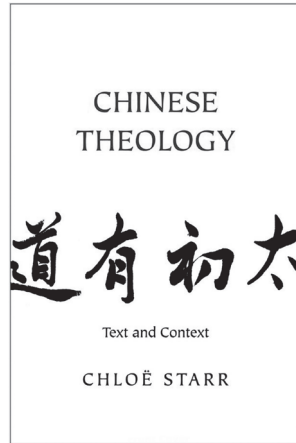


Book Review by Patrick
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Chloë Starr. *Chinese Theology. Text and Context*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016. 373 pages.



Philip L Wickeri, internationally known for his writings on Protestant Christianity in China, recommends *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* for being indispensable on the bookshelf of everyone interested in theology and Christianity in China. "We can learn from it, enjoy it, argue with it, and have different interpretations on key subjects." But Chloë Starr has produced a seminal work that provides a new point of departure for understanding Christian theology in China.

Chloë Starr 司馬懿 joined Yale Divinity School in 2009, and is Associate Professor of Asian Christianity and Theology. She previously taught classical Chinese literature at the universities of Durham, where she was Senior Tutor of St John's College, and Oxford.

Starr bases her study on a close reading of representative Chinese theological texts in their contexts:

Textual: Chinese literary contexts, such as themes, words, phrases and allusions to other texts, and a distinctly Chinese literary style and structure. Starr believes that Chinese have not produced a “systematic” theology precisely because their literary tradition does not feature systematic treatments of subjects like theology and philosophy. Still, some may disagree as neo-Confucianism can be considered a “systematic” treatment of the Confucian literary tradition. Whilst she identifies her audience as scholars of theology and Chinese literature, her work has a stronger emphasis on the latter. This is not to say a literary analysis is not important for theology. Yet, those trained in systematic theology may have trouble recognizing theological themes such as Christology or ecclesiology in Starr’s analysis.

Socio-political: Chinese society and politics form the other major context for Christian writers, especially “nationalism,” broadly defined as a concern for the Chinese nation after 1911. The author highlights other dialogue partners during and after composition of the Chinese theological texts and theological debates at the time, including both Chinese and foreign discussions. She affirms with confidence that a purely “Chinese” theology is hard to find, for all the Chinese writers are in dialogue with universal church conversations.

Unlike most other treatments of Chinese Christianity, Starr focuses not just on history but theology. By “theology,”

she means, “speaking about God,” not just the usual systematic treatments of the West. She believes that because there is little systematic thinking in the usual “Western” form, we need to look in other places for discussions of God, humans, and life in this world. At the same time, she does not limit herself to “theology,” but devotes extensive space to public religious policy and to history, so that we may understand the contexts of these texts.

As the subtitle of the volume under review suggests, *Chinese Theology* majestically weaves together the theological texts produced by Chinese Christians with the historical contexts in which they were born. The latter is taken up in Chapters 2, 6 and 8, discovering the socio-political factors shaping theology after the establishments of the Republic and the People’s Republic, as well as the post-Cultural Revolution period.

The remaining seven chapters offer more focused treatments on the texts of Chinese theology. They contain discussions of Chinese Roman Catholic writings in Chapters 1 and 4, Protestant texts in Chapters 3, 5, 7 and 10 from the sixteenth century up to the early twenty-first century. In her later chapters, she presents the work of both Protestant “Mainline” and “House church” writers, with sections on church and academic publications, popular hymns, sermons and blogs by Christian church leaders. Starr is inevitably selective in her choice of writers, and some important voices,

as she herself notes, are not dealt with at all, or are treated too briefly. It is peculiar that the book chooses to set aside figures like Song Shangjie 宋尚節 (John Sung, 1901-1944) and Ni Tuosheng 倪柝聲 (Watchman Nee, 1903-1972) to focus on “the issues that intellectuals and liberals faced” – a point which is somewhat contradicted by Chapter 10.

Chapter 1 begins in the late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jesuit mission. There is a tremendous amount of scholarship on late Ming and early Qing Catholicism, and in a short chapter, Starr manages to provide a helpful summary of the period, while at the same time contributing her own perspective on what she terms “textual sinicization.” Starr traces the evolution from missionary theology, first translated and then composed by missionaries, to localized Chinese theology.

