Doyle, G. Wright (ed.)


I had great pleasure in reading this book on *Builders of the Chinese Church*. It’s both informative and illuminating. It is not just a collection of stories about Protestant missionary and Chinese Christians. It contains an argument and hopes ‘to present a fair and balance picture’, ‘to give a round portrait of a complex man’, and ‘to tell of the inner struggles with faith, hope, and love’ (p. 28-29). The builders cited were not only builders of the Chinese church, but also builders of Chinese Christianity. Doyle, in his introduction, argued that the portraits of these builders could not be accurate without the understanding of the Chinese socio-political contexts. He had recalled some of the core issues (such as the connection between ‘Christian mission’ and ‘Western imperialism’, ‘missionary policies’ and ‘strategies’, whether ‘evangelism’ or ‘education’, whether preaching from ‘below’ or from ‘above’ etc.), which defined the Chinese contexts and had become the platform for the struggling of these great builders.

For instance, Hudson Taylor was a great builder who had devoted a lifelong ministry among the Chinese. Doyle reminded us that Taylor had founded China Inland Mission (CIM) which distinguished itself to be ‘an inter-denominational organization, based on a common evangelical, non-denominational faith and an emphasis upon diffusing the gospel as widely as possible throughout all of China’ (p. 109). It is interesting to note that such evangelical theology turned out to be an ‘essential theology’ and the attempt to move ‘beyond denominationalism’ was found to become one of the core elements of today’s Chinese Christianity. Plus the fact that it was through his personal experiences in China that Taylor had learnt and passed on to CIM missionaries the strong faith in God and the basic trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. These beliefs later became the essential elements of Chinese Christianity which helped the Chinese church to survive even in time of oppression throughout the past century.

Pastor Xi (or Hsi) was another great builder of Chinese Christianity. He was a typical example of a Chinese preacher who worked independently of foreign supervision. Xi was a man of prayer; he read the Bible daily as the Word of God, and he had strong faith in God. He had been an opium addict, but was saved by the work of the Holy Spirit, through prayer and faith in God. After his conversion, he assumed another name, ‘Sheng Mo’ (席勝魔), meaning ‘overcomer of demons’. Later, when he committed himself to God, he trusted that God had
called him to help other opium addicts to gain freedom from their bondage, as what God had done to him. He told the addicts, ‘If you would break off opium, don't rely on medical help, don't lean on man, but trust only in God’ (p. 153). He started a movement of deliverance for opium addicts by simple faith in God and establishment of churches for those former addicts turned to Christians. It was found to be the most indigenous form of Chinese Christianity. Yet, his work was acknowledged, and he received both baptism and ordination by CIM missionaries. He was still working among the Chinese as a preacher and healer, and demonstrating his leadership by supervising several churches in his own way. Hudson Taylor acknowledged his work and appointed him as ‘lead pastor’ (the leader of pastors), which in effect was ‘bishop’ of the region (p. 163).

The story of Timothy Richard has revealed a controversial, and perhaps beyond the normal type of missionary career in the Chinese context. Richard sought to appreciate, and even to promote the ‘worthy’ elements in Chinese civilization. His conviction of ‘seeking the worthy’ and ‘the Kingdom of God’ drove him to reach out to the Daoist and Buddhist believers, and later to the great multitude of intellectuals in China. Despite his conflicts with the CIM missionaries and those in his own missionary society, he launched greater mission for the ‘Conversion by the Millions’ in China. Richard and his wife even succeeded in presenting a decorated New Testament as a birthday gift to the Empress Dowager. Richard had also been appointed to serve as one of the Emperor’s advisers during the Hundred Days Reform (1898) in China. Hence, despite the strong anti-foreign sentiments in China, the name ‘Li-Ti-Mo-Tai’ (Timothy Richard’s Chinese name) remained a household word in China and is highly respected by many Chinese people, even today. Richard was indeed another great builder by his offering of an alternative, or perhaps a broadened conception of Christian mission.

Doyle classified two ‘branches’ of Protestant Christianity in China, namely ‘the builders of the liberal wing of Chinese Christianity’ and ‘those for the evangelical (and even charismatic) churches’ (p. 27). While missionaries like W.A.P. Martin, Timothy Richard and others advocated Western education and promoted political and social reform movements in China, Jonathan Goforth, a Canadian Presbyterian missionary preached the ‘old-fashioned’, ‘confrontational’ gospel and focused more on direct conversion and spiritual revival. The case of Goforth represented the evangelical and Pentecostal traditions in Christianity. He stood firmly against the trends of the modernist and liberal theologies which had been brought by the liberal wing of missionaries in China. Goforth was involved also in the Pentecostal movements which prevailed in Manchuria, Shandong and Henan provinces and had impelled him into a new ministry of evangelism and revival preaching in China. These