**Sinolization of Christianity: Making the Gospel Relevant or Distorting It?**

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One critical predicament Christianity encounters in China is the long-term unresolved problem of its legitimacy in the Chinese cultural context (Yang, 2014). The Western packaging of the gospel still remains irrelevant in Chinese society because of the tremendous difference between the Chinese religious spirit and the traditional Christian message. Based on this reality, scholars from mainly non-Christian perspectives propose the concept of Sinolization of Christianity in order to reconcile this differences (Tang, 2013; Fan, 2015; Zhang & Tang, 2017).

Due to the unique cultural and political environments in China, the motif of Sinolization has become a prevalent theme among the official Three-Self churches. Even though there are different opinions regarding the ways of Sinolization, these voices have not received adequate attention. At the same time, the Chinese church, especially the Adventist church, generally neglects the cultural study, and as a result, the church lacks the appropriate response to Sinolization, thus easily losing its identity in the Chinese cultural context.

This study aims to revisit the concept of Sinolization of Christianity in light of the cultural studies, the biblical principles, and the great controversy perspective, and evaluate how it could affect the gospel communication in the Chinese context. Will it make the gospel more relevant or further distort the Christian message in the lens of the Chinese culture? The answer will help Chinese Christians, especially the Adventists, understand better their mission in China.

**Revisiting the Sinolization of Christianity**

What is the Sinolization of Christianity? At first glance, it seems to be a wonderful concept because the gospel must be contextualized if it intends to influence Chinese culture. We may assume that, under Sinolization, Christians find a more effective way to communicate the gospel as a culturally relevant message, without sacrificing its true meaning. However, there might be unexpected twists of meaning as the Sinolization of Christianity is evaluated in its specific political and cultural contexts.

It is notable that the Sinolization of Christianity is a relatively new concept set forth by the official Chinese government scholars such as Zhuo (2014) and Zhang (2011). Based on Zhuo’s theory, Christian thought is alien to Chinese culture, and must be Sinolized in order to develop in Chinese society. He claims that the purpose of this strategy is for the benefit of Christianity. However, Zhang’s theory, adopting Mou’s (2006) religious ecological concept, indicates that the rapid development of Christianity has broken the religious ecological balance in Chinese society, and therefore, it needs to be Sinolized in order to maintain the harmonious relationship with the larger Chinese culture.

Zhang’s and Zhuo’s theories appear to be somewhat contradictory. Either Sinolization benefits Christianity (Zhuo) or it is responding to the rapid development of Christianity (Zhang), these two explanations cannot escape the fact that the concept of Sinolization is “a political movement per se” and aims to transform Christianity with a political ideology (Guo, 2017). In some sense, it is somewhat similar to the indigenization movement of Christianity in the beginning of twentieth century. But, this Sinolization, like the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the 1950s, is designed for the political purpose. As Cohen explains, the government regards the existence of Christianity as an “uneasy presence” (Lim, 2013, p. 3) in Chinese society and makes the regime’s long-term viability as “the most important” issue in its political agenda (Vala, 2013, p. 59). Religion therefore must be treated in a subordinate position under that political security, and therefore the Sinolization of Christianity must by no means have the freedom to propagate the Christian message.

**The Sinolization of Christianity as a Cultural Movement**

Despite its strong political influence, Sinolization still needs to be studied as a strategy to deal with the vast difference between the Western Christian thought and the Eastern Chinese culture which mainly comes from the mixture of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and various folk beliefs.

After thousands of years of development, Chinese culture has become a formidable power that not only includes the philosophy of the ancients, but also seeks to dissolve any alien religious thought and philosophies by absorbing them into its own system. Under the diversity of religious forms, the main principle that guides religion is the philosophy of “the unity of heaven and man,” rooted in the Taoist thought (Li, 2013). Unlike the western philosophy, which is constructed based on the concept and category and makes clear division between opposite concepts, the Chinese people see no such demarcation. They try to reconcile different thoughts based on their understanding of heaven (truth), and absorb them into their hearts.

As a result, one significant characteristic of Chinese culture is pragmatism, which means that people will choose the religion based on their needs, especially caring for the everyday affairs of this world, instead of the truth related to the other world. They have no problem to accept polytheistic worship and thus it will not be a problem if the Christian God is added to their pantheon. They can even create some new gods or add some new functions to the existing gods when it is necessary to help their daily lives. If it is not violating the “unity between heaven and man” and the principle of pragmatism, people have no trouble in blending the concept of the Christian God into their belief system. Therefore, the Sinolization of Christianity is not a problem for Chinese culture and the latter has enough capacity to accommodate outside religions.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the Sinolization of Christianity has the capacity to appropriately communicate the Christian message in a Chinese cultural form while maintaining the true Biblical meaning of salvation. Even though Chinese culture can accommodate Christianity, it cannot accept Christian truth. There is a strong mechanism within the Chinese culture, preventing it from truly accepting the Christian message.