She notes that enculturation, a contemporary term like inculturation or contextualization, has been going on all along. To illustrate this trajectory, Starr examines three texts: Michele Ruggieri’s catechism *Tianzhu shilu* 《天主實錄 True Record of the Lord of Heaven, 1584》; Matteo Ricci’s revised catechism *Tianzhu shiyi* 《天主實義 True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, 1603》; and Li Jiubiao’s 李九標 *Kouduo richao* 《口鐸日抄 Daily Excerpts of Oral Admonishments; 1630-1640》. The last two texts are available in English translation. All three writings take the form of a dialogue: Ruggieri’s dialogue is a constructed, internal one, with questions and answers of a Roman

Catechism; Ricci's revised catechism is not a real dialogue but a teaching, since the Chinese scholar's questions always bring a response and resolution from Ricci himself; only Li Jiubiao's *Oral Admonishments* represents a written record of a true dialogue between Chinese Christians in Fujian and local Jesuit missionaries over the period of a decade. "The text is a record of life, a miscellany, not a systematized didactic presentation of Christian faith." (Chapter 1, p. 28)

Starr acknowledges and interprets the term "accommodation" as a "two-way making room for, or adaptation of, religious thought, liturgy, and method within a new philosophical house or religious casing. It implies a generosity, and hospitality, on the part of both the one making room for the metaphysical newcomer and the one accommodating Christianity to a new sphere of religious experience." (Chapter 1, p. 17) She applies this to theology, by pointing out that not only content, but literary form played an important role in this process.

The first chapter as a whole shows how sinicization of theology took place much earlier, and much more comprehensively, than church structures. "Just as Christianity was being transformed into Chinese forms by local adaptation and innovation in communities and patterns of prayer built around a church or mission house, so Chinese Christian theology underwent its own process of transformation into a local textual religion." (Chapter 1, p. 40)

From here, Starr jumps to the twentieth century, ignoring nineteenth century Protestant and Catholic Christianity altogether. Her interest is not in the growth of missions, but in the development of theology by Chinese. In Chapter 2 she begins by focusing on the print culture in the Republican era (1912-1949), and the wide circulation of Christian texts, a process that was itself facilitated by Christian efforts in modernization. In this period, and especially after the 1919 May Fourth Movement, the issue of Christian identity takes center stage for Christian intellectuals. Up until and beyond the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, Christians would be wrestling with the question of what it meant to be committed to Christ and to China. This is the subject of subsequent chapters on Zhao Zichen 趙紫辰 (T. C. Chao, 1888-1979), Xu Zongze 徐宗澤 (P. Joseph Zi, S.J., 1886-1947), and Wu Leichuan 吳雷川 (L. C. Wu, 1870-1944). In each case she focuses on a key text, rather than attempting to deal with their thought as a whole. Starr interprets the three thinkers in terms of literary genres, such as a novella (*zhuan* 傳) or the Chinese 'jottings' (*biji* 筆記).

Chapters 3 and 5 focus on two of the most important Protestant thinkers of the Republican period, Zhao Zichen and Wu Leichuan, and their works the *Life of Jesus* and *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, respectively. Starr's focus is on Zhao's *Life of Jesus* (*Yesu zhuan* 耶穌傳, 1935), an imaginative portrayal intended as an introduction for younger Chinese intellectuals. Later Zhao himself

qualified this work as a “literary exercise!” Given her emphasis on form over content, her choice of *Life of Jesus* is a natural one. However, this comes at the expense of Zhao’s later works, which go more deeply into the main content of his theology, especially his *Four Lectures on Theology*, which were geared toward the same audience as his *Life of Jesus*. Zhao was always creative, moving from an emphasis on culture to politics and society before he was effectively removed from the theological scene after the criticism he underwent in the early 1950s.

Chapter 4 looks at a lesser-known Catholic theologian Xu Zongze 徐宗澤, a “bibliophile par excellence” and prolific editor of *Revue Catholique* (*Shengjiao zazhi* 聖教雜誌). The two epigraphs at the opening of Chapter 4: “The Holy Church is a good mother who protects her children. . . . The priests of the Church are spiritual doctors, curing the pain of the people,” (1933) and “To spread the gospel in a country, the first thing necessary is to assimilate it with the people’s thinking and customs, only then can it enter deeply among the people and comprehend their psychology,” (1944) illustrate the two foci of Xu Zongze’s writing: Roman Catholic teaching and the personal and social situations of the Chinese people. Starr first looks at his essays in the *Revue Catholique* and then at the “thoughts and jottings” *Sui si sui bi* 隨思隨筆 that later became a regular feature in the back pages of the magazine. In each case, she finds Xu to be applying traditional Roman Catholic convictions to daily life.

Jesuit Fr Xu, with both Chinese and Western education, gained considerable authority among his Roman Catholic readers during the crucial 1920s and 1930s. Xu published doctrinal works and textbooks, compiled from articles he had written for the magazine. Some dealt with theological topics; others treated psychology and social economics. In 1940, he issued a “curious scrapbook of ideas and comments in the Chinese *biji* 筆記 “pen notes” or “brush notes”. . . style of composition titled *Sui si sui bi* 隨思隨筆,” or *Pencilus Liber* (a Free Pencil). (Chapter 4, p. 101)

