

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

People >
East Asia

While speaking with Professor Peter Chen-main Wang, Professor of History at National Chung Cheng 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 the 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.

By Masayuki Sato

In the field of Chinese history, Professor Wang is a widely-recognized specialist on the Ming-Qing period for his research on, for example, a careful and creative articulation of the political role of Hong Chengchou in Ming-Qing dynastic change. This research was crystallized into his monograph: *The Life and Career of Hung Ch'eng-ch'ou (Hong Chengchou): Public Service in a Time of Dynastic Change* (AAS Monograph Series, 1999), in which he analyzes how one Ming intellectual finally discarded his loyalty to his own "civilized" Han tribe and cooperated with an outside force, the Manchu tribe. Professor Wang is also exploring the history of Christianity in China. Wang argues that Christianity has long been conceived of as a foreign religion and, accordingly, has been understood in association with Western power, which would influence Chinese society negatively. He is presently giving a seminar on "The History of Christianity in China" at the Sinological Institute of the Universiteit Leiden and is also organizing an international conference on this subject taking place from 6-8 June 2002. Moreover, he is almost finished with his monograph, *Marshall and China*.

Dynastic Transformation from the Ming to the Qing and Hong Chengchou

Let us start with your monograph on Hong Chengchou. Can you explain what aspect in Ming-Qing history you shed light on through your research on his political life?

In its last period, the Ming dynasty was in a desperate situation; it was plagued by a corrupt, self-seeking court, bureaucratic factionalism, widespread public discontent, open rebellion, and numerous other problems of an economic and political nature. Under those circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that at some point in time Hong Chengchou concluded that the Ming cause was hopeless and that the nascent Qing Dynasty represented the only reasonable alternative for the restoration of orderly rule.

But Hong's decision to leave the Ming Dynasty was inconsistent with Chinese traditional moral values.

Yes. In the past, the concept of loyalty was a dominant factor in judging scholar-officials in China. Any official who crossed over to serve the new dynasty would naturally be considered a traitor, one of the most notorious categories of Chinese officialdom. In the case of Hong Chengchou, his sense of loyalty, or his lack of it, poses an intriguing question. Many individuals have been puzzled by the question of how a

senior public official with a consistent record of personal honesty and integrity could seemingly abandon those principles and join forces with an alien people bent on the conquest of his homeland.

What do you think is the reason Hong finally decided to join the Qing?

Hong seems to have taken the practical view that dynasties, native or foreign, come and go, but the native culture endures. It was a rich and ancient one. If an alien people accepted the pre-eminent values of that culture, they might become a part of "China." Throughout his career in the Qing period, it is clear that he persisted in adopting a Confucian-style administration. Hong's contributions to history are not limited to his perception of a changing world or his success in fulfilling his personal ambitions in troubled times. Instead, he can be seen to represent those individuals who attempt to restore peace and stability to a war-ravaged society and thus realize the Confucian ideal.

It seems that he was not the only statesman-official who decided to follow the Qing during that period.

I think that for many of the Ming intellectuals, it was not simply a case of self-preservation and political expediency that they discarded their loyalty to the Ming. As with Hong, their joining the new government seemed to present the best chance of serving China and its people in a time of national crisis. Given that Hong's active participation in the Qing enterprise was always as a Confucian gentleman and man of action, one can 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 scholar-officials who chose to serve the new dynasty. It is perplexing that so few of them, Hong included, sought to explain or clarify their reasons for changing their political allegiance.

Christianity in China

You are currently giving a seminar on "The History of Christianity in China" at the Sinological Institute at the Universiteit Leiden. Can you describe points that you want to make in the seminar?

This course will serve to introduce the student to the development of the Christian church in China, the interaction between the church and the host society, and the role of the church and its missionaries as agents of East-West cultural exchange. It will begin with the coming of Nestorian Christianity to China during the Tang Dynasty, continue with the story of the early Christ-



Dr Masayuki Sato (l) and Professor Peter Wang (r) at the Sinological Institute, the Universiteit Leiden.

ian missionaries, and conclude with a description of the Christian Church in contemporary China and Taiwan.

