



Book Review

Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. xiii + 373. ISBN 978-0300204216. RRP £40.00/US\$50.00. doi:10.1017/S1740355318000311

In this erudite volume, Chloë Starr presents an impressive overview of Chinese theology from the late sixteenth century to the present. The book is structured by a double helix of ‘text and context’. The context helix consists of three interluding chapters (2, 3 and 6), covering the historical background of the Republican (1912–49), Communist (1949–78), and Reform and Opening Up (1978–present) China. The late-imperial period is integrated into the first chapter. The text helix studies the major theologians who responded creatively to the pressing issues of these four periods: dynastic politics, anti-imperialism, social reform movements and communism. Michele Ruggieri, Matteo Ricci and Li Jiubiao – the Jesuit missionaries and their first convert – represent the first efforts in inheriting theologically the Chinese textual sphere, whose practice privileges a notion of theology as communally produced text aimed at self-cultivation as opposed to a singular, systemizing mind dispensing personal revelation. Zhao Zichen, Xu Zongze and Wu Leichuan, the three towering Republican theologians, produced a biography, jottings and a treatise on the Social Gospel in response to the tumultuous social and literary crises of their time. For the People’s Republic period, Ding Guangxun, Yang Huilin, Lü Xiaomin, Wang Yi and Yu Jie are discussed to underscore the dynamics of Chinese theology in the official Protestant church, secular academy and the house churches.

The volume proposes a persuasive thesis that Chinese theology is not intelligible without an understanding of its literary context. For instance, Starr shows that debates in late-Ming about the translation of ‘God’ or whether God existed in classical Confucian canon or the Rites Controversy were as much linguistic/textual as political debates, given that worship of Heaven was restricted to the emperor and that state, religion and education were closely tied to a well-defined canon. In the wake of the New Cultural and May Fourth Movements, the Republican theologians, along with their secular counterparts, had to reckon with the loss of prestige of the Confucian canon and the end of the emperor as guardian of textual heritage. They appropriated new literary possibilities in vernacular Chinese and maintained the high status of the written word even as they self-consciously wrote uniquely Chinese theology in the face of anti-Christian and anti-imperialist critique, which had come to be seen as increasingly synonymous. China’s communist revolutions, from the Anti-Rightist Campaign to the Cultural Revolution, Starr poignantly notes, exposed the close connection between word and violence. The relentless injunctions for ‘self-confessions’, frequent prosecutions of ‘thought crime’, daily requirement of bearing testimony against another’s inner class consciousness were all undertaken in a realm saturated with words: big-character posters, weekly struggle sessions,

and loudly broadcasted revolutionary slogans. What was at issue for Chinese theologians was not only some quite specific theological questions of church and state or Christianity and Marxism but the very plausibility of some basic Christian practices of repentance, confession, testimony and spiritual combat, a challenge that compelled Chinese theologians to find new connections between word and meaning at a time when language was singularly devoted to the primacy of class struggle.

It is tempting to read Starr's thesis as one marginalizing doctrinal debate in favor of literary invention or at least setting these two as opposites. Several of Starr's explicit analyses, for example, a Barthian reflection on Ding Guangxun's judicious relation with the Communist state and an interpretation of immanent eschatology in Wu Leichuan's appropriation of the Social Gospel, should put this misreading to rest. But Starr's serious treatment of Chinese theology and its doctrinal intricacy lies more prominently in her deft literary analysis. For example, Zhao Zichen's novelistic biography of Jesus, in Starr's hands, becomes a sustained reflection on Jesus's humanity. Zhao took advantage of the historiographical and literary reforms of the Late Qing and early Republic, most notably the rise of the Romantic individual and merged it with the Chinese biographical tradition privileging moral exemplarity. This enabled a portrayal of Jesus with interior development in the course of a life, leading to his attainment of the 'great enlightenment', which echoes the Confucian ideal of perfection of all knowledge that *transforms* one into a sage (one needs to remember how controversial this portrayal could be in view of traditional debates on the entangling of Jesus's divinity and humanity). Starr's account of Wu Leichuan's identification of the Holy Spirit with the Confucian notion of *ren*, humanness or benevolence, indicates an understanding of the Holy Spirit as working through a gift conferred by Heaven via a gradual, ordinary process of moral formation rather than some drastic, interruptive and supernatural manifestation (a similar account, for example, that Kathryn Tanner takes pains to develop in the last chapter of *Christ the Key*). Liu Jiubiao's recorded dialogue on good work and grace, in invoking the prevalent textual practice of 'ledgers of merit and demerit', at once distinguishes the Catholic teaching on salvation from its Daoist, Buddhist, and neo-Confucian counterparts and maintains rather than explains away the difficulty of judging the status of good Chinese people within official doctrine. These three texts, while atypical of dogmatic theology, offers no less subtle articulations on Christology, pneumatology and soteriology, respectively.

The rich volume resists brief summary and some contributions must be mentioned only in passing: a sophisticated account of inculturation and contextualization, suggestive indications for further research (e.g., the absence of theological writing analogous to secular 'root-searching' and 'scar literature' in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution) and a capacious understanding of theology (for example, the inclusion of academic Yang Huilin with no profession of faith and Lü Xiaomin with no formal theological training). From the dedication to the two martyred and bereft theologians to the superb attention and sympathy in close reading of each text, the volume exemplifies a mode of theological writing that retains both critical distance and personal admiration, which makes it both illuminating and edifying to read. By joining various literary forms – *biji* (jottings), *zhuan* (biography), entries in periodical press, mircoblog and hymn – into the canon of Chinese theology, the most noteworthy achievement of the volume remains Starr's sustained meditation

on the question of theological genre. In making her case, however, Starr sets up a fairly strong contrast between Western systematic theology and more diffused Chinese theology, which could have the unfortunate effects of limiting the volume's selection of texts and attenuating the philosophical dimension of Chinese theology (the absence of Liu Xiaofeng or He Guanghu seems to raise this question). Even the most deadpan theological tome in the Western tradition retains the improvising, contextual and socially engaged features that Starr advocates. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, for example, was the last stage of a series of writing experiments in response to the specific demands of the Dominican curriculum of his time. And its disputation form, while 'systematic', reveals a relational character that Starr uplifts in Chinese theology insofar as it recognizes the belatedness of its writing in relation to other authoritative texts. The appearance of exalting the virtuoso of a singular unifying mind in standard systematic theology is immediately effaced (often despite the hubris of the author) by any theological work's submission to the Scripture and by its explicit or muted conversation with other Christian writers.

More plausibly, however, Starr's dichotomy can be read as a provocative heuristic device meant to correct the current myopia of limiting what counts as theology. In this sense, it is highly instructive not only as a lens through which to read Chinese theology but also as a timely diagnosis of modern theology as a whole. It reminds us that prior to the restriction of the theological canon in the modern West, the Christian library encompassed many forms – saints' lives, miracle stories, bestiaries, mystery plays, liturgies and sacramental rites. It also urges us to attend to the systematicity of theology across genres insofar as it shares with more standard systematic theology an aspiration to see how various Christian beliefs hang together both logically and experientially amid historical contingencies. As the Anglican Communion continues to disentangle itself from the powers of Christendom, Starr gifts us a salutary lesson on intellectual generosity, a hospitality of mind that welcomes a wide range of textual practices into one's own repository of approaching the unsayable but endlessly eliciting God.

Peng Yin
Harvard University, USA