



Seven Spirits from Patmos: Towards a Decolonial Chinese Theology for the Third Millennium

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Abstract: Compared to the five centuries of global colonial history, China's colonial history lasted only one hundred and nine years (1840-1949). However, since 1949, coloniality, anti-colonialization, anti-imperialism, and decolonization have been deeply embedded in Chinese theology while lurking in ideology, philosophy, and politics. This paper argues that Chinese theology faces a grave epistemic crisis and needs to be transformed epistemologically by appealing to the seven spirits of God and shifting to decolonial thinking in the global decolonial discourse. This paper first analyzes China's (semi-)colonial/anti-colonial history in four stages with its various influences on Chinese theology. Then the paper adopts a three-layered "sandwich" approach to expose the profound epistemic crisis that is deeply submerged in Chinese theology. Finally, based on Witness Lee and Amos Yong's pneumatology, the paper proposes a decolonial Chinese theology for the third millennium.

Keywords: Chinese theology, decolonial theology, colonialism

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CHINA'S COLONIAL/ANTI-COLONIAL HISTORY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CHINESE THEOLOGY

Compared to the five centuries of global colonial history, China's (semi-) colonial history lasted only one hundred and nine years (1840-1949). However, coloniality, anti-colonialization, anti-imperialism, and decolonization have



continued to lurk in ideology, philosophy, and politics since 1949. This article proposes the following four periods in China's semi-colonial and anti-colonizing history as a heuristic device.

1. 1840-1894

The First Opium War (1840-1894) between China's Qing Dynasty and Great Britain marks the beginning of China's semi-colonial era. Western imperialism's military, economic, and cultural invasion is best captured in the portrait *The Situation in the Far East* (see Figure 1). Feng Ziyou (冯自由, 1882-1958) attributes its authorship to Xie Zantai (or Tse Tsan-tai, 谢瓚泰, 1872-1938), who intended to warn the Chinese people to wake up from a deep sleep and see the imminent danger of their motherland. At that time, China was about to be divided and devoured by "Russia represented by a bear, Great Britain a dog, France a frog, the United States an eagle, Japan a scorching sun, Germany an encircling sausage."¹ Xie was a member of the Revive China Society (*Xingzhong Hui*, 兴中会) founded by Sun Yat-sen (or Sun Zhongshan, 孙中山, 1866-1925) in 1894. Among the five figures in this painting, one is a listless and reclining Qing official, vividly illustrating the pernicious side effects of smoking opium.

Also significant in this era was the worldwide spreading of Protestant Christianity through the efforts of missionaries who brought with them Western theology.² Kathleen L. Lodwick examines the intersecting efforts of Protestant

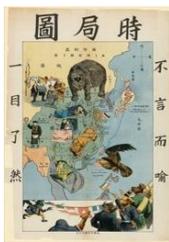
¹ Ziyou Feng 冯自由, *Feng Ziyou huiyilu: Geming yishi 冯自由回忆录: 革命逸史* [Memoirs of Feng Ziyou: Anecdotes of the Revolution] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2011), translation mine. In this essay, the Chinese names in texts and notes are ordered by last name followed by first name. The romanization of the Chinese names and terms is always given in *pinyin* with alternative renderings given in parentheses. Exceptions have been made for individuals and terms such as Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan) and Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng), which are better known in Anglophone literature using Wade-Giles romanization system.

² For a history of protestant missionaries in China since the late Qing Dynasty, see R. G. Tiedemann, "Reference Guide to Christian Missionary Societies in China from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century,"



missionaries, particularly medical doctors, who had long denounced opium use, and conducted an education and awareness campaign in China and abroad. Lodwick tells a fascinating story of imperial exploitation and a strain of honest crusaders who sought to right some of the wrongs their own nation was perpetrating.¹

Theologies in this period were imported mainly by the missionaries that bore the imprint of their ecclesial tradition and personal Western-oriented spiritualities. The European and American missionaries to China have been in low repute in China for a long time. However, a different, far more generous account of the work and theologies of Western missionaries has begun to appear in the scholarship of Chinese cultural and intellectual historians.²



(Figure 1: *The Situation in the Far East*, by Xie Zantai)

2. 1894-1949

This era features the end of the Qing Dynasty after a series of revolutionary struggles led by Sun Yat-sen, the founding of the Republic of China (1912), the Japanese invasion (1937-1945), the civil war (1945-1948), and the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949).

(2009); Pat Barr, *To China with Love: The Lives and Times of Protestant Missionaries in China 1860-1900* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972); Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

¹ Kathleen L. Lodwick, *Crusaders against Opium: Protestant Missionaries in China, 1874-1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

² For a recent turn which reminds us that missionaries accomplished intellectual as well as religious work of abiding value, see Huilin Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).



Sun Yat-sen played a significant role in modern Chinese political history. He is honored as the Father of the Nation by the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China. He helped to overthrow the monarchy in 1911-1912, was the first President of the new Chinese republic (if only provisionally), and was a prominent founder of the Kuomintang (KMT),¹ leading the anti-colonial, anti-feudal revolution which culminated in the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. In addition, Sun developed the *Three Principles of the People* (*sanmin zhuyi*, 三民主义) to improve China, namely, the Doctrine of Nationalism, the Doctrine of Democracy, and the Doctrine of Livelihood. By the first doctrine, Sun meant independence from imperialist domination or oppression. To implement the third doctrine, Sun formulated a famous slogan, "All land to the tillers" (*gengzhe you qitian*, 耕者有其田), in 1924. Paul Trescott argues that Sun's idea "is consistently claimed as an inspiration for latter-day land reforms in Taiwan and mainland China."²

An exciting subset of this period is the Republican Era (1911-1949), characterized by political turmoil complicated by cultural, educational, scientific, and religious movements, which produced fertile ground for the birth of great thinkers and practitioners of Christianity.³ This period is significant theologically

¹ Paul B. Trescott, "Henry George, Sun Yat-sen and China: More Than Land Policy Was Involved," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 53, no. 3 (1994), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.1994.tb02606.x>, 363.

² Trescott, "Henry George, Sun Yat-sen and China," 371.

