 2010 included 33 academic articles with *Hanyu shenxue* in the title. By the late 2000s, the movement no longer focused on applying foreign theologies to the Chinese situation but entered into more richly creative dialogues. The rhetoric of much recent scholarship has insisted on China's right to set its own agenda and to think beyond the terms of Western theologies.

Proponents of Sino-Christian theology have bypassed or deconstructed debates surrounding local theologies by redefining the terms at the outset: they are not doing theology of the church for the church, as orthodox Western theology would have it, but theology "from Chinese academia, for Chinese academia, facing the

church and society.” It is a movement rooted in the Chinese situation, meeting Chinese needs.

Some Hong Kong theologians who first responded in the 1990s to the academic theology movement were adamant that theology should derive from the thinking of the body of Christ, the church, and that theology could not be done by those without a church affiliation or personal belief. Both sides were unhappy, for different reasons, with using the term *cultural Christians* to describe academics who were sympathetic to Christianity without necessarily being baptized Christians. (The phrase “scholars in mainland China studying Christianity” is preferred now.) The Hong Kong theologians who were skeptical of the Sino-Christian theology movement were expressing an orthodox viewpoint, but it did not hold much sway for the Sino-Christian theologians, who never bought into church definitions or terms of debate.

In Hong Kong, where church-oriented theology and humanities-oriented theology exist side by side, the challenge from the mainland academics has led theologians to think more deeply about how to expand church scholarship beyond the horizons of the church. Some are looking ahead to the question of what role the Hong Kong church will have within China when Hong Kong is no longer protected as a separate territory after 2047.

For the mainland church, whose theology is frequently characterized by scholars as conservative and backward, the challenge is to develop its own intellectual elites who can speak to the wider society in the way that the academics are doing. The mainland church also needs to become more welcoming to those who might be critical of its institutional structures.

As sociologists and historians of religion document some of the positive effects that religion can have in society, their data are taken up by the government and brought to bear on policy. However we view the contributions of academic theology, there is no doubting that it is making Christianity more socially acceptable. Dispelling some high-level fears about Christianity can only be good for the tens of millions in the pews.