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## **Reformed theology in China**

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Reformed Christianity was part of the two earliest Protestant missionary endeavours to Chinese lands. The first dates back to the Dutch colonial rule of the island they called Formosa (1624-62), now known as Taiwan, when Dutch Reformed missionaries worked amongst aborigines and Han Chinese immigrants.<sup>1</sup> The second attempt was by Robert Morrison, the son of Scottish Presbyterians, who in 1807 would become the first Protestant missionary to mainland China. Morrison produced many Chinese Christian works such as a catechism in 1811, based on the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and a New Testament in 1812.<sup>2</sup>

As the Opium Wars ensued and treaty ports were forced open in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, waves of missionaries were sent from every major denomination to evangelise China. Many Chinese Christians became discontent with the paternalism of foreign denominations, and a number of Presbyterian and Reformed churches united, establishing the Presbyterian Church of China. After inviting other denominations to join this union, the organisation would be renamed the Church of Christ in China and held its first general assembly under this name in 1927.<sup>3</sup> However, after the Communist Party won the civil war against the Nationalist Party in 1949, all

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 376–7.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Daily, *Robert Morrison and the Protestant Plan for China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), pp. 136–9, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Sumiko Yamamoto, *History of Protestantism in China: The Indigenization of Christianity* (Tokyo: Tōhō Gakkai, 2000), pp. 76–81.

foreigners were ejected from the mainland and all forms of public religious life would eventually come to an end.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of these events, many Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries would flee the mainland to neighbouring regions. The earlier church union would be somewhat preserved through the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China, a reorganisation of the former Canton Synod, which today has congregations in Hong Kong and Macau. In Taiwan, the Presbyterian Church has played a significant role in sociopolitical activism, particularly after the Nationalist Party relocated the capital of the Republic of China to Taipei and began ruling the island under martial law.<sup>5</sup> Fighting this hegemonic state, the Presbyterian Church has resisted the state-mandated use of the Mandarin dialect, has been a proponent of aboriginal rights, and has been closely associated with the Taiwan Independence movement and the Democratic Progressive Party. Moreover, Taiwanese Presbyterians such as Shoki Coe (Huang Zhanghui),<sup>6</sup> Choan-Seng Song (Song Quansheng), and Huang Po Ho (Huang Bohe) have engaged this sociopolitical climate through the practice of theological contextualisation – a concept popularised by Coe through the WCC in the 1970s – emphasising theologies that identify with the Taiwanese people.

In the last few decades, diasporic Chinese have played an important role in bringing Reformed theology back to mainland China. Charles Chao (Zhao Zhonghui), a Chinese Christian who fled to Hong Kong in 1949, helped to establish the Reformation Translation Fellowship (RTF) to produce Chinese translations of Reformed literature. After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), one of

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Chow, 'Protestant Ecumenism and Theology in China Since Edinburgh 1910', *Missiology* 42.2 (2014): 170–1.

<sup>5</sup> Murray Rubinstein, 'The Presbyterian Church in the Formation of Taiwan's Democratic Society, 1945-2001', *American Asian Review* 19.4 (Winter 2001): 63–95.

<sup>6</sup> The standard form of Romanisation used in scholarly literature is pinyin. In this essay, personal names will be given in their more well-known forms and followed by pinyin in parentheses when appropriate.

Chao's sons, Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tianen), would begin to travel into mainland China and distribute bibles and translated works produced by the RTF.<sup>7</sup> Other diasporic Chinese like Stephen Tong (Tang Chongrong) and Samuel Ling (Lin Cixin), and a growing number of South Korean and Korean American missionaries, would later be involved in similar work to propagate Reformed Christianity.

In the mid-1980s, internal government reports began to speak of a 'Christianity fever' (*jidujiao re*) spreading across all sectors of Chinese society, mainly developing in pietistic and so-called 'Pentecostal' forms that emphasised a sectarian otherworldliness. Reformed theology was not as prominent at this time, despite the efforts of Jonathan Chao and others.<sup>8</sup> However, this period also saw the growth of Christianity-based new religious movements like the Shouters (Huhan Pai) and Eastern Lightning (Dongfang Shandian); these groups often looked to Christian communities as sources for new converts. In response, by the 1990s, a growing number of Chinese Christians turned to the Reformed tradition to underscore the importance of theology and reason, above subjective experiences and emotions. This tended to focus on Reformed soteriological formulations, leading to debates on predestination – particularly around supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism – and whether the supernatural gifts continue to exist today.

Mainland China has since been experiencing a surge of interests in Reformed Christianity. A number of studies have shown that one reason for this growth is due to a parallel growth in China's 'socialist market economy'. The country's ascent as an economic superpower has resulted in a growing number of Christian entrepreneurs in coastal cities, often described as 'boss Christians' (*laoban jidutu*), giving some

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<sup>7</sup> David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006), pp. 278–80.

<sup>8</sup> There are some churches today which trace their roots back to the early Calvinist missionaries. There are also some church leaders like Wang Aiming who have attempted to argue the case for Reformed theology in the state-sanctioned church. However, the interest in Reformed theology would only become more widespread beginning in the 1990s.

credibility to Max Weber's thesis about the close connection between the Christian work ethic and the spirit of capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a growing number of urban churches being established by 'intellectual elite Christians' (*zhishi jingying jidutu*) who can be traced back to the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement.<sup>10</sup> Due to the failure of the 1989 movement, many of these young intellectuals became disillusioned in their pursuits and found in Reformed Christianity existential resolve and a new approach to transform China. One group of urban intellectual Christians has drawn on covenantal theology to argue for a stronger understanding of constitutionalism. Another group has relied on the Dutch Neo-Calvinist understanding of the cultural mandate to emphasise a stronger engagement with the state and the society. Both of these groups have thus placed a higher emphasis on Reformed ecclesiology.

Today, there is a growing body of Reformed literature being translated into Chinese. The writings of many Calvinist and New Calvinist thinkers like John Piper, D. A. Carson, and Tim Keller can be found in Christian bookstores throughout China, and a lively discussion about Calvinism can likewise be found online. However, only time will tell if this translation of Reformed theology is merely a phase in the shifting history of Chinese Christianity or if it will become deeply rooted in the Chinese soil.

### **Further Reading**

Cao Nanlai, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

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<sup>9</sup> Chen Cunfu and Huang Tianhai, 'The Emergence of a New Type of Christians in China Today', *Review of Religious Research* 46.2 (2004): 190–1.

<sup>10</sup> Fredrik Fällman, 'Calvin, Culture and Christ? Developments of Faith among Chinese Intellectuals', in Francis Khok Gee Lim, ed., *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-Cultural Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 152–68; Alexander Chow, 'Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today', *International Journal of Public Theology* 8.2 (May 2014): 158–175.

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