³ Stark and Wang give a concise but elegant survey of Christian missions to China (1860-1950). See Rodney Stark and Xiuhua Wang, *A Star in the East: the Rise of Christianity in China* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015), 13-34. Tze Ming Ng gives a detailed account of the historical background of Chinese Christianity prior to the Republican Era, for example, the impact of the Boxer Movement (1900), and the development of Chinese Indigenous movements before and after the Edinburgh Conference (1910). See Peter Tze Ming Ng, *Chinese Christianity: An Interplay between Global and Local perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 43-90. On the Chinese side, for an influential account of the social background of Chinese Christianity in the Republican Era, see Wang Zhixin Wang 王治心, *Zhongguo Jidujiao shigang 中国基督教史纲* [A Historical Sketch of Chinese Christianity] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhai chubanshe 上海文海出版社, 1940),



and missiologically.¹ Daniel Bays considers this period the “Golden Age” of missions in China.² Chloë Starr observes, “The Republican period produced a disproportionate number of exciting and lasting Chinese theological texts and insights.”³ Samuel Ling considers the 1920s and 1930s a period of the Chinese “Christian Renaissance.”⁴ Christian leaders and thinkers such as Wang Mingdao (王明道, 1900-1991) and Watchman Nee (or Ni Tuosheng, 倪柝声, 1903-1972) both formulated theologies⁵ that represent what Chan calls “the lived theology of the ordinary people of God,” whose importance in shaping theological endeavors is becoming more widely recognized.⁶

Of particular theological significance is the protestant liberalism introduced into China by the Western missionaries⁷ and the antagonistic response from the Chinese Christians and theologians. At about the time of the Revolution of 1911, a Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy broke out in China.⁸ The New Theology

204-17.

¹ The historical location of the Republican Era and its impact on the development of Chinese theology is studied in Jacob Chengwei Feng, “Theological Method of Chinese Theology in the Republican Era (1911–1949): A Case Study of Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee,” *Journal of Chinese Theology* 9 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1163/27726606-20230018>, 6-7.

² Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, New History, (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), chap. 5.

³ Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 42.

⁴ Samuel D. Ling, “The Other May Fourth Movement: The Chinese ‘Christian Renaissance,’ 1919–1937” (PhD diss. Temple University, 1981).

⁵ The theological methods of Wang and Nee are compared and contrasted in Feng, “Theological Method,” 6-7.

⁶ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 28.

⁷ For a detailed historical account of the liberalism in American Protestant missions in China in the Republican Era, see Xi Lian, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907–1932* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). Also see Wing-hung Lam 林榮洪, *Zhonghua shenxue 50 nian: 1900–1949 中華神學五十年: 1900–1949* [Fifty Years of Chinese Theology: 1900–1949] (Hong Kong: Zhongguo shenxue yanjiuyuan, 1998), 109-19.

⁸ For the latest brief introduction of the Modernist-Fundamentalist debate, see Richard R. Cook, *Darkest Before the Dawn: A Brief History of the Rise of Christianity in China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 128-30.



was fully embraced by Christian colleges and their educators. The liberalism in China emerged primarily as an elitist movement that attracted the better educated Chinese Christians.¹ Charles Coates observes that due to the liberal encroachment, only four out of thirteen theological seminaries in China were “safe” and that only nine or ten Bible schools out of the entire forty-eight could be “depended upon.”²

On the side of Modernist liberalism was Wu Yaozong (or Y. T. Wu, 吴耀宗, 1893-1979), who, for many years, was a secretary of the Beijing Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and later became the first chairman of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM).³ Since as early as 1938, Wu had been promoting the communist revolution.⁴

3. 1949-1978

This period is known for the extreme communist anti-imperial political movements, the severe class struggle, the end of historical colonialism, which caused the expulsion of the Western missionaries,⁵ the Great Famine (1958-62), which caused the fatality of more than 45 million people from hunger and starvation,⁶ the Cultural Revolution (1966-76),⁷ and severe persecution toward the Christians.

¹ Lian, *The Conversion of Missionaries*, 147-50.

² Charles H. Coates, *The Red Theology in the Far East* (London: C.J. Thynne & Jarvis, 1926), 142.

³ Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

⁴ Derong Shen 沈德溶, *Wu Yaozong Xiao Zhuan 吴耀宗小传* [A Brief Biography of Wu Yaozong] (Shanghai: Zhongguo jidujiao sanzhi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui, 1989), 34, 40.

⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, "Missionaries Abroad," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 368 (1966).

⁶ Xun Zhou, *Great Famine in China, 1958-1962: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁷ For a topical and analytical study of the cultural revolution, see Michel Oksenberg, Carl Riskin, and Ezra F. Vogel, eds., *Cultural Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).



Due to the severe trials after the political changes in 1949, Wang Mingdao's church, the Christian Tabernacle (1925-1955), ceased to exist. On the contrary, the Local Churches (or the Little Flock) founded by Watchman Nee survived the ordeal of harsh persecution.¹ Chan notices that Nee, as a master strategist, encouraged several families to migrate to a new area to form a local church.² Wee Hian Chua observes that the creation of strong family-based local churches is well-suited to survive under severe trials.³ In this era, the hidden house churches⁴ in China were upheld primarily by Nee and Wang's theologies.⁵

Wu Yaozong played a vital role in establishing the TSPM as its first chairman in 1951. Wu advocates that "[he and others alike] have been fighting against American imperialism ... they have been discontented concerning the conservative, corrupt Christianity, and its tie with imperialism and feudal powers; they recognize that social revolution is an important constituent of the gospel of Jesus, which aligns, by and large, with the ideas of communism."⁶ Later, Wu recounted that in his conversation with Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩来, 1898-

¹ For a presentation of Nee's ecclesiology and its relationship to mission, see Jacob Chengwei Feng, "Against the Tide: The Ecclesiology of the Local Churches and Its Contribution to a Glocal Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 65, no. 2 (2022).

² Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*.

³ Wee Hian Chua, "Evangelization of Whole Families," in *Perspective in the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 653-56; quoted in Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 186.

⁴ For surveys of China House Churches, see Yalin Xin, *Inside China's House Church Network: The Word of Life Movement and Its Renewing Dynamic* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2009); Kai-Yum Cheung-Teng, "An Analysis of the Current Needs of House Churches in China to Improve the Effectiveness of Leadership Development" (D.Min. Trinity International University, 2006); Young-Hak Yang, "The Formation and Development of the House Churches in China" (MTM Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997).

⁵ Andrew Chi-Sing Ma, "Toward a Contextual Theology of Suffering: The Chinese Christian Perspective Since 1949" (PhD diss. Fuller Theological Seminary, 2004), 292.

