This study is on the inculturation of Christianity in China, how it transformed from the religion of foreign missionaries to a faith deeply rooted within China. Brian Stanley has defined inculturation as “a quest for a secure and integrated identity motivated by a concern to find ways of being both authentically Christian and authentically Chinese, Indian, African or whatever.” In turn, Lamin Sanneh has noted that inculturation takes place through the translation of ideas and texts into the local idiom. This study follows that process of translation through modes of transmission at once ancient and modern: how through sermon, story, and song, Chinese adherents sewed their new-found faith into the fabric of Chinese society.

The adoption of foreign ideas and religious faith is a complex process. Narratives and concepts born outside a culture require local amendment and adaptation. As Wang Hui has pointed out, traditional epistic modes of

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1 What constitutes the precise term for the process of the appropriation of religion within any given milieu is itself a matter of some dispute between scholars. Some prefer the use of “appropriation”, “acculturation”, or “assimilation”. In this chapter I will use the term “inculturation” as defined by Brian Stanley (see footnote below). Though imperfect, “inculturation” as Stanley defines it best captures the process we will describe and analyze. Some argue that one should refer to “Christianities” as opposed to “Christianity” in China. Certainly, the use of “Christianities” is fair given the diversity of Christian belief and practice in China. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity, I will refer primarily to “Christianity” rather than the plural form; assuming that by “Christianity” we refer to sects that rely on a set of common texts, a shared vocabulary, and enough beliefs in common to maintain a family resemblance that hearkens back to the creedal formulation that Christianity in its various iterations represents “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Indeed the term “catholic” best captures what is presented, for unlike “one” it refers to the paradoxical unity that exists in each distinct instance of the Christian religion as representative of its universal character.


discourse play a substantial role in how concepts are received, understood, and applied within the Chinese context. This is particularly true of evangelical Protestant forms of Christianity that put tremendous weight on texts and their translation, reception, and dissemination in the vernacular of the local culture. Further, as Sanneh has noted, emphasis upon translation and interpretation empowers the local interpreter, thereby nurturing inculturation. Mastery of the local idiom puts the native speaker at a distinct advantage over the foreign missionary when it comes to understanding and spreading the message. Over time, this diminishes the need for the foreign missionary. As the story is told and retold by the local interpreter it produces and reinforces an “integrated identity” that is both individual and corporate, giving rise to its consequent social and political significance.

Thus, if one wishes to understand the inculturation of Chinese Christianity and its social and political significance, one should pay close attention to the modes of transmission and how these comport with the cultural milieu. What terms were used by its adherents to transmit and apply their new-found faith? In what ways did their perceptions of the faith diverge from those of the foreign missionaries? What impact has their message had upon the development of Chinese Christianity and society itself?

**Milieu, Medium, and Message**

The complex transition of Christianity into a faith deeply embedded in Chinese soil has much to do with where it took root. Though a handful of scholars and officials embraced Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their influence and imprint upon Christianity in China were minimal. Christianity took root amongst the lao bai xing, the “common people”, and the texts we will examine were written along the meandering paths of itinerant evangelists. Here the grit and pressing calamities of China pressed

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4 See Wang Hui’s “The Fate of ‘Mr. Science’ in China,” trans. Howard Y. F. Choy, *Positions* 3, 1 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Wang Hui’s study looks at how Western notions of “science” were transformed and applied within China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though Wang addresses the concept of “science” in China, he notes how the term is transformed in its translation into the Chinese idiom. As a foreign term, “science” is only understood and applied along traditional epistic modes of discourse.


6 Wang Mingdao, John Sung, and Jing Dianying were not scholars, but they were educated. Wang was educated in Beijing and taught briefly at a missionary school in Baoding. Sung