

Kuhlmann, Dirk: *„Das Fremde im eigenen Lande“*. Zur Historiographie des Christentums in China von Liang Qichao (1873–1929) bis Zhang Kaiyuan (geb. 1926). Nettetal: Steyler Verlagsbuchhandlung 2014. ISBN: 978-3-8050-0624-8; 452 S.

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Christianity has a long history in China, one that dates back to the Nestorians in the seventh century. Yet why is it still considered a foreign religion? This is the central question that Dirk Kuhlmann addresses in his impressive book, a revision of his dissertation finished at the University of Trier. Kuhlmann finds answers by examining the historiography of Christianity in China. His conclusion: Christianity remains a foreign religion because it reflects certain „master narratives“ that Chinese intellectuals have told themselves about China’s place in the world.

The attempt by historians to reflect on their own traditions, of course, is not new, and Western historians of China have devoted considerable attention to reflecting on the development of sinology and Western historiography in China (see, for example the trailblazing work of Paul Cohen and Mechthild Leutner). Few scholars, however, have devoted their attention to studying how Chinese scholarship on the history of Christianity in China has evolved in the past 30 years. Kuhlmann offers a new approach by placing studies of Christianity in China produced during the Republican period in dialogue with the scholarly literature published in the 1980s, after the Chinese economic reforms.

After overviews of the history of Christianity in China as well as the broader political context that grounded the historiographical debates about Christianity, Kuhlmann begins his narrative by looking at three intellectuals before 1949 – Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, and Chen Yuan. All three set the „discursive patterns“ for later writing about Christianity. In 1902, Liang, as a way of criticizing his teacher Kang Youwei’s more positive view of Christianity and religion as a modernizing force in China, portrayed Christianity as a form of Western „cultural aggression“ and invasion.

For Liang, Christianity, as opposed to Buddhism, was not able to indigenize into Chinese culture because of its „ambitions for conquest“ and its intolerance towards traditional Chinese culture. (pp. 166–167).

Hu, on the other hand, „selectively adapted“ parts of Christianity that he thought useful to reforming China. While he disliked the „superstitious“ and „irrational“ aspects of Christianity, he was attracted to the Social Gospel and found Christianity a useful force for social and ethical reform of the nation. In short, Christian missionaries, with their emphasis on medical and social work, could be used as a way to modernize the nation.

The historian Chen Yuan, on the other hand, was one of the few intellectuals that took Christianity seriously as a cultural phenomenon. Citing the work of the Jesuits and Matteo Ricci, Chen argued that Christianity could be compatible with Chinese culture. In his work, Chen focused on both successful and failed attempts at „inculturation“ or „indigenizing“ Christianity in China.

These three approaches – Christianity as cultural imperialism, as modernization, and Christianity as part of „cultural exchange“ – had a long-lasting influence on the historiography on Christianity in China, as they set the template for many of the later historiographical discussions of Christianity in China. Ever since the Chinese economic reforms after 1979, there has been an explosion in studies of the history of Christianity in China. Over 1.000 articles and monographs were published between 1980 and 2000, and with it, the foundation of academic centers for the study of Christianity (p. 194). Kuhlmann surveys three influential journals, Jindaishi yanjiu, Lishi yanjiu, and Zhongguoshi yanjiu to collect his data.

Kick-starting the interest in Christianity, Kuhlmann points out, was the translation of Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism in 1987, which sparked a shift in writing about Christianity as part of China’s „modernization.“ By the late 1990s, however, yet another paradigm shift occurred: the change to „cultural exchange.“ In particular, Zhang Kaiyuan, President of Huazhong Normal University (Wuhan) from 1983 to

1990, promoted the new approach to studying Christianity and further promoted the work through the Center for the Study of Cultural Exchange between East and West. Thus, Kuhlmann shows that the discursive patterns and shifts in the work of Liang, Hu, and Chen are mirrored in the three decades since the 1980s.

What explains these historiographical transformations after the 1980s? For one, Kuhlmann points to the increasing intellectual exchange with Western historians working on Christianity in China since the 1980s. Yet, he downplays the part that exchange with Western scholars had in shifting the historiographical discourse. The Chinese approach to the charismatic indigenous Chinese church group, the Jesus Family (Yesu jiating), is telling. While Western scholars have often focused on delineating the indigenous theological roots of the group, Kuhlmann shows that Chinese scholars are interested in different issues, particularly how the Jesus Family were similar to the Taiping movement (1851–1864), and how their ideas reflect utopian and modernizing elements. Thus, while Western scholars are prone to arguing that Christianity itself is a „Chinese“ religion, the Chinese historiography is still reluctant to make that argument. Thus, Kuhlmann emphasizes that Chinese historians are responding more to shifts internal to China, rather than responding to global trends in historiography.

But it is here that Kuhlmann’s interpretive apparatus sells him a bit short. While Kuhlmann does mention the broader political and cultural shifts that are occurring in China after the 1980s, one wishes that he had rooted his readings of the scholarly literature more tightly with the political changes in China. Part of this is due to the rigid organization of the book, where he separates his close readings of the texts from the broader historical context, thus leaving the reader to fill in the gaps to think about how the historiographical changes after the 1980s reflected China’s own rapid modernization and engagement with the rest of the world. By focusing on institutions, rather than individuals, Kuhlmann also leaves a muddier picture about what drives the individual scholars after the 1980s. While

one gains a clear view of how Liang, Hu, and Chen drew upon the history of Christianity in China for their reformist goals, the picture becomes less clear for the scholars after the 1980s.

Overall, these are minor criticisms of Kuhlmann’s wonderful work. His appendix and bibliography – where he comprehensively sorts the scholarship into different categories – alone offer a great service to the scholarly community, and will be essential reading for people hoping to gain an overview of the scholarship on Christianity emanating from the PRC. The result is a meticulously produced yet panoramic intellectual history of Chinese scholarly approaches to the history of Christianity in China.

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