⁶ Yaozong Wu 吴耀宗, "Women canjia Renmin Zhengxiehuiyi de jingguo 我们参加人民政协会议的经过" [Our Experience of Joining the Meetings of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).] *Tianjia 田家* 16, no. 8 (11/1949) (1949), 6.



1976), the clearest revelation he received from Zhou was that “Christianity should automatically eliminate the power and influence of imperialism from within.”¹ Zhou asserted that “Christianity cannot be separate from imperial invasion of China.”² For Wu, Chinese Christianity’s revolution and renewal movement under his leadership are distinct from the church’s indigenization movement before 1949, in that even though both regard the “Three-Self,” namely, self-governance, self-support, self-propagation as their goals, they are vastly different in terms of “content and nature.” Wu believes that the former was conducted in “China before her liberation, a country governed by imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism, a semi-feudal and semi-colonial nation,” while the latter was launched “in a new China after imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism have been defeated.”³ Like his predecessor Wu, Ding Guangxun (or K. H. Ting, 丁光训, 1915-2012) was mainly concerned with political questions dealing with subjects like imperialism, capitalism, and communism in the 1950-1960s.⁴

4. 1978 till the present

China has turned to a new age since its economic reform with open policy in 1978. Prevailing in this era are the suppression of Christianity in the name of political anti-colonial ideology and Christians’ continual survival and taking deep roots. In the meantime, the world has witnessed its rising economic and military power, second only to the United States.

¹ Yaozong Wu 吴耀宗, “Zhankai jidujiao gexin yundong de qizhi 展开基督教革新运动的旗帜” [Unfurling the Banners of Christianity’s Revolution and Renewal Movement], in *Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong wenxian (1950-1992) 中国基督教三自爱国运动文选(1950-1992)*, ed. Guanzong Luo (Shanghai: Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui, 1993), 10.

² Guanzong Luo, ed., *Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong wenxian (1950-1992) 中国基督教三自爱国运动文选(1950-1992)* (Shanghai: Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui, 1993), 475.

³ Wu, “Zhankai [Unfurling],” 6.

⁴ Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 89.



With Nanjing Union Theological Seminary's reopening in 1978, Ding Guangxun was elected national Chairperson of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the president of the Chinese Christian Council (CCC) in 1980.¹ Due to the changes in the political context, Ding, exercising two roles as a statesman and a churchman, "needed a contextual theology of action to address the needs of this occasion—to be a diplomat both to the church and to the state."² As a result, he developed a theology that focuses on the creator of the cosmos himself, namely, the Cosmic Christ. Ding's cosmic Christology is understood by many interpreters of contemporary Chinese Christianity to be "a political formulation coming out of Ding's dual role as a churchman and a statesman."³ His harmonizing efforts in uniting the two opposite parts, namely, belief and unbelief, "seems to have confused Christian identity" and "weakened the relevance of his contextualization effort."⁴ Alexander Chow argues that "[w]hile his theology may be useful in bridging the chasm between Chinese Christians and Chinese communists, [Ding]'s thoughts appear to be more divisive than helpful in the unity of the Chinese church."⁵ Ding's theology widens the deep chasm between the state-sanctioned and unregistered churches.⁶

Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 observes that "[s]ince the 1980s, the field of Christian

¹ Lu Chen, "Ding Guangxun's Critique of Fundamentalist Theology in Contemporary China and His Theological Construction," *Transformation* 27, no. 2 (2010), 96.

² Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 90.

³ Alexander Chow, "Wang Weifan's Cosmic Christ," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12260>, 385-86. For a highly critical reading of Ding Guangxun, see Xinyuan Li, *Theological Construction-or Destruction?: An Analysis of the Theology of Bishop K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun)* (Streamwood, IL: Christian Life Press, 2004).

⁴ Chen, "Ding Guangxun," 106.

⁵ Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 110.

⁶ For a detailed explanation of why house churches refuse to be registered to the government through TSPM, see "Our Attitude Toward the Religious Policy of the Government Why do we not register?" in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 287-88.



studies in China has entered a new phase and has been attracting widespread attention.” In particular, he sees “a tripartite framework” consisting of Chinese theology, Sino-Christian theology, and academic theology.¹ With the awareness that “none is fully mature” and that “they are constantly changing,”² Zhuo gives a preliminary and general description of the three trends, each with unique characteristics. With Ding Guangxun as its initiator and leading figure, Chinese theology is constructed by the Chinese church as “an indigenizing, or contextualizing, theology” that stresses ethics and morality.³ Sino-Christian theology, with Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫 as its initiator, aims “not to revert to the ‘national’ or the ‘native’ but to be the embodiment of universality or transcendence,” with an emphasis on theological writing and research in the “mother tongue,” namely, the Chinese language.⁴ Finally, different from Chinese theology with its stress on confession and Sino-Christian theology that attaches equal importance to faith and the knowledge of the “cultural Christian,” academic theology refers to the academic concept of a faith-neutral Christian theology.⁵

To put it briefly, I have dissected China’s 180-year (semi-)colonial and anti-colonializing history into four periods, which occupy nearly forty percent of the “500-plus years of decolonial resurgence, insurrection, rebellion, and agency”.⁶ Next, the paper will analyze Chinese theology through the lens of decoloniality in the global liberative discourse.

¹ Xinping Zhuo, “The Status of Christian Theology in China Today,” in *Christianity*, ed. Xinping Zhuo (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

² Zhuo, “Status,” 10.

³ Zhuo, “Status,” 11-12.

⁴ Zhuo, “Status,” 14.

⁵ Zhuo, “Status,” 23.

⁶ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, eds., *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 24.



A DECOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF CHINESE THEOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC CRISIS

Despite being a significant participant in the global liberative endeavor, China has been an “orphan,” left abandoned, in the international study of decoloniality, much like John the Evangelist exiled on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). However, just as the Evangelist was confronted by an existential crisis, Chinese theology is deeply situated in an epistemic crisis. Oscar García-Johnson speaks of an epistemic crisis “now experienced in world Christianity, an epistemic rupture with linear logics and homogenous-monocultural views of the world,”¹ which is equally applicable in the Chinese context. Such a crisis is embodied in the current state of Chinese theology and its interaction with China’s public ideology. In this section, I employ a three-layered “sandwich” approach to expose the profound epistemic crisis that faces Chinese theology.

