

The Emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity in Mainland China*

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The study of Christianity in universities and research institutes is nothing unusual. It is rather remarkable, however, that Christian studies have become established in the cultural and educational system of communist China and have been developing rapidly since the late 1980s. A considerable number of scholars are now pursuing the serious academic study of Christianity and publishing their findings, and are doing so not in seminaries or other ecclesiastical settings but in institutions of the social and human sciences run and financed by the state. Their research includes not only studies of Christianity from historical and sociological perspectives, which may often be considered value-neutral from a religious point of view, but also the production of confessional theology, although the latter is much smaller in quantity than the former. Some scholars who are interested in religion even become committed Christians. In this article I introduce the phenomenon of the production of theology in these circumstances, articulating the factors that make it possible, analysing the nature of the theology produced in this situation and making a theological reflection on the orientation of theology relevant for Asian countries.

A Description of the Phenomenon

Apart from writings criticising Christianity from the 'advanced' communist perspective there was only scanty publishing on Christianity in communist China before 1980; it was all translated works that were usually closely related to the study of western philosophy. Since the 1980s publishing has been growing rapidly in terms of both quantity and quality. At the outset the publications were still mainly translated works on Christianity from the perspectives of history, cultural studies, sociology, religious studies and even theology. Later on articles, books and journals by Chinese scholars appeared in increasing numbers. In the higher education system religious studies departments and research institutions were established in some important universities such as Beijing and Nanjing (for details and figures, see He, 2001, p. 28). Nowadays some of these offer religious studies programmes from undergraduate level up to postgraduate level and publish textbooks. Some distinguished scholars have emerged and have been playing important roles in the development of religious studies (Liu Xiaofeng, 1997, p. 65). Even in liberal Chinese societies like Hong Kong and Taiwan it is unusual to find Christian studies programmes offered and academic books published by the state education system.

*This paper was first presented at the fourth Annual Meeting of Boon-Dang Central House, 24–28 June 2003, Paris, on the theme 'Doing Theology with Context: Exploring the Course'.

ISSN 0963-7494 print; ISSN 1465-3975 online/04/020177-10 © 2004 Keston Institute
DOI: 10.1080/09637490410001694647

It is a significant fact that the academic study of Christianity has become a formal part of the communist cultural and educational system.

Following Liu Xiaofeng (1997, pp. 65–66) we can divide the research interests of these scholars into five types:

1. Religious studies: the study of Christianity as one of the world religions from the perspectives of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.
2. History of Christian thought: the study of patristic, scholastic and contemporary Christian thought.
3. History of Christianity: the study of the history of the western churches and the churches in China.
4. Arts and literature: the study of Christian arts and literature through the ages.
5. Christian theology: the study of Christian doctrines.

Most of these studies can be pursued without a commitment to Christian faith and most of the discussions are developed in the realm of the human and social sciences. However, some of the scholars involved agree that in certain circumstances to have a genuine understanding of Christian theology proper and to develop meaningful discourse about it may require a commitment of faith. It is important, therefore, to analyse the attitude of these scholars towards the Christian faith.

In their attitude towards Christianity the scholars in mainland China can be divided into three groups (Chen Rongnu, 1997, p. 262; Li, 1997, pp. 132–33):

- (A) These scholars take Christianity as one of the world religions. They have no religious commitment themselves. They regard Christianity as a ‘foreign’ religion and are concerned to identify those of its features that are different from Chinese culture. In a sense they are doing comparative study between Christianity and Chinese culture.
- (B) These scholars are not committed to the Christian faith either; but they do not study Christianity from a cultural-nationalistic perspective: their approach is more value-neutral. Their frame of reference is shaped by the academic standards of the social and human sciences. Some of them show an appreciation of the Christian faith, however.
- (C) These scholars have a personal commitment to the Christian faith and comprise the only group committed to doing Christian theology proper. They do not do dogmatic theology in a traditional way, however, since they are working in the realm of the human and social sciences and have to adopt the so-called religiously unbiased approach required in these academic circles.

