Accommodation and Compromise in the Contact Zone: Christianity and Chinese Culture in Modern Hong Kong Literature

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Abstract: Situated in the unique historical context of Hong Kong—a contact zone between East and West—this study explores how Christianity’s introduction through British colonialism and missionary efforts has intertwined with and influenced Chinese cultural traditions. By examining selected works of Xu Dishan and Chen Zanyi, this study reveals the