1. “Top Bread of the Sandwich”: Epistemic Crisis of Chinese Theology

Chinese theology suffers imperial coloniality at both ends of its spectrum. On the left, in their “official” theology, Wu and Ding’s anti-colonial and decolonizing endeavors are at best driven by political propaganda and, at worst, by personal agendas to cope with the ideological pressure. In other words, Chinese “official” theology has not self-consciously engaged in the rigorous, academic investigation of the “epistemic machine of colonial modernity” to subvert Western epistemic normativity like its Global South neighbors.²

Zhuo Xinping helpfully distinguishes the three recent theological trends. Building on Zhuo’s analysis, I reckon that the first trend, namely, Chinese theology, or more accurately, “official” Chinese theology, is especially succumbed

¹ Oscar García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate: Decolonial Pneumatologies of the American Global South* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 58.

² Oscar García-Johnson, “Faith Seeking for Land: A Theology of the Landless,” in *Theologies of Land: Contested Land, Spatial Justice, and Identity*, ed. Khiok-Khng Yeo and Gene L. Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 57.



to the political maneuver, which is evident in Ding's politicized theology and TSPM's execution of the government-initiated sinicization project since 2015.¹ Through examples from history as well as studies of contemporary Chinese society, Richard Madsen concludes that "they demonstrate the impossibility" of the state project to "sinicize Christianity," which "assumes forcing the adaptation of Christianity to a unitary Chinese culture under the supreme control of a unified state."²

García-Johnson rightly suggests that "it would be a grave mistake to confuse Christianity's ethos with the logic of coloniality/modernity."³ Unfortunately, Chinese political ideology, and subsequently Chinese official theology, commits precisely the kind of mistake that García-Johnson insightfully names and critiques. Such a "guilt by association" took place as early as 1925-1928 in the anti-Christian movement, died down gradually, and was "voiced [again in 1950, which] is inspired by prejudice and the interests of propaganda."⁴

On the right end of the spectrum, Chinese Christianity has internalized Western theology under the imperialist, capitalistic influence of modernity at the cost of indigenized Chinese theologies and ancient wisdom traditions. A quick survey shows that most of the textbooks on systematic theology used in seminaries and official churches in mainland China are mostly translated from English and printed in Hong Kong.⁵ As a result, indigenous Chinese theologies of

¹ Tom Harvey, "Sinicization: A New Ideological Robe for Religion in China," Oxford House Research Ltd, updated December 21, 2020, <https://www.oxfordhousereseach.com/sinicization-a-new-ideological-robe-for-religion-in-china/>.

² Richard Madsen, "Epilogue: Multiple Sinicizations of Multiple Christianities," in *Sinicizing Christianity*, ed. Yangwen Zheng (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 326. Also see Richard Madsen, ed., *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

³ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 67.

⁴ Quoted in George A. Hood, *Neither Bang nor Whimper: The End of a Missionary Era in China* (Singapore: The Presbyterian Church in Singapore, 1991), 21.

⁵ Yun Meng 蒙允, "Xitong shenxue jiaocai de xuanyong: xiang zhongguo jiaohui tuijian liang ben shu 系统神学



Wang Mingdao, Watchman Nee, and others (save those who held official positions, for example, Jia Yuming (贾玉铭, 1880-1964)) are hardly represented in seminaries and theological publications in mainland China.¹ The second trend, namely, Sino-Christian theology, rejects indigenization outrightly but promotes “com[ing] face to face with the Christ Event” by “shak[ing] off the mindset of indigenization or Sinicization.”² It does so by insisting on doing theology in “mother-tongue”³ and, therefore, effectually leaves out China’s over fifty ethnic minority groups, most of whom have their own languages. By exploring the Chinese province of Guizhou, whose seven minority groups comprise 37.8 percent of the provincial population, Paul Hattaway laments that “many mission organizations and Chinese Christians today appear unable to grasp the importance of viewing the ethnic diversity of Guizhou’s peoples as they really are.”⁴ For example, two tribes, pronounced as A-Hmao and Gha-Mu in their own language, refuse to follow the government’s label and call themselves “Miao.” Other groups in Guizhou “reject the Chinese labels assigned to their tribes and

教材的选用: 向中国教会推荐两本书” [Selection of Textbooks for Systematic Theology: Recommending Two Books for Chinese Churches], *Jidu shibao 基督时报*, updated January 28, 2014, <https://www.christiantimes.cn/news/13691/%E7%B3%BB%E7%BB%9F%E7%A5%9E%E5%AD%A6%E6%95%99%E6%9D%90%E7%9A%84%E9%80%89%E7%94%A8%EF%BC%9A%E5%90%91%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%95%99%E4%BC%9A%E6%8E%A8%E8%8D%90%E4%B8%A4%E6%9C%AC%E4%B9%A6>.

¹ This is mostly due to the government’s accusation of them as “anti-revolution.” Wang Mingdao, his wife Liu Jingwen, and a few other Christian leaders in Beijing, Xiangshan, Changchun and Guangdong were arrested on August 8, 1955. Meanwhile, a nation-wide movement of criticism of Wang and his “anti-revolutionary gang” was conducted by the TSPM between August and November 1955. See Fuk-Tsang Ying, “Counterrevolution in an Age of Revolution: ‘Wang Mingdao’s Christian Counterrevolutionary Clique,’” *Academia Sinica* 67 (2010), 132-33.

² Xiaofeng Liu 劉小楓, *Hanyu Shenxue yu Lishi Zhexue 漢語神學與歷史哲學* [Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History] (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma, 2000), 90.

³ Xinan Yang 楊熙楠, *Hanyu shenxue chuyi 漢語神學刍議* [A Humble Opinion on Sino-Christian Theology] (Hong Kong: Hanyu jidujiao wenhua yanjiusuo, 2000), 26-27, 37.