Needless to say, the divisions amongst these groups are rather fluid and their interaction means that people sometimes move from one group to another. Group A is the largest, then Group B and Group C is the smallest. Group C is the most active, however, and includes the most prominent figures of the circle. They are sometimes called the ‘Cultural Christians’ (*wenhua jidutu*) because although they have a personal commitment to the Christian faith most of them are not baptised members of an institutional church, nor do they have a direct relationship with any seminary or ecclesiastical institution. This is one of the reasons why several years ago vigorous debate arose between them and some scholars in Hong Kong, who mainly work in seminaries and institutions with an ecclesiastical background (Wenhua, 1997, pp. 96–196).

A Historical and Sociological Analysis of the Phenomenon

In most Chinese societies Christian studies and especially theology are usually done in seminaries and institutions which are run by the church or at least have a Christian

background.¹ The special feature of the emergence of scholars studying Christianity in mainland China is that they have no relationship with existing ecclesiastical institutions and are all located in the cultural and educational system run by the communist government. The development of this remarkable phenomenon is worth further analysis from the historical and sociological perspectives.

After the communist government was established in mainland China in 1949, and especially during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the Christian churches were forced to surrender all their educational institutions, including schools, universities and seminaries, to the state. Subsequently they had to struggle for their existence and accommodate themselves to their new situation under an atheist socialist government. The general repression of religion ceased over 20 years ago and religious freedom is now enshrined in the constitution. However, since the churches' academic resources were completely abolished for such a long time the seminaries in mainland China have until recently been struggling to produce clergy to meet the needs of the churches. They have therefore had no extra resources to devote to research and the institutional churches have not been able to produce high quality academic studies.

A humanities faculty is not complete without the study of religions, however. Even during the Cultural Revolution, therefore, the study of philosophy, history and other subjects in secular universities included material on various religions, though this was usually present so that the religions in question could be 'criticised'. Once ideological control was relaxed, however, this material began to attract the interest of scholars in its own right (Chen Cunfu, 1997, p. 9; He, 2001, pp. 22–25).

Despite the atheist stance of the communists and their eagerness to impose their ideology on every area of the cultural and educational system, it was an undeniable fact that communism was a product of the history of western thought. Its origin therefore had to be studied in that context; and one of the essential constituents of western thought is Christianity. Indeed, the writings of Marx, Engels and even Lenin include discussions of creation, original sin, the Trinity and other elements of the Christian faith. As early as 1956, therefore, the communist government was already planning to translate 1630 western philosophical works over a period of 30 years. This was the beginning of the process of introducing a vast amount of western thought into the Chinese cultural and educational system. Some older-generation mainland scholars learned about Christianity in this way. The more important point, however, is that it prepared the human resources and experience needed for the translation of a large number of Christian classics and a large quantity of developing Christian theology in recent years (Liu Xiaofeng, 1997, pp. 67–68).

The cultural and educational system nevertheless provides only a necessary but not a sufficient reason for the appearance of serious academic Christian studies in mainland China. There are plenty of academic resources such as seminaries and even universities with a Christian background in other Chinese societies, but none of these societies has ever seen such a dramatic growth in Christian studies as that which has occurred in mainland China over the last one and a half decades. There must, then, be other reasons for this exciting phenomenon.

Liu Xiaofeng, a prominent figure in the circle, points out that although Chinese societies like Hong Kong and Taiwan have never experienced ideological control like that in communist mainland China, they rarely produce writings that are widely transmitted in, and accepted by, the wider circle of the human and social sciences beyond the ecclesiastical institution; and the reason for this, in his view, is that Christian studies in these places are mainly conducted in institutions run by churches. Although the institutional churches enjoy complete freedom in these societies, they are to a large extent profoundly influenced by their fundamentalist and evangelical wings and have little intention of influencing the

cultural and academic realms. What is more, although these liberal societies allow complete religious freedom, based on the political principle of the separation of church and state, the cultural and educational system is reluctant to let the institutional church have too much influence. A further consideration is that because of their Chinese cultural identity and their market-led economic orientation, these modern secular societies rarely listen to the voices of Christian intellectuals and they have limited audiences to make their discourse influential (Liu Xiaofeng, 1997, p. 71).

