The Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Modern China and the Globalization of Culture

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Buddhism and Christianity are among the most ‘globalized’ world religions, contributing enormously to the globalization of culture. Studying their encounter in modern China is particularly significant for the understanding of globalization. However, the studies in this area remain relatively rare and the perspective of the globalization of culture has not been properly adopted for exploration. Most historical surveys of modern Chinese Buddhism tend to emphasize the Buddhist adaptation to modern society or the modernization of Buddhism. The perspective of globalization is usually sidelined. In fact, many of these works prefer to take Western science rather than Christianity as the key issue for modern Chinese Buddhism. Only some of the specialized studies on individual Buddhists or Buddhist organizations pay particular attention to the global perspective and make occasional references to the encounter with Christianity. In these studies of modern Chinese Buddhism, the Christian side of the encounter is usually omitted. Though this shortcoming is addressed in the more focused surveys of the Buddhist-Christian encounter in China, most of these tend to study the encounter primarily within the Chinese context.

This essay aims to contribute to the subject by adopting a new perspective, namely the globalization of culture, rather than discovering any new material or providing further historical details. This is not to suggest that the global context or the perspective of globalization is the only legitimate context or perspective for the understanding of the encounter. What is argued here is

1 Globalization has been discussed in various disciplines, including economics, politics, geography and sociology. This paper will focus on the globalization of culture addressed primarily from a historical perspective. For an overview of these approaches to globalization, see Pieterse (2004), pp. 7–21.


that the global perspective can supplement the prevalent local perspective\(^6\) to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding.

This essay consists primarily of a historical study of the formation, process, and impact of the Buddhist-Christian encounter in modern China from the perspective of the globalization of culture. Firstly, it endeavours to show that the encounter was shaped by a number of factors that were part of the globalization of culture. These include the activities of Christian missions and the cross-cultural dissemination of Western science. Secondly, through focusing on some individuals involved in the encounter, namely Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), Timothy Richard (1845–1919, known in Chinese as Li Timotai 李提摩太) and Taixu 太虛 (1889–1947), this essay will demonstrate that they also considered the meaning of the encounter against the global context. Thirdly, it will be shown that the impact of the encounter on both Buddhism and Christianity can be understood from the perspective of globalization.

As well as providing a historical study, the essay also addresses the theoretical discussion concerning the globalization of culture. There are currently three major paradigms or theories: The first attempts to understand cultural globalization in terms of a clash of civilizations. The second, which may be called Westernization, Americanization, or even McDonaldization, views globalization as the expansion or ‘universalization’ of Western culture or values. The third prefers to interpret globalization in terms of a hybridization of cultures.\(^7\) This essay will provide critical remarks on these paradigms in its analysis of the encounter.

### 1 Yang Wenhui and the Buddhist Revival in Late-Qing China

Chinese Buddhism experienced a revival in the late Qing 清 period, though in what sense it is a revival should be further clarified and remains a subject of academic debate.\(^8\) It is widely recognized that the most prominent leader of this reform, or revival, was a lay Buddhist named Yang Wenhui, who is widely hailed as the ‘Martin Luther’ of Chinese Buddhism. An analysis of the history of Yang’s reform, in particular the proposals and practices associated with it, will show that the reform was shaped to a certain extent by the process of globalization.

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\(^{6}\) E.g., Chen Yongge (2003).

\(^{7}\) Pieterse (2004), pp. 41–58.

\(^{8}\) Welch (1968), pp. 262–69.