⁴ Paul Hattaway, *Guizhou: The Precious Province* (London: Lightning Source, 2018), 14.



consider the names derogatory.”¹ From this perspective, Zhuo Xinping rightly critiques Sino-Christian theology’s nature as a “closed system.”²

The “unofficial” Chinese theologies, or theologies that effectively operate among most of the TSPM congregations and house churches, bear the orientation of “fundamentalism or evangelicalism,”³ at least in the field of soteriology (if not in many other aspects as well). With Wang Mingdao as its prominent proponent, Fundamentalism was imported from the United States amid its fierce debate with theological liberalism.⁴ Evangelicalism borrowed its central theological tenets from the dominant white evangelical theology in Europe and North America. Mitri Raheb reminds us that “a white Anglo-Saxon theology was partly responsible for colonization projects worldwide.”⁵

Elsewhere, I have surveyed the Christian response to the theory of evolution introduced into China in 1898, and argued that there is a seventy-year gap between Chinese theology and its Western counterpart.⁶ In particular, Chinese theologians have failed to participate in the meaningful discussion of the Needham Question, which was posed by Joseph Needham (1900-1995) regarding China’s (lack) of advancement in science and technology in its long historical development.⁷ It can be argued that (at least partly) due to Chinese theologians’ failure to engage with their counterparts in the Chinese science

¹ Hattaway, *Guizhou: The Precious Province*, 14-15.

² Zhuo, “Status,” 27.

³ Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 38.

⁴ For a detailed historical account of the liberalism in American Protestant missions in China in the Republican Era, see Lian, *The Conversion of Missionaries*.

⁵ K. K. Yeo, “Conclusion,” in *Theologies of Land: Contested Land, Spatial Justice, and Identity*, ed. K. K. Yeo and Gene L. Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 154.

⁶ Jacob Chengwei Feng, “Addressing the Needham Question from a Theological Perspective: Toward a Chinese Theology of Holistic Wisdom,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 57, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12787>, 301-2, 314.

⁷ Feng, “Addressing the Needham Question,” 300.



community, scientism continues to loom large in society.¹

Another side-effect of the epistemic crisis on the right is the creation of the subaltern status of non-registered churches. For García-Johnson, subalternity “has become a central idea within de/postcolonial studies. Not simply synonymous with ‘being oppressed,’ subalternity is a state of being entirely (or almost entirely) outside a society’s hegemonic power structures, unable to gain influence without fundamental systemic change.”² The house church leaders have voiced their rationales for not registering with the government through TSPM.³ However, house church members have regularly faced harassment and sometimes imprisonment.

2. “Meat of the Sandwich”: Epistemic Crisis of Public Ideology

The Chinese national ethos of the “century of humiliation”⁴ is a Chinese version of the “colonial wound,” which Walter Mignolo defines as “the feeling of superiority imposed on human beings who do not fit the predetermined model in Euro-American narratives.”⁵ Expanding on this definition, García-Johnson reveals that colonial wound, or any similar kind of wound, “also includes those populations’ ongoing internalization and reproduction of the dehumanizing narratives.”⁶ This ethos is captured well by Gu Ming Dong in the question: “Why, since the mid-nineteenth century, have Chinese intellectuals oscillated between commendation and condemnation of their own culture, and between

¹ Shiping Hua, *Scientism and Humanism: Two Cultures in post-Mao China, 1978-1989* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

² García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 32.

³ See “Our Attitude Toward the Religious Policy of the Government Why do we not register?” in Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 287-88.

⁴ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁵ Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), xii.

⁶ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 105.



fetishization and demonization of all things Western?”¹ Likewise, Chinese public ideology has also been oscillating between these extreme positions. Since 1949, the political ideology dubbed “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been primarily based on Marxism, whose author is a German philosopher raised in a non-religious Jewish family. It was China’s first Chairman Mao Zedong (毛泽东, 1893-1976) who developed and contextualized Marxism into Chinese society. In the post-Mao era, China has, by and large, adopted humanism and scientism as its cultural and economic ideology,² which translates into the country’s highly successful modernity project, again a contextualized Western ideology.

Despite its origin in the West, Chinese public ideology has resorted to several old “myths” amid its struggle to keep tight control of society and competition with the West (primarily the United States). Top on the list of the myths is the myth of the “century of humiliation” (1840-1949). Public ideology has taken advantage of it to promote nationalism and patriotism. Christianity, in general, has been labeled as “an accomplice of Western imperialism” through the guilt of association. In this sense, public ideology has “hijacked” the anti-colonial, anti-imperial ethos to restrict Christianity from exerting social influences and making its voice heard in the public square.

The second “myth” on the list is the political labeling of “anti-revolution” in the Cultural Revolution and “heresy” and “cult” after the Revolution. Those labels allow the state to manipulate public fear and hatred toward certain Christian groups outside its direct control. Those are convenient weapons that can be deployed anytime to harass, threaten, and imprison Christians. By deshelving the Bibles from online and offline stores, and illegalizing printing and circulation

¹ Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), Kindle, location 13.

² Hua Shiping argues that China adopts three versions of humanism in operation since the 1980s. See Hua, *Scientism and Humanism: Two Cultures in post-Mao China, 1978-1989*.



of Christian books, the nation-state is committing a *de facto* “epistimicide” (the extermination of [indigenous] knowledge)¹ in the name of preventing heresies and cults.

Third, public ideology has utilized the China Dream not only to counter the American Dream but also to internalize Western colonialism in its domestic, dehumanizing exploitation of its labor force and environment (first in China and then in other Global South countries). Domestically, the state owns all the land throughout the country, thus creating a nation with landless peoples in the name of modernity. In doing so, public ideology betrays the Father of the Nation, Sun Yat-sen’s vision for the new republic regarding people and land. Internationally, a different form of colonization takes the shape of economic expansion and exploitation of cheap labor and natural resources through the country’s One Belt One Road Initiative.² Thus, Chinese public ideology matches what Boaventura de Sousa Santos identifies as modern Western science’s capitalist character, namely, the global commodification of life by exploiting two noncommodities: labor and nature.³ Ultimately, the dominating public ideology in China has internalized Western imperialism and colonialism domestically and internationally: once its slave, now its new master. In the end, both the American dream and the China dream are on the same side of the abyssal line⁴ of the colonial matrix of power

¹ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 67.

² Anthony Kleven, “Belt and Road: Colonialism with Chinese Characteristics,” (May 6, 2019), The Lowy Institute, 2019, accessed June 7, 2021, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/belt-and-road-colonialism-chinese-characteristics>; James F. Paradise, “China’s Quest for Global Economic Governance Reform,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 24, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-019-09610-5>; David Dollar, “The AIIB and the ‘One Belt, One Road’,” Brookings, updated Summer 2015, 2015, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-aiib-and-the-one-belt-one-road/>.

³ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 107.

⁴ Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*, x.