Some mainland scholars try to explain the phenomenon of which they are a part from a sociological perspective on the basis of their own experience. As noted earlier, communism is a product of western thought. More specifically, it is an heir of the Enlightenment and thus inherits its revolutionary character. It is critical of all kinds of tradition and its antireligious stance is only one of its many 'anti-' positions.² Early Chinese communist intellectuals were inspired by this spirit and succeeded in their political revolution. After the communist government was established communism was not only the directive of the political realm, it was also transformed into an intellectual discourse for justifying and establishing socialist China as a modern national state. As such it not only combated western imperialism but also took a critical stance towards traditional Chinese culture as a conservative spirit hindering the acceptance of 'advanced' communist revolutionary thought by ordinary people; but it is in this way that communism as a stream of western thought has accommodated itself to traditional Chinese society and become an autocratic ideology with the help of political power (Liu Zongkun, 1997, p. 47).

There has been something of a foundational shift in the cultural and academic world in this communist state. Although some radical Marxists still resist the development of Christian studies, they have in a sense become the arena for the expression of an inner tension within western culture between communist and Christian thought rather than of an external tension between an eastern and a western religious tradition (Liu Xiaofeng, 1997, p. 69). Although it cannot be denied that at the grass-roots level antichristian attitudes still arise mainly from national and cultural identity, among intellectuals nurtured by the communist government, who provide the major transformational force in the cultural and educational system, such attitudes arise more from an Enlightenment spirit than from an eagerness to sustain a cultural identity (Liu Zongkun, 1997, pp. 47–50). At an earlier stage, when the communist government needed to strengthen its control, it tended to treat those who embraced traditional Chinese cultural thinking as resisting the politically orthodox position of communism by a form of cultural nationalism. Meanwhile although the tension between Christianity and communism can hardly be eased, communist thought can never completely prevent people from studying Christianity, as Christianity is in a sense the predecessor of communism in European intellectual history. Scholars studying Christianity are of course very unlikely to transform themselves into a dominant political power in the Chinese national state.³

The communist government has thus completely transformed the ecology of the cultural and educational system for the sake of making communism an autocratic ideology in the modern national state of China. One side effect of this has been the suppression to a certain extent of the exclusivist stance of scholars embracing traditional Chinese culture in the academic realm. Meanwhile, through the communist cultural and educational system Christian thought has silently participated in the making of modern thought in this ancient country. Once the control of an autocratic ideology was relaxed in the academic realm, therefore, a wide variety of types of thinking had a more or less equal chance of developing and gaining popularity among intellectuals. This has been the scene since

1978, when Deng Xiaoping came to the political foreground and began gradually implementing his policy of 'reform and openness'.

The above description may appear too idealistic, so let us look at the concrete situation. In 1952 all Christian universities and religion departments in mainland China were closed. A few Christian classics were still being translated from the 1950s to the early 1970s, but they did not attract much attention because ideological control was severe in the academic realm. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, a new situation developed. The communist government admitted the errors of the Cultural Revolution, and the belief that all religions are antirevolutionary was criticised as an oversimplified dogma. (For an overview of the discussion in China, see He, 2001, pp. 25–27.) All kinds of religious studies then began to reestablish normal development.

By now the scholars who had had formal academic training in religious studies and theology before the Cultural Revolution had either died or were very old.⁴ Religious studies could now rely only on intellectuals trained in other disciplines. Of the five areas of research in Christian studies (see the discussion in the previous section (Liu Xiaofeng, 1997, pp. 65–66)), the history of Christian thought (area 2) and the history of Christianity (area 3) have experienced the fastest growth. This was because although departments of religion had been closed for a long time some intellectuals were still able to receive training in philosophy and history even during the Cultural Revolution, and these people were now better prepared for study in areas 2 and 3 than in the other areas. Many of the mainland scholars recently involved in Christian studies graduated from philosophy and history departments during the period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Some of them have gradually but successfully transformed themselves into scholars in the area of religious studies and a few in Christian theology. Some distinguished figures have had the chance to study overseas in religion and theology departments and have returned to reinforce the movement. Religion departments and research institutions thus began to be established in the state education system from the late 1980s after this generation of scholars gained sufficient research experience and acquired the relevant positions in the system. The number of translated works and even original writings they produced then increased dramatically. Now the younger generation nurtured since the late 1980s is becoming another major dynamic element in the circle (Chen Cunfu, 1997, pp. 13–15).