Starr notes “The *biji* 筆記 had for centuries been a forum for personal expression outside one’s official writings, and these short entries, some just a few lines long, are arguably as revealing as the formal essays and editorials.” In other words, these “pen notes” helped to interiorize one’s daily experience. “This chapter sets the *biji* in the frame of the “official” magazine writings.” (Chapter 4, p. 101) In both the articles in large print and the *biji* in small print, we find a “deep social concern.” The first part of the chapter looks at the articles that discussed papal encyclicals that spoke to larger social issues, while the second part examines the *biji*, which addressed a larger variety of matters of importance to ordinary people. “Like the work of many of his Protestant peers, Xu’s writing was in dialogue with mainstream society as much as with other theologians, and a prime aim was for the church to influence society, especially in the formation of morals.” (p. 102)

Xu worked within three sets of discourse: Roman Catholic teaching, the new language of social science, and Chinese traditional values. Starr's exploration of the interrelationships among these three is fascinating, and gives insight into the complex thought world of educated Chinese Roman Catholics and Protestants at the time. Xu's articles addressed matters like just labor laws (labor contracts), education, and marriage.

Xu's "jottings" 筆記 receive more discussion, because they reinforce Starr's thesis that there is a "need to look beyond received doctrinal texts and forms in assessing Chinese theology." (Chapter 4, p. 127) In the *biji*, Xu was able to touch upon all sorts of topics, many of which are not overtly theological or even "Christian," and yet all of which reflect the intersection of divine truth with daily life. He believed strongly that Roman Catholic youth must learn both their own Chinese culture and official church teaching, and must see the connection between truth and life, both private and public. Indeed, as seen in the *biji*, "reading and ingesting forms the moral self." (Chapter 4, p. 127)

Chapter 5 analyzes Wu Leichuan's *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (*Jidujiao yu Zhongguo wenhua* 基督教與中國文化) in 1936. Wu, a modern "Confucian Christian" bases his theology of the Kingdom of Heaven upon the imperative of social and economic reform as a prelude to moral reform. For Wu, religion is "a motivating force for progress in

human society. It propels individuals forward and upward: from the material to the spiritual, from the individual to the communal.” (Chapter 5, p. 128)

The last half of the book deals with Chinese theology from 1949 to the present. Chapter 6 addresses the many dilemmas of the Chinese Church created by the rise of a new regime. Starr shows the complexity of the discernments Chinese Christians, like Wang Mingdao 王明道 (1900-1991), Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗 (Y. T. Wu, 1893-1979), Zhang Boda 張伯達 (Beda Chang, 1905-1951), Cardinal Gong Pinmei 龔品梅 (Ignatius Kung Pin-mei, 1901-2000) and many others, had to make in the 1950s and again in the 1980s. Ever since, no open public space has been created in mainland China for bringing out the truth and the sharp delineation of religious groups has militated against an atmosphere of reconciliation.

Whilst the Republican-era figures are investigated largely around their respective *magna opera*, Chapter 7 turns to the significant yet controversial Ding Guangxun 丁光訓 (K. H. Ting, 1915-2012), through his collection of essays from the 1930s to the 1990s. This provides a useful counterpoint to existing studies on Ding which have tended to focus on the 1980s–90s when he was the pre-eminent leader of the state-sanctioned Protestant church. Starr emphasizes his role in building up the Church after the end of the Cultural Revolution era and his “robust” Christology.

In the pre-war period Ding elaborated an ecclesiology of interdependence, which sharply contrasted with his absolute defense of the Chinese Church's self-determination after 1949. Perhaps radical political changes in China may explain this *volte-face*. Ding's thinking is centered on the moment; it consists of sermons and small articles. From the fact of the divisions they created, as the ones they intended to heal, it would be worthwhile to critically reexamine them today.

Chapter 9 shifts from the church to the academy – a “Christianity fever” happening within the country's secular universities and academic institutes. It is surprising that Starr devotes this chapter to Yang Huilin 楊慧林. In contrast to figures such as Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 and He Guanghu 何光滄. Yang has never publicly professed to be a Christian or a Christian theologian and would perhaps more accurately be described as a scholar of literary studies.

Finally, Chapter 10 returns to the church, highlighting key house-church figures such as the rural hymn-writer Lü Xiaomin 呂小敏, also known as Sister Ruth, and her popular Canaan Hymns 迦南詩選, and urban intellectuals such as the convert Wang Yi 王怡, a former law professor at Chengdu University, and Yu Jie 余杰, the editor of Christian biographies, who both see the state church as irrelevant to the future of Chinese Christianity.

French Jesuit Fr Benoit Vermander in his book review of *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* concludes: “This

remarkably written and documented monograph, should contribute to start a conversation between Chinese theology and those theologies elaborated within other contexts. Moreover, it provides alternative insights into the situation of Christianity in contemporary China. Finally, it opens up towards an approach of theological style that can provide significant benefits well beyond the Chinese case.”

For a Chinese book review, please see: 田海華，〈文以載道－評司馬懿的《中國神學》〉，《道風：基督教文化評論》第四十八期，2018年春，頁298-311。