This mechanism influences the Chinese people to regard their culture superior to the Western, and thus leads it to reject the Christian message. At the core of this mechanism is the Chinese people’s thinking model, which emphasizes the inspiration from the nature and the resonance between human’s heart and the natural spirit (Qi, 2016), instead of the pursuit of truth. Driven by this pragmatic thinking, Chinese culture tends to have a strong anti-intellectualism sentiment.

Anti-intellectualism is a concept coined by Hofstadter (1962). He notes that this word is difficult to define, but it still can be treated as “an attitude” that dislikes “intellect or intellectuals” (p. 7). Even though it is a relatively new concept, the reality of anti-intellectualism has existed in various cultures for a long time. For Chinese culture, its anti-intellectualism can be seen both in Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

For example, Lao Zi says, “It is when knowledge and wisdom appear that the Great Hypocrisy emerges” and “Banish wisdom and discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold” (Cai, 2009, pp. 75, 79). However, this anti-intellectualism, as Hofstadter (1962) mentions, is not found “in a pure form but in ambivalence” (p. 7). It is a relative, rather than an absolute anti-intellectualism because it has its own pursuit of knowledge (Song, 2008).

Based on this anti-intellectualism, even though Chinese culture can accommodate Christianity, it cannot readily accept Christian truths like worshiping the only true God and the redemption from sin because it stands in contrast to the polytheistic worship and pragmatism in Chinese culture. In other words, Chinese culture can only accommodate Christianity in the sense that the Christian God provides another possible way of blessing their daily lives. Based on this reality, the Sinolization of Christianity should adopt the way of the Sinolization of Buddhism, which clothes the form of Indian Buddhism but keeps the meaning of Chinese culture, including the creation of their own Chinese scriptures (Fan, 2015).

**Sinolization of Christianity from the Biblical Perspective**

In the mission field, Christian witness seeks to communicate the gospel appropriately both in the biblical and cultural senses. It tries to “raise up effective sources of the Christian message from within the respondent culture” (Hesselgrave, 2009, p. 428). In other words, gospel communication should be receptor oriented (Kraft, 1991). This communication strategy is based on the biblical teaching, such as the incarnation of Jesus in John 1:14. He has set an example of becoming flesh in order that people could be reached. Paul the Apostle established the principle of becoming “all things to all people” in order to save some “by all possible means” (1 Cor. 9:22). This well known strategy is called contextualization.

Contextualization espouses that the Christian message needs to be clothed in a form that is understandable to people in different cultural settings, including the Chinese culture. In other words, the Christian message can be resilient in different forms as it encounters different contexts. As a result, from both the Chinese cultural side and the Christian side, there are no barriers for the Sinolization of Christianity. Both have adequate capacity to accommodate each other.

However, any contextualization is risky and can lead to syncretism (Kraft, 2009, p. 405), which further leads to a loss of the Christian identity. Because of this, Paul Hiebert (1984) proposes the concept of critical contextualization, abandoning those cultural practices that violate biblical principles and keeping those in harmony with the Bible.

Hiebert’s proposal demonstrates that the influence of contextualization is only partial, instead of complete. In whatever form the Christian message may take, the essential message of salvation does not change. It means that from both the Chinese cultural side and the Christian side, some respective elements exist, which makes them resistant to one another. From the Biblical perspective, the gospel tries to maintain its core value, which is Jesus’ redeeming humanity from the sin. Its aim is the Christianization of China. While from the Chinese cultural side, it tries to maintain its thinking model, the unity between heaven and man, and to reject the Christian doctrines regarding salvation. Its aim is the Sinolization of Christianity.

Furthermore, like the Chinese culture, Christianity also possesses a certain degree of anti-intellectualism. As Hofstadter (1962) mentions, Protestantism is “the first arena for an anti-intellectual impulse” in North America (p. 55). For example, the evangelist Charles Finney was convinced that “the schools are to a great extent spoiling the ministers” and he considered the young ministers coming “out of college with hearts as hard as the college walls” (Hofstadter, 1962, p. 94). John Piper’s (2010) book *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* also describes the phenomena of anti-intellectualism in Christianity in detail. In the Chinese version of this book, the translator especially mentions that not only the Christians in America, but also those in China possess the strong sentiment of anti-intellectualism.