An Analysis of the Nature of Theology

A special feature of this phenomenon is that most scholars involved do not learn Christianity from the institutional churches but solely through their own academic studies and experience in translating Christian classics. It is not surprising that some thereby develop a keen research interest in religious studies. A small proportion – though the actual number is very few – even has a commitment to the Christian faith and has developed high-quality theological discourse. Liu Xiaofeng points out the significance of this phenomenon as evangelisation without missionaries (Liu Xiaofeng, 2000, p. 57). I would add that they in turn become missionaries and preach the Christian message to intellectuals without the aids of the institutional churches. Their writings are transmitted in the human and social sciences among Chinese intellectuals and the churches in mainland China play absolutely no part in this process. This is a very special phenomenon in the history of Christianity, especially in the modern history of Christianity in Asia, and it directly affects the nature of the theology these people produce.

The importance of one point can hardly be overemphasised for the above phenomenon to occur: the lessening of ideological control in the communist state, which has led to a vacuum in both the public sphere and the individual mind and an openness to all sorts of

ideas. In the academic realm a quasiliberal situation has developed: all types of religious and cultural thought can be studied and appreciated, as long as this does not lead to the development of a social movement. Some scholars involved confess that they suffered from ideological control in the past and now find consolation in studying Christianity in the new situation.

As a student from Hong Kong who has studied in Britain for several years I should admit that I have limited interaction with the group of scholars studying religions in mainland China. I can only try to predict the development of their studies, basing my conjecture on the assumption that ideological control in the academic realm will not revert to that of the Cultural Revolution. This conjecture is important, however, for an appreciation of the theological discourse these scholars are and will be producing, which is relevant for our own theological reflection.

As I have stated repeatedly these scholars are working solely in the academic realm and have no interaction with the institutional churches. The result is that their studies and even their theology are produced in the realm of the social and human sciences and make use of the corresponding language. (Here I am mainly referring to Group C, the 'Cultural Christians'.) They are therefore experiencing a great tension as they construct their theology. On the one hand, if they overemphasise their confessional stance they run the risk of losing their place in their institutions, as these are supposed to be religiously unbiased. On the other hand they acknowledge that it is because of their personal conviction that they are able to produce genuine Christian theological discourse rather than religious studies discourse. If they withdraw from this position, they will become members of Group B. This explains why Group C is few in number. They may be criticised by Group A from a cultural-national position and by Group B from a supposedly religiously unbiased position. Nevertheless Group C is the most active and influential of the groups. Indeed it sometimes happens that members of Group A who withdraw from their cultural-national position and members of Group B who are drawn by the Christian faith become members of Group C (Chen Rongnu, 1997, p. 263).

Regardless of the changing inner dynamics amongst the groups and the number of scholars they comprise one thing is quite certain: they have to pursue their studies and do their theology in the realm of the human and social sciences and using the appropriate language. This is not their own choice but a given condition. Some of their works are 'exported' to other Chinese communities, and scholars working in seminaries and other ecclesiastical settings have detected the difference in nature in their works. As communication between scholars in different regions increases rapidly and in view of the fact that the ultimate objective of some of the mainland 'theologians' is to establish a global Chinese theological circle, some theological reflection on the phenomenon is relevant. I believe that such reflection will also have significance for theologians in other Asian countries where Christianity is a religion of foreign origin rather than indigenous.

A Theological Reflection on the Typology of Theology

As a matter of fact theological discourse produced in the realm of the human and social sciences using corresponding language is not something new in the western world. Most traditional universities in Europe and private universities in the USA still have a divinity faculty or theology department. Nonetheless theologians working in such institutions since the time of the Enlightenment (for example Friedrich Schleiermacher, John Henry Newman, Edward Farley) have at times felt the need to produce a discourse of justification for the presence of their discipline in the modern university system. While theological seminaries run by Christian denominations operate outside the state education system,

relatively value-neutral religion departments form in new universities, and here theologians find it difficult to involve a confessional stance in their academic discourse in the modern secular cultural and educational system. Therefore although scholars in divinity faculties and even religion departments continue to produce Christian theology this has its own distinctive quality and is sometimes regarded as a type of 'theology' different from the traditional confessional discourse.

In most Chinese societies there is a long tradition of the study of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in university departments of philosophy, history, literature, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and of course religious studies. In such departments these religions are studied differently from the way they are studied in institutions run by the respective religious communities. In the latter case scholars can develop confessional discourse freely; but scholars working in the former institutional settings need to adapt their discussion to the rules of the above-mentioned university disciplines and may be required to justify the involvement of their confessional stance. As Liu Xiaofeng points out, if the study of traditional religions is to occupy a proper place in the modern cultural and educational institution it has to undergo transformation. Nevertheless, regardless of their own faith commitment, scholars of traditional Chinese culture and religions in universities in Chinese societies can still produce high-quality discourse accepted by intellectuals. The same thing can apply to the study of Christianity (Liu Xiaofeng, 2000, pp. 55–57).

