CHAPTER EIGHT

T.C. CHAO: BUILDER OF CHINESE INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

T.C. Chao (Zichen Zhao, 趙紫宸 1888–1979) was born on February 14, 1888, in the county of De Qing in Zhejiang Province, China. He enrolled into Sui Ying College (萃英書院) in Suzhou at the age of fifteen and the following year continued his study at the Middle School of Soochow (Dongwu) University. Since then, he had established a lifelong link with missionary schools in China. Soochow University was run by the American Methodist Episcopal Church of the South; it was thus natural that Chao would belong to the Methodist Church by denomination, when he was baptized or became a Christian. But it is interesting to know that Chao was later affiliated to the Anglican/Episcopal Church and was ordained as an Anglican priest by a Hong Kong bishop, R.O. Hall, in 1941.

As a member of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong, I am interested to know the Anglican side of the story and to see how T.C. Chao was connected with the Anglican Church and whether the Anglican faith had any impact on Chao’s construction of his indigenous theology. In 1989, I came to know a Chinese historian, Prof. Kaiyuan Zhang in Wuhan and had heard from him that there was a popular saying among the Chinese Christians in the late 1940s and early 1950s, which said, ‘Bei Zhao Nan Wei’, meaning ‘For Protestant theologians in China, we have Zichen Zhao (T.C. Chao) in the north and Zhuomin Wei (Francis C.M. Wei) in the south’.¹ Why was it so? I later discovered that the saying was popular within the Anglican/Episcopal Church in China and among the Chinese Christians within the Anglican Church who had respected highly these two professors and theologians—T.C. Chao being the professor of the School of Religion

¹ The popular saying was found in the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (The Chinese Anglican/Episcopalian Church) in 1940s in China. See, for reference, the discussion in Peter Tze Ming Ng. “Lecture III: On T.C. Chao” in Wo suo huainian de siwei Shenggong zong shenxuejia (The Four Anglican Theologians I Respected Most). (Kowloon, Hong Kong: All Saints’ Church, 2006), 28–39.
at Yenching University in the North and Francis C.M. Wei being the professor and President of Central China (Huazhong) University in Wuchang (South of Yangtze River). Wei was a student and later a professor at Central China University, and it was natural that he was baptized as a member of the Anglican/Episcopalian Church. But T.C. Chao had studied and was baptized at Soochow University and later received his further education, attaining the Master of Arts and Bachelor of Divinity degrees from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, USA. After returning to China, Chao became a professor first at Soochow University (1917–1926) and later at Yenching University (1926–1956, Dean of the School of Religion from 1928–1956), both of which were strongly associated with the American Methodist Episcopal Mission. Why did Chao then became an Anglican priest in 1941? I began to investigate further T.C. Chao’s relationship with the Anglican Church in China. I discovered that it was in 1925, shortly before Chao became a professor at Yenching University, Chao met the Anglican bishop Ronald O. Hall at Soochow University. It was the last year Chao taught at Soochow, as the professor of theology and philosophy at the age of thirty-seven. Bishop Hall was so impressed by the talent and profound knowledge of Chao that he recommended him to go to Oxford in England for his sabbatical year in 1932–33.\(^2\) There, Chao could develop closer contact with his Anglican friends and began to learn more about Anglicanism in England. When the Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937, Central China (Huazhong) University moved its campus to Xizhou, Dali in Yunnan. Bishop Hall was much concerned with student work in the new campus, so he invited T.C. Chao to spend his second sabbatical year (1939–40) to work in Yunnan, assisting another Anglican priest, Rev. Gilbert Baker (who later became R.O. Hall’s successor as Bishop of Hong Kong in the 1960s) and working with refugee students there.\(^3\) While working in Yunnan, Chao suggested the name ‘Wen Lin Tang’ (meaning ‘The Church in the Forest of Learning’) to the student church in Kunming, and there he had expressed to Bishop Hall his willingness to join the

\(^2\) Bishop Hall remarked the followings about Chao, saying: “The Dean of the College, a young Chinese theologian, TC Chao, is a great and saintly soul with a first class brain.” See David Paton, *The Life and Times of Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Diocese of Hong Kong and Macau & the Hong Kong Diocesan Association, 1985), 49.

\(^3\) See *ibid.*, 103.