This Chinese-Christian anti-intellectualism, like that in Chinese culture, is driven by pragmatism and pluralism (Piper, 2010). The difference is that the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture makes it resist the Christian core message such as the salvation from sin and eternal life. In some sense, it Sinolizes Christianity not only in its cultural form, but also in its meaning. It means that anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture helps that culture maintain its highest value by assimilating Christianity completely. The result is syncretism.

However, anti-intellectualism among Christians does not show a united attitude towards the Chinese culture. For example, the Shouters (a Chinese denomination whose worship is featured with shouting “Amen” all the time) generally reject both theological study and Chinese culture at the same time. But for many other Christian anti-intellectualists, although they despise theology, especially systematic theology, they still incline to the Chinese culture. Whether rejecting or accepting the Chinese culture, as Piper (2010) indicates, this anti-intellectualism makes Christians lose their heads and knowledge about salvation, and thus easily makes Christianity lose its identity in the process of Sinolization.

In sum, the pragmatism in Chinese culture and the contextualization of Christian message together make the process of Sinolization of Christianity a possibility. But the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture requires that Sinolization must make the Eastern culture superior to Christianity. The result is, as Fan (2015) points out that Chinese Christians’ pragmatism is not a failure of the Christian mission in China, but the starting point of Sinolization. This is dangerous because the pragmatism will ultimately require that Christianity should be completely Sinolized, including its core values. Therefore, the Sinolization of Christianity is entirely different from the missiological concept of contextualization or indigenization, which requires that the gospel should take the cultural form while keep the Christian meaning. Sinolization does not make the gospel relevant, but, on the contrary, distort the gospel in the Chinese context.

**The Sinolization of Christianity in**

**the Great Controversy Perspective**

The preceding discussion shows that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between Christianity and Chinese culture even under the influence of Sinolization. The former tries to bring the nation of China into the kingdom of God, while the latter intends to assimilate the kingdom of God into the Chinese context. This controversy is in fact the same great struggle between God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom. It does not mean that a certain country or culture belongs to Satan while others belong to God. It simply implies that the intention in trying to assimilate the gospel into any human culture will only serve the purpose of Satan.

In the relationship between gospel and culture, the fundamental views come from Niebuhr (1951), who proposed five different views. These views include Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. Niebuhr’s view indicates that within every culture of the world, there are elements in accordance with the biblical principle, but at the same time, every culture also bears the elements defiled by the sin. This reality justifies the principle of critical contextualization.

In case of the Chinese culture, although it is open and tolerant to other religions on the superficial level, it is in fact opposed to any other religion in its deeper meaning. The Christian message can by no means be Sinolized if it still wants to keep its identity. Gospel communication in any human context is “caught up in a great struggle-the conflict of the ages” (Ladd, 2009, p. 88). The Christian mission is in fact announcing the coming of God’s kingdom to this world. When these two kingdoms meet, the conflict cannot be avoided. As Jesus says, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28).

This theme of conflict echoes the Great Controversy that is featured in Adventist theology. We believe that this cosmic conflict started even before the earth was created. The beginning of the Bible is full of such conflict, which eventually leads to the fall of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, this conflict is repeated throughout the whole Bible, the whole of human history, and even in human’s heart. Naturally, this conflict exists in the gospel communication in different cultural settings, especially in the process of the Sinolization of Christianity.

Adventist theology provides special means that help people fight against anti-intellectualism. Doctrines such as the Great Controversy, the sanctuary, pre-Adventist judgment, and the emphasis of God’s laws make people think more about the biblical truth and evoke people’s rational thinking about Christian faith and the world to come. Both the emphasis of great controversy and the elements against anti-intellectualism help people understand the nature of the Sinolization of Christianity, and thus know how to deal with the cultural problems in the cross-cultural gospel communication.

**Conclusion**

The Sinolization of Christianity is a double-edged sword for the Christian message. It provides a space allowing Christianity to be expressed in the form understandable to the Chinese people. Both Chinese culture and Christianity have the capacity to embrace each other. However, it will probably also cause syncretism, with Chinese culture entirely assimilating Christianity and making the latter lose its identity. The Sinolization of Christianity in fact does not make gospel relevant in Chinese culture but distorts it.

The way to avoid such a distortion is to recognize that both Chinese culture and Christianity have inner immune systems to guard their respective core values, and thus reject each other in their deep levels. Chinese culture will not abandon the unity of heaven and man as its thinking model and the pragmatism as its benefit, and anti-intellectualism greatly strengthens this perception. Christianity, in the same manner, cannot be assimilated into the Chinese culture, which would sacrifice its message of salvation. As a result, between Chinese culture and Christianity, there is an irreconcilable conflict, which is reflected in the Great Controversy theme in the Adventist theology. Such theme will help people understand more fairly about the relationship between gospel and culture, and thus help Christians maintaining its identity in the cross-culturally mission.

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