The question of the transformation of the study of religion is a crucial one for Christian theologians in mainland China. It also has significance for theologians elsewhere. Liu Xiaofeng has articulated the importance of producing this kind of Christian theology in the modern world. In any modern secular state, whether it is socialist or liberal democratic, the cultural and educational system (including universities, research institutes and the like) is the major environment where a religion or culture can find intellectual disciples and influence people beyond its own community. Christian and Buddhist seminaries can also form intellectuals and even produce academic discourse. Nevertheless they are considered to be private sectors of society and it is difficult for them to extend their influence beyond their own religious communities. If the influence of Christian theology is not to be restricted to the institutional church, then, its discourse must be of a kind that is acceptable in the academic realm of the modern secular world (Liu Xiaofeng, 2000, pp. 55–57). In fact, when we examine the contemporary university system, we can see that Christian studies in the West and the study of traditional Chinese culture and religions in Chinese societies have constantly been adapting themselves to that system. Thus they can survive in the system as studies of ancient cultural heritage and continue to exert influence on intellectuals.

Some Chinese scholars have pointed out that the changes which have occurred in the last half century in mainland China are basically a drastic form of modernisation in a relatively short time-span. The communist government is attempting to domesticate a form of modern political thought (communism) in order to construct the 'orthodox' cultural discourse of the national state in China (see the descriptions of this phenomenon by Liu Zongkun and Liu Xiaofeng). Although we are often reminded that we have already entered a postmodern age, the global project of modernisation is still constantly influencing the social, political and cultural context. We should of course not unreservedly welcome this process, since it may conceal various forms of colonisation. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not we are facing a situation in which local contexts, cultures, traditions and identities are more readily transformed than ever before. Christian theologians should be conscious of this changing context so that theology may be able to play a part in the process.

The challenge for theologians working in academic circles in these circumstances is to produce genuine Christian theology in the realm of the human and social sciences which does not lose its confessional stance. If we accept the need to produce this kind of theology, then we need to examine how this is to be done. The discussion so far seems to give the impression that theology produced in ecclesiastical settings and theology produced in the academic realm should exhibit completely different qualities. The former starts from a confessional stance while the latter must originate in a so-called religiously value-neutral context. However if theology is to be genuinely 'Christian' it must be based in faith in Jesus Christ. It seems, therefore, that producing a confessional 'Christian theology' in the academic realm is basically impossible. Do we really need to insist on a dichotomy between these two types of discourse, however?

At this point I would like to refer to Hans Frei, a theologian who has spent a lifetime grappling with this issue. Frei points out that the status of Christianity in the modern western world has become ambiguous, such that two mutually exclusive views of Christian theology have emerged. On the one hand,

Christian theology is an instance of a general class or generic type and is therefore to be subsumed under general criteria of intelligibility, coherence, and truth that it must share with other academic disciplines.

while on the other hand

Theology is an aspect of Christianity and is therefore partly or wholly defined by its relation to the cultural or semiotic system that constitutes that religion. In this view theology is religion-specific, and whether or not other religions besides Christianity have theologies or something like them would have to be adduced case by specific case.

In addition Frei points out that the first view sees theology as a cognate discipline to philosophy while the second sees it as closer to anthropology and sociology (Frei, 1992, pp. 1–2).

Both types of theology exhibit problems by their very nature. Since the first type makes use of some existing philosophical system and its corresponding language to express Christian thought, it is not speaking first from the point of view of a believer but tries to describe Christian faith from a perspective that may not be commensurable with that faith. The second type, however, commits itself to the confessional stance and produces genuine Christian discourse. The problem here is that people outside the confessional circle may not be able to understand the language of the religious community concerned. Cultural Christians in mainland China get into both types of trouble. They want to produce discourse from a confessional stance but must use the language of the human and social sciences. They thus suffer from a great intellectual tension.

