

BOOK REVIEW

LIM, Francis Khok Gee (ed.), *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural Perspectives*. Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy, no. 5. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013. xiii+265p: Hbk. ISBN: 9780415528467. £85.

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This important collection of articles is a welcome addition to the study of burgeoning Christianity in the Chinese mainland. It is based on a 2011 conference in Singapore and is mainly by Chinese authors from institutions outside the mainland. As is true of many such collections, there are weak and strong chapters in this book. Protestant Christianity has grown remarkably in China since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1979, and now has at least 40 million adherents (p. 61). Some estimates are considerably higher, such as the range of 50 to 200 million “unregistered Protestants” alone (p. 220). Many of these are in house churches with Pentecostal characteristics. The authors come from different perspectives: sociology, ethnography, political science, history, theology and cultural studies. They deal with various subjects: modernity, syncretism, nationalism, ethnicity and various different forms of Chinese Christianity – and there is even a chapter on the religiosity of popular Chinese cinema. The infamous Cultural Revolution sought to eradicate all forms of religion in China, but this unwittingly created a new religious market in Deng Xiaoping’s “reform era” from the 1980s. This favoured Christianity’s rapid expansion, particularly as it came to be regarded no longer as foreign, but as a prestigious Chinese religion symbolizing modernity and cosmopolitanism. This also created a situation where Christianity became more assertive, socially active, and attractive to the growing educated Chinese urban middle class (pp. 5–6). But enormous variations of tolerance towards this new Chinese Christianity by local government authorities in different regions exist, and different variables regulate the relationship (p. 221).

The collection has much information on different forms of Christianity, including Catholicism, official Protestantism, unofficial Protestant house churches, and a chapter on Seventh Day Adventism. In this review I concentrate on how this collection sheds light on Pentecostalism. In the first place, the term “Pentecostalism” itself is contested. The nature of house church Christianity in China is described by Chen-yang Kao (p. 208) in his chapter as “Pentecostal-style Protestantism” with “Pentecostal-oriented faith”. Richard Madsen (p. 17) describes this most rapidly growing form of popular Christianity as being “full of signs and wonders”; Katrin Fiedler (p. 143) refers to “healing Christians” accounting for 90 per cent of conversions in rural China; and Fredrik Fällman

(pp. 156, 162) states that the fastest-growing churches throughout China are “evangelical, charismatic and/or Pentecostal”. Kristin Kupfer (p. 183) writes of “spiritual-religious groups” in China since 1978 that “often mix aspects of Western charismatic revival and Pentecostal movements”. The main activities of these groups include speaking in tongues, communal prayer and evangelism (pp. 194–5), activities that characterize Pentecostalism worldwide. Kao (p. 216) suggests, however, that speaking in tongues is seldom practised, and that healing and exorcism are the prevalent activities in unregistered house churches. There is therefore much of interest here to scholars of Pentecostalism.

Taking his cue from Charles Taylor, Madsen (pp. 18–26) tackles the challenges western social sciences with their secular, “dis-encharnted” culture have with the “encharnted” world of Chinese Christianity. Chinese Christianity has been strongly influenced by revivalist movements from elsewhere, both East and West, since the early twentieth century – but these have been hybridized into a distinctly Chinese form that confronts sickness, misfortune and evil spirits, and lives constantly in expectation of the miraculous. In doing so, Chinese Christianity has largely rejected a modernizing, social gospel form of Protestantism that was the legacy of the missionaries. As Peter Tze Ming Ng (p. 32) points out, Chinese Christianity encounters “signs and wonders, miracles and unexpected things of all kinds” so that it is “not the same as Western Christianity”. Ng (p. 33) makes the important point that Chinese–Western cultural and religious exchanges must be studied from a bi-directional perspective, so that the influence of the East on the West must also be taken into account and of course, the influence of the Chinese on the development of Christianity. But a proliferation of millenarian sects in the Chinese countryside has led some of the unregistered house church networks to form alliances that have a more Pentecostal and “orthodox” character, often with the help of Pentecostal groups based in Hong Kong, Singapore and the West. Tobias Brandner (p. 87) gives reasons for the prevalence of “millenarian movements” in Chinese Christian revivalism with a countercultural approach to history.

The study by Lee and Chow (p. 51) on Seventh-Day Adventism makes reference to new, multiple schisms brought about by Pentecostal-like groups within the movement after 1979. This is particularly interesting given the influence of Seventh-Day Adventism on the True Jesus Church, the largest of the older Pentecostal churches in China and a “Oneness” (non-Trinitarian) denomination. Editor Lim (p. 110) writes of the rapid growth of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, among minorities in southwestern China, especially in Yunnan, but focuses on Tibetan Catholics, and does not mention the reasons for the growth or the nature of this “ethno-religion”. Much of this is influenced by Pentecostalism, with its focus on a spiritual world. On the other hand, in one of the most Christian cities, Wenzhou on the eastern seaboard, “boss Christians” with their emphasis on God’s blessings resulting in economic success are reminiscent of the prosperity gospel present in Pentecostalism globally. Fiedler (pp. 141, 149) sees this, and that of “healing Christians”, as evidence of the inculturation of Christianity in China, drawing on “folk religious impulses and concepts”. Similarly, Kao (p. 218) describes how, in reaction to the government’s

attempts to regulate religion in China, Pentecostalism has grown remarkably with “an indigenous shape”, characterized as a Pentecostalism without a Pentecostal identity.

I think that the book as a whole illustrates how important it is that truly interdisciplinary studies of Pentecostalism are undertaken rather than only multi-disciplinary ones. If there is one weakness in this collection, I would say it is that religious and theological aspects of Chinese Christianity are given insufficient analysis, and even when these aspects are mentioned, sometimes they are contrasted with so-called “orthodox” Christianity, and implicitly seen as “heterodox”. Nevertheless, this is a useful and thought-provoking book that should be read by all interested in Chinese Christianity today.