(CMP).¹

García-Johnson's acute naming of the "political gate" of the American Global South is equally valid in contemporary China, word for word: "In short, we despised the conqueror/colonizer, yet to free ourselves from this odious character we created another, no less violent nor less hateful, whom we call *caudillo*, or "chieftain": the autocratic leader."² Only here in China, the *caudillo* is the public ideology based on contextualized Marxism and humanism with Chinese characteristics, operating with its CMP, "of which modernity/coloniality is a shorter expression."³

3. "Bottom Bread of the Sandwich": Epistemic Crisis of Chinese Theology

The dominant public ideology brings Chinese theology into another epistemic crisis in that the latter internalized the former, expressed as individualism, consumerism, and neo-liberalism. In addition, Chinese theology has lost its ability to offer a credible and convincing voice in the public square. Even the official Chinese theology's emphatic promotion of ethics and morality is largely unheard of in public media. Consequently, Chinese theology has been (self-)isolated in an island of "personal spirituality," a hidden corner to "glorify God and benefit people" (*rongshen yiren*, 荣神益人), forever disappearing from the public discourse.

In addition, Chinese theology has largely neglected theologies of China's fifty-five minority ethnic groups (with more than fifty languages) as its source.⁴

¹ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 4.

² García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 73.

³ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 4.

⁴ Much sociological work has been done to investigate the spreading of Christianity among the ethnic minority groups. See Bin You, Aiguo Wang, and Yukuan Gong 游斌, 王爱国, and 宫玉宽, "Duoyuan minzu wenhua zhong de jidu jiao: "Jidujiao yu yunnan shaoshu minzu" diaocha baogao 多元民族文化中的基督



Moreover, from the perspective of world Christianity, Chinese theology has inadequately learned from its Global South neighbors and insufficiently contextualized liberation theology, feminist theology, and de/postcolonial theology. For example, in his address to Nanjing Seminary in 1985, Ding Guangxun spoke a message entitled *Inspirations from Liberation Theology, Process Theology and Teilhard de Chardin*. While showing his appreciation of liberation theology because it “expose[s] the darkness of society—colonialism, imperialism,”¹ Ding believes that political liberation should not be “the eternal theme for Christianity and its theology.” Since “China has experienced political liberation,” what it needs is not liberation theology but a theology that engages “the question of reconciliation with God,” which liberation theology does not.² Ultimately, Latin American theology fails in the Chinese context because China, according to Ding, no longer needs political liberation.³ Here, one discerns Ding’s political motive again to applaud the country’s “great changes and improvements in people’s lives,”⁴ even after the Cultural Revolution was over for nine years. Apparently, Ding missed (intentionally or not) the point of contextualizing liberation theology in the Chinese context against its deeply rooted patriarchy and newly imported neo-liberalism.⁵ This applies similarly to

教:“基督教与云南少数民族”调查报告,” [Christianity in a Diverse Peoples Culture: A Report on “Christianity and Minority Ethnic Groups in Yunnan”] *Jinling Shenxuezhì 金陵神学志* 3 (2004); Junxue Han 韩军学, *Jidujiao yu yunnan shaoshu minzu 基督教与云南少数民族* [Christianity and Minority Ethnic Groups in Yunnan] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2000); Ning Qian 钱宁, ed., *Jidujiao yu shaoshu minzu shehui wenhua bianqian 基督教与少数民族社会文化变迁* [The Social and Cultural Evolution of Christianity and the Minority Ethnic Groups] (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 1998).

¹ Guangxun Ding, “Inspirations from Liberation Theology, Process Theology and Teilhard de Chardin,” in *Love Never Ends: Papers by K. H. Ting*, ed. Janice Wickeri (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 1985), 198.

² Ding, “Inspirations,” 199.

³ Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, 91-92.

⁴ Ding, “Inspirations,” 199.

⁵ A recent news has gone viral in Chinese news media concerning a woman abducted, forcefully married, giving birth to eight children. The iron chains around her neck speaks forth the dire need of a Chinese



the recent developments in feminism and postcolonial theology.¹

In brief, I have followed the Kichwa intellectual Armando Muyolema by struggling to name the crucial factors of the epistemic crisis of Chinese theology.² By unpacking the myths in the public ideology and their impact on Chinese theology, I also have demonstrated the epistemic crisis that is “mythbusting” in its force.³ Next, the paper will sketch a decolonial Chinese theology based on epistemic transformation.

SEVEN SPIRITS FROM PATMOS: TOWARD A DECOLONIAL CHINESE THEOLOGY

John the Evangelist invoked the seven spirits (Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6) while facing an existential crisis. Similarly, there is a dire need for Chinese theology to appeal to the seven spirits and embody epistemological transformation, resistance, disobedience, and re-existence amid the epistemic crisis.

liberation theology and womanist/feminist theology.

¹ There have been many introductions of feminist and postcolonial theologies, but lacking contextualization efforts. See Xianjun Chen 陈贤君, "Chujinghua de jiefang shen xue 处境化的解放神学," [Contextualized Liberation Theology.] *Jinling shenxuezhì* 金陵神学志, no. B03 (2002); Peilan Guo 郭佩兰, "Funü shen xue de fazhan 妇女神学的发展," [Regent Review of Christian Thought.] *Jidujiao sixiang pinglun* 基督教思想评论 11 (2010); Yanchao Zhang, "Guo Peilan Houzhimin funü shenxue fangfalun tansuo 郭佩兰后殖民妇女神学方法论探索" [Exploring the Theological Method of Pui-lan Kwok's Postcolonial Feminist Theology] (Master Fudan University 复旦大学, 2010); Xiaohong Zhu 朱晓红, "Shenfen yu xiangxiang: duochong huayu zhong de guo peilan houzhimin funü shenxue 身份與想象: 多重話語中的郭佩蘭後殖民婦女神學," [Identity and Imagination: Guo Peilan (Kwok Pui-lan)'s Postcolonial Feminism in the Multiple Discourses.] *Daofeng: Jidujiao wenhua pinglun* 道風: 基督教文化評論, no. 34 (2011).

² Armando Muyolema, "De la 'cuestión indígena' a lo 'indígena' como cuestionamiento: Hacia una crítica del latinoamericanismo, el indigenismo y el mestiz(o)aje," in *Convergencia de tiempos: : studios subalternos/contextos latinoamericanos, estado, cultura subalternidad*, ed. Ileana Rodríguez (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

³ Walter Brueggemann, "Introduction: Theologies of the Land," in *Theologies of Land: Contested Land, Spatial Justice, and Identity*, ed. K. K. Yeo and Gene L. Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 6.



