

Editorial



How Chinese are Chinese Christians Today?

In recent years, some scholars in China have called for Chinese Christians to *zhongguohua* 中国化 (become more Chinese), a process that might be expressed in English by less-common words like “sinicization” or “sinofication.” Indeed, *zhongguohua* has become part of the party-state’s religious policy and is actively reinforced through new regulations. Even though the presence of Christianity in China can be traced back to the seventh century CE or even earlier, many people, including scholars, continue to depict Christianity in China as a foreign or nontraditional religion. When people use the term “foreign religion” (*yangjiao* 洋教) to describe Christianity, it is usually coupled with an ideology-driven discourse demanding more *zhongguohua*. The notion that Christianity is a “nontraditional religion” (*fei chuantong zongjiao* 非传统宗教), on the other hand, has some validity. First, Christians remain a numerical minority in Chinese societies and in most of the diasporic communities. Second, many Chinese Christians are first-generation converts or children of these converts. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask: How Chinese are Chinese Christians today? This question is actually susceptible to two very different interpretations. First, to what degree are Chinese Christians Chinese? Second, in what ways are they Chinese?

The articles in this issue can be read as addressing the second interpretation of the question in various aspects and contexts, although each article pursues distinct research questions of its own that do not directly raise this issue. Naomi Thurston examines some Chinese researchers of Christianity since the 1980s, many of whom were active scholars in the so-called “Sino-Theology” (*hanyu shenxue* 汉语神学) movement. Some of these scholars are not confessed Christians but have been dubbed by others as “cultural Christians” who at least affirm some Christian values. Holding professorships at major universities in China, these scholars introduced Christian and theological studies into mainstream academia in China. Their Chinese translations of theological

and philosophical books by European or American authors, their Chinese commentaries and reflections, and their original studies of Christian history, literature, and social institutions have contributed to the legitimation of Christianity as a viable faith option for the Chinese in China today. Indeed, since the 1990s, many college-educated Chinese have converted to Christianity both in China and in diaspora. Cynthia Baiqing Zhang's article in this issue studies Chinese conversion to Christianity in the United States, comparing different network ties and identities in a small city and a metropolis.

While speaking and writing in the Chinese language and networking with fellow Chinese are two ways in which Chinese Christians perform Chineseness, they arguably participate in a deeper way of being Chinese when they follow traditional Chinese behavioral patterns. In her study of an indigenous Chinese sect, the Local Church, Teresa Zimmerman-Liu argues that these Christians have reconfigured *guanxi* 关系 and invested it with new meanings. "*Guanxi* is the Chinese system of ideas and practices constituting social relationships and can be considered the foundation of Chinese societies," she writes. The Christian adaptation of *guanxi*, however, has also reconstituted *guanxi* under Christian principles, so that both Christianity and *guanxi* have been changed in the process. Zimmerman-Liu's article is exemplary in analyzing the changing dynamics of *guanxi* and the accommodation and transformation of a deep-rooted cultural tradition by a nontraditional religion. The case of the Local Church is interesting for two additional, ironic reasons. This sect, which evolved from the Little Flocks under Watchman Nee into the Local Church under Witness Lee, has been suppressed—in spite of its manifest Chineseness—by the same Chinese Communist party-state that has repeatedly called for making Christianity more Chinese. If the Little Flocks or Local Church do not qualify as sufficiently Chinese, what counts as Chinese in the eyes of the Chinese Communists? Second, in spite of its Chinese origins, the Local Church has aspired to be a universal church movement appealing to people of all nations and ethnicities. In striving toward this universal goal, the Local Church has to overcome the Chinese characteristics of *guanxi*, or reinterpret *guanxi* as a universal principle through biblical exposition. Therefore, cultural *zhong-guohua* of a universal religion also faces the challenge of transcending national or ethnic boundaries.

The article by Ottavio Palombaro takes us in a different direction. While Palombaro finds a resemblance between Wenzhou Christians' business ethics and Max Weber's Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, his study also shows that for these Chinese Christians in Milan, Italy, their Chineseness seems natural and their Chinese and Christian identities are inseparable.