An Interview with Professor Peter Chen-main Wang, The Fifth Chinese Chair of Chinese Studies

While speaking with Professor Peter Chen-main Wang, Professor of History at National Chung Hsing University in Taiwan and the fifth holder of the European Chair for Chinese Studies at Leiden University, I was struck by his broad academic interests and consistency in his perspective throughout a series of Sino-foreign studies. Wang seems to attempt to seek the meaning of Chinese society as a chain of dynamic reactions to the outside world, e.g., the Manchu rule in the seventeenth century, Marshall’s mediation from 1945 to 1947, and Christian ideas in the twentieth century.

What does history tell us about the political role of Christianity in China? I do not think that Chinese Christians are eagerly interested in politics. In fact, as far as I know, Chinese Christians have been under close watch by the Chinese government. That is especially true for the underground churches (or house churches). One of the most peculiar characteristics of the house churches in China is that their church members do their best not to get involved in any political issues. I believe that the Chinese Communists are very suspicious of any large gathering, especially of religious activities. As we all know, any religious gatherings, even being defined as heterodoxy, would be seriously suppressed.

Given that Hong’s active participation in the Qing enterprise was always as a Confucian administrator, it is perplexing to conclude that he was motivated by an overriding concern for the welfare of China and its people. In this way, the example of Hong Chengchou may also shed some light on the motives and experiences of other Chinese scholars-officials who chose to serve the new dynasty. Hong included, sought to explain or clarify their reasons for changing their political allegiance.

The title for the upcoming conference you are organizing refers to “Contextualization of Christianity in China.” What kinds of issues should receive focus according to your concept of “contextualization”? A lack of contextualization of Christianity is a widely accepted explanation for the slow development of the Christian faith in China. When the Christian churches in China were forced to adopt a three-self method (self-administration, self-support, and self-propagation) in the 1950s, Christianity was still viewed in many Chinese eyes as a “foreign religion” with various connections with foreign governments. Thus, the foreign flavour of the Christian churches and the differences between Christianity and Chinese culture have often been blamed for the “slow” development of Christianity in China.

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