Crisis is an opportunity for transformation. I argue that Chinese theology/praxis in the third millennium, vis-à-vis its epistemic crisis, needs to appeal to the seven spirits and shift to decolonial thinking, to facilitate an epistemic transformation by interrogating its theological aspirations, engaging in critical dialogue with ancient wisdom traditions and indigenous theologies, while participating in global decolonial discourse.

The Cuban American theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz describes her home city as “a city that inhabits me,”¹ while the United States is “the center of wealth, intellectual privilege, and racial hegemony.”² Similarly, the Christians in China have flourished both in faith and number even amid constant suppression, and have never enjoyed a status like those living in the residue of a Christendom. And yet, ironically, Western theology has been dominant in China’s land.

For the epistemic transformation to be effective, one useful resource that Chinese theology can resort to is ancient wisdom. When his disciple Zi Gong (子贡, 520BC-446BC) asked him about how to be a sage, Confucius (孔子, 551BC-479BC) answered: “If you have something to say, you should put them into practice first and then say it.”³ One can find some interesting similarities between Confucius and Mignolo and Walsh, who insist on “delink[ing] from the modern concept of theory versus praxis” and “disobey[ing] the long-held belief that you first theorize and then apply, or that you can engage in blind praxis without theoretical analysis and vision.” Instead, they suggest that “we locate our thinking/doing in a different terrain,” a terrain that is “rooted in the praxis of

¹ Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, “La Habana: The City That Inhabits Me,” in *Spirit in the Cities: Searching for Soul in the Urban Landscape*, ed. Kathryn Tanner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 98-124; quoted in García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 10.

² García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 10.

³ Deli Song 宋德利, *The Analects of Confucius* [《论语》汉英对照] (Beijing: Duiwai Jingji Maoyi Daxue Chubanshe, 2010), 37.



living and in the idea of theory-and-as-praxis and praxis-and-as-theory, and in the interdependence and continuous flow of movement of both.”¹

In chapter 64 of *Daodejing*, Laozi (老子, 571BC-471BC) says: “A thousand-mile journey begins with the first step.”² An essential element in the first step of Chinese praxis/theology is constructing a decolonial Chinese theology that is pneumatologically oriented.

From his American Global South social position, Garcia-Johnson argues that “Christology has been so implicated in the colonizing and neocolonizing processes of the Americas that any attempt to begin with Christology (as such) is going to carry within itself Iberian ‘diseases,’ distinctly Western and hegemonic theological frameworks (gates) that inhibit the development of a truly liberating-decolonial theology.”³ This is why he proposes a pneumatological solution because “Christology requires a pneumatological turn to heal.”⁴ Likewise, Christology in China has been contaminated by the anti-imperial, anti-western, anti-colonial theologizing process and succumbed to political ideology. Therefore, a pneumatological foundation is in place in the project’s theological construction to heal the Chinese colonial wound.

Witnessing the sharp contrast between the thriving Christianity in the Majority World and the decline here in the Global North, Witness Lee (or Li Changshou, 李常受, 1905-1997), Nee’s closest coworker, resorts to the seven spirits in the book of *Apocalypse* and offers a contextual understanding:

The seven Spirits are unveiled in the book of Revelation as the seven

¹ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 7.

² Yuanhong Xu 许渊冲, *Hanying duizhao Laozi Daodejing 汉英对照老子《道德经》* [The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human] (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe 高等教育出版社, 2003), 140.

³ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 105.

⁴ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 105-6.



eyes of the Lamb (5:6). The Lamb is our Savior, Christ, and the seven Spirits are the Spirit of God. Thus, the seven Spirits are the seven eyes of Christ. Can you say that your eyes are one person and that you are another person? This shows that the Spirit cannot be separated from Christ. Revelation reveals to us an observing Christ who has seven eyes watching over all the churches. The seven eyes, the seven Spirits of God, are Christ Himself watching over all the churches on this earth and observing their real situation. For the church to overcome ... the decline in today's Christendom, we need the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God.¹

Lee discerns contemporary Western Christianity's trend of decline, which confirms Justo González's observation of a "macroreformation"² that is taking place as Christianity is moving from the Global North (Europe and North America) to the Global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America).³ In order to counter that decline, Lee resorts to the Holy Spirit, who has been sevenfold intensified to overcome the church's degradation.⁴

In dialogue with John's introduction to the question of the relevance of this mysterious book for Christian discipleship at the beginning of the third Millennium, Amos Yong sees the uniqueness of Revelation's reference to the seven spirits. He affirms similarly with Lee that "the number seven's notion of fullness and completeness is consistent with seeing this vis-à-vis what the

¹ Witness Lee, *Collected Works of Witness Lee (1984)*, 5 vols. (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2021), 3:126.

² Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 49.

³ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2. For Asia, see Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia*, Blackwell Guides to Global Christianity (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, ed., *Christian Movements in Southeast Asia: A Theological Exploration* (Singapore: Genesis Books and Trinity Theological College, 2010).

⁴ Witness Lee, *The Collected Works of Witness Lee (1994-1997)*, 5 vols. (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2021), 4:279.



broader New Testament tradition calls the Holy Spirit.”¹ Moreover, out of his pneumatological sensitivity, Yong makes a strategic move:

I periodically deploy spirits in plural when discussing Revelation’s pneumatology in order to remind us that John is a pluralistic — not pluri-theistic! — rather than singular perspective of the divine breath and wind. Catherin Keller rightly thus notes about John’s pneumatology, “In order therefore to release the radically democratic, plurivocal, and sustainable potencies of the present we may need to retrieve a relation to select premodern traditions of spirit.”²

Therefore, Lee and Yong’s intensified, pluralistic, and plurivocal readings of the seven spirits are pregnant with pneumatological imaginations that can intensify the decolonial cracks,³ and feed into “the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living; that is an otherwise in plural.”⁴ Different from, but not rejecting, the pluralistic paradigm, which is one of the eight paradigms identified by García-Johnson,⁵ the epistemic diagram adopted by this project subsumes it, transforms it, and argues for a pluriversal proposition, with an agenda that “is not ‘anti-Western’ per se, but de-Westernizing and post-Occidental,”⁶ to which list I add that it is not anti-ideological, but de-ideological, not anti-Oriental, but de-Orientalizing and post-Oriental.