Frei's unfinished project *Types of Christian Theology* may shed light on the matter. He thinks that Christian theologians in the West as well are continuously struggling to do theology in the tension between these two poles. Instead of simply dividing their works into two opposing categories, however, he finds that it is more appropriate to arrange them into a continuous spectrum with the two supposedly mutually exclusive positions at the two ends. In his system Frei articulates five typologies, with type one representing those approaches that are closer to philosophical disciplines and type five those that are characterised by a confessional stance. If one is anxious both to maintain one's own convictions and produce a discourse that will be understood, then the optimal choice would probably be the middle point, type three, which would be likely to produce the most balanced discourse between the two poles.

Christian theologians have in fact from the very beginning been faced with the challenge of encountering the context they are living in. Theology addressed itself to the Greek and Latin cultures of the Roman world, and then to the Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism of the medieval period. In recent times it has been addressing itself to modernism and postmodernism. One of the challenges to theologians today may be that theology needs to appropriate the language of the human and social sciences. In other words academic theology may need to introduce history, sociology, linguistics, philosophy and so on into its discussion, or even restructure itself to fit the discussion of these disciplines into itself as a kind of modern science (to use Ernst Troeltsch's term, becoming a *Wissenschaftliche Theologie*). The traditional way of doing dogmatics may not be relevant for the new situation. In these circumstances, Frei's type three could be an appropriate option. The mission of this type of theology is as follows:

Theology as academic enterprise and as Christian self-description in the Church must be correlated. Philosophy and theology must be correlated. External and self-description of Christianity must be correlated, and in each case, two factors are autonomous yet reciprocally related, but that reciprocity and mutual autonomy is not explained by any more basic structure of thought under which the two factors would be included. (Frei, 1992, p. 38)

In line with this aim, Frei points out that the correlation envisaged in type three must not rest on a tight method, but always remain an experiment and an imperfect one. Hence this type of theology must endure an ever-present tension, risking contradiction and confusion but trying to be hermeneutically consistent (Frei, 1992, pp. 77–78). A theology of this type is 'a carefully modulated way of articulating the faith philosophically but therefore fragmentarily, even though in a fit, descriptive fashion. At *some* point, though not too quickly, *philosophical* agnosticism has to set in in the interest of full-blooded Christian theology' (Frei, 1992, p. 91). Nevertheless, 'if you're not a theologian of types one or two – that is to say, if you are *not* systematic in your correlation between general meaning and academic criteria and the specific self-description – you are not too worried about cutting your philosophical losses' (Frei, 1992, pp. 89–90).

Although the academic situation in mainland China is unique, it is a worthwhile enterprise for theologians in other Asian countries to consider the issues arising; they are often neglected in Asian countries where Christian studies are conducted mainly in Christian institutions. If this were to continue, Christianity might be doomed to play a role only in the private sector but never in the public sphere affecting the making of modern culture. The churches might continue to grow, but Christianity might well remain with the status of a popular religion, unable to assume its full responsibility for transforming culture. Not only would it lose its role in the world, but the power of Jesus Christ would become irrelevant (Liu Zongkun, 1997, p. 55). If the period of communist rule has accidentally and paradoxically created an appropriate situation for Christian study to become a formal part of the cultural and educational system of the state, this implies that the Christian faith already possesses the potential to influence the construction of modern Chinese thought in mainland China. Liu Xiaofeng claims that this is a chance Chinese Christian intellectuals cannot afford to miss (Liu Xiaofeng, 2000, p. 4; see also He, 2001, pp. 30–31). Are Asian theologians aware of the changing context in which and with which we are doing theology under the agenda of modernisation and are we prepared to give of our best to the Master? I believe that this is a relevant and important question.

Notes

- ¹ The Baptist University of Hong Kong, for example, was originally established by the Baptist Church and thus has a department of religion and philosophy; the Chinese University of Hong Kong has a religion department (with a theology division financed by churches as a constituent part) because Chung Chi College, one of the member colleges of the university, was formerly a Christian university in mainland China.
- ² The Enlightenment spirit is critical of religion but not necessarily antireligious. The antireligious stance of most communist governments may partly originate from their political motives.
- ³ One of the reasons why Cultural Christians keep themselves distant from the institutional churches, although there is no bar to their becoming involved with them, may be that want to avoid being suspected of trying to gain popularity among the vast numbers of Christians in mainland China.
- ⁴ Before 1949 the Second World War and the Chinese civil war meant that most people in mainland China were unable to receive a formal education.

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