What kind of issues do you address in the seminar?

I am focusing on the following four topics: First, how Christian missionaries at various times sought to spread the Gospel in an alien culture. This will include discussions of missionary perceptions of Chinese culture and the local environment and of their methods and strategies in spreading the faith. Second, indigenous perceptions of the Christian religion and the messengers of this faith, and the various responses of the Chinese people to foreign beliefs and cultures. Third, special attention will be paid to matters concerning Chinese converts to the new religion and to the founding of Christian churches. And, fourth, how did foreign missionaries and their Chinese converts respond to the differences between various Christian denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, and those existing between Christianity and various indigenous religions?

Various questions will be explored, such as: to what extent did Chinese converts accept these foreign beliefs, and how did they accommodate themselves within the larger culture to this foreign religion? How did they maintain a balance between this new system of belief and national ideals? How and when did they assume the task of spreading their new beliefs among their countrymen? And, also, how did the foreign missionaries respond to the founding of native churches independent of their supervision and control?

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.

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 government. That is especially true for the underground churches (or house churches). One of the most spectacular 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, once being defined as heterodoxy, would be seriously suppressed.

The Marshall Plan and the Modern Sino-US Relationship

Can you contextualize the role of the "Marshall Plan" in modern Sino-US history?

From the last months of World War II to the completion of Marshall's instruction in early December 1945, the American policy on China consistently tried to create a "strong, united and democratic" China, an impressive and noble ideal. Yet few Americans at the decision-making level appreciated what China most needed as she fought for survival. Instead, they pursued their

idealistic quest for world order without fully comprehending China's situation, which meant that American officials never found a satisfactory solution to China's problems.

What did the US learn from this "failure"?

Marshall's failure to achieve his goals in mediating the struggle between the Nationalist Government and the Chinese Communists has three things in common with what is happening now between the US, China, and Taiwan. First, although the US does not now wish to become embroiled in peace talks between the Republic China and the People's Republic of China, it is caught between Taiwan and mainland China politically, economically, militarily, and culturally. Secondly, when Marshall acted as mediator in China, control of arms sales and suspension of economic assistance were used as the methods of control over the Chinese governments, just as they are today. And, thirdly, Marshall's task in China was to make China a strong, united, and democratic country. In other words, the US was greatly concerned with China's internal affairs. Today, the US is also very concerned for democracy and human rights in China.

The Socio-political Dynamism in the History of Sino-foreign Relationship

I would like to end this interview with a question about your broad academic vision: What is the common thread in your perspective on these three 'different' subjects, i.e. Hong Chengchou, Chinese Christianity, and the modern Sino-American relationship?

Basically, we can see the above three subjects as a series of "stimulus-response" activities. In the case of Hong Chengchou, he helped the Manchus to conquer China by guiding the Manchus into a Chinese cultural norm. It seems that, to Hong, the Manchu leader could be an accepted Chinese emperor as long as he adopted the Chinese way to rule China. Christianity, although being considered a foreign religion, has been introduced into China in different ways. Some missionaries tried to cover it with a Chinese garment, some tried to integrate it with Chinese culture, and some refused to make any change in Western interpretations. Thus, the Christian stimuli aroused different responses from the Chinese. As for Marshall's mediation, the Chinese context was not ready for an American-ideal coalition government and democracy, there was no hope at all for his mediation.

Thank you very much and enjoy the rest of your stay at IIAS and in the Netherlands!

Thank you! <

Dr Masayuki Sato is currently Chiang Ching-kuo post-doctoral fellow and Lecturer at Sinological Institute, Leiden University. The first of a two-part series on his own research can be found on p.20 in this issue. E-mail: m.sato@let.leidenuniv.nl

Editors' note >

Professor Wang's article on his research regarding Christianity in China can be seen on p.22 of this issue, and information about the upcoming conference organized by him can be found on p.59.