Indigenous Chinese theology, since its beginning, has demonstrated the

¹ Amos Yong, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021), “Commentary on 1:1-9.”

² Yong, *Revelation*, “Commentary on 1:1-9.”

³ Catherine E. Walsh, “Pedagogical Notes from the Decolonial Cracks,” *e-misferica* 11, no. 1 (2014).

⁴ Catherine E. Walsh, “On Decolonial Dangers, Decolonial Cracks, and Decolonial Pedagogies Rising,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, ed. Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 81.

⁵ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 55.

⁶ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 63.



“subversion and alterity as counterhegemonic forces against coloniality/modernity.”¹ Unfortunately, these theological traits have been largely neglected by Chinese churches. The Local Churches, founded by Nee in Fuzhou in 1922, and now becoming a global phenomenon.² Elsewhere, I have argued that in the history of the Local Churches, the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren group led by James Taylor Jr. (1870-1953)—out of a colonial mindset—intended to dominate the young churches in China under the leadership of Watchman Nee. However, based on his reading of Scripture, Nee critiqued the Brethren ecclesiology and resisted their intended control.³ One key theological resource of Nee’s trinitarian ecclesiology is the oneness of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Therefore, the Local Churches have manifested what García-Johnson calls the “Church Without Borders, which seeks to delink from the imperial/colonial/modern core permeating much of our Western understanding of the church, that is, the logic of global design that invents and reforms ecclesial structures.”⁵ In the same vein, many (if not most) of the Chinese theologians in the Republican Era (1911-1949) can be reconsidered from the decolonial perspective.

Other sources of the epistemic transformation include the worship, liturgy, spirituality, and theologies of Chinese Christians from ethnic minority groups. In his report of such groups in Guizhou, Hattaway reports that “[s]ince the start of the new millennium, significant breakthroughs have occurred among minority groups that had been ignored for generations. There are growing churches today among minority groups like the Dong, Shui and, to a lesser extent, the Bouyei.”⁶ The images, customs, languages, cultural artifacts, and spiritualities of these

¹ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 67.

² Yi Liu, “Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee’s Ministry,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 30(1), no. April (2016).

³ Feng, “Against the Tide,” 244-50.

⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, 2nd ed. (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 81.

⁵ García-Johnson, *Spirit outside the Gate*, 39-40.

⁶ Hattaway, *Guizhou: The Precious Province*, 224.



Christian groups will undoubtedly contribute to “intersersality of decoloniality and of interculturality postured from below, including the intertwining of both in building, assembling, and re-membering (putting and pulling together anew and again) other conditions of knowledge(s).¹ Also to be engaged are the epistemologies embedded in ancient wisdom literature, primitive science, and modern sciences.

The goal of the decolonial Chinese theology agrees with and develops upon the thoughts of Mignolo and Walsh, and Santos in that the aim is not “to replace the epistemologies of the North and put the South in the place of the North,”² neither to replace the epistemologies of the public ideology, TSPM, and state-sanctioned, registered churches and put the unregistered, underground house churches in their place. Instead, the epistemic transformation proposed by the decolonial Chinese praxis/theology is to “overcome the hierarchical dichotomy between North and South,” and between registered and unregistered, legal and illegal, official and underground, the public and the grassroots, the oppressor and the oppressed, the east and the west. By “affirm[ing] and valoriz[ing] the differences that remain after the hierarchies have been eliminated,”³ decolonial pluriversality and pluriversal decoloniality,⁴ a kind of thinking that “promotes decolonization, creolization, or *mestizaje* through intercultural translation,”⁵ can be achieved.

In a nutshell, by providing the Chinese churches and Christians with such a theological reflection and praxis, the pneumatologically oriented, decolonial Chinese theology has the potential to develop a proposal that honors its legacies,

¹ Walsh, “Interculturality and Decoloniality,” 74.

² Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*, 8.

³ Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*, 8.

⁴ Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, “Introduction,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, ed. Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

⁵ Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*, 8.



responds to the present conditions, orients to its eschatological future of emancipation, as a way of serving people with God and on behalf of God, and refracting the Christian values and visions of co-existence and re-existence.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have analyzed China's colonial/anti-colonial history for a little more than one hundred years and divided it into four stages heuristically. In each stage, a brief contour of the development of Chinese theology was drawn. This four-stage classification of China's semi-colonial and anti-colonializing history serves as a heuristic device to correlate with the other worldwide decolonial counterparts.

Then the paper presented a decolonial analysis of Chinese theology and affirmed its three-layered epistemic crisis. Positioned at the central layer is the profoundly problematic public ideology manifested as a few old "myths," including the "century of humiliation," the labels of "anti-revolution," "heresy," and "cult" that have been associated with the Christianity in China, and its promotion of the China Dream as a counter-measure of the American Dream. The top layer indicates the full spectrum of Chinese theology, which has by and large internalized Western theology. As a result, indigenized Chinese Christianities and theologies have been marginalized. The bottom layer refers to the observation that Chinese theology has been dominated by China's public ideology. As a result, individualism, consumerism, and neo-liberalism have penetrated China's churches and Christians. Chinese theology has lost its voice in the public square and remains complacent on the (self-)isolated island of "personal spirituality." In short, the three-layered "sandwich" approach represents a comprehensive analysis of the epistemic crisis faced by Chinese theology.

However, Chinese theology is not without hope. Like John the Evangelist,



who was stranded on the island of Patmos and therefore invoked the seven spirits, the article attempted to work out a decolonial Chinese theology by shifting to decolonial thinking. The paper enlisted a few valuable resources. Witness Lee discerns Christendom's rapid decline and resorts to the seven spirits, who is the sevenfold intensified Spirit, to overcome Christianity's degradation. Under the leadership of his predecessor, Watchman Nee, the Local Churches resisted Western Christianity's domination out of the colonial mindset. Amos Yong's pluralistic and plurivocal readings of the seven spirits are helpful in intensifying the decolonial cracks identified in Chinese theology. Other resources contributing to decolonial Chinese theology include various indigenous Chinese theologies from ethnic minority groups.

If there is anything original in this article, it is the constructive decolonial Chinese theology that realizes the deeply embedded epistemic crisis, and subsequently proposes an epistemic transformation that transcends the dichotomy between the Global North and South, between the registered and unregistered churches in China, between the official and underground house churches, between the elite cultural Christians and the grassroots, between the oppressor and the oppressed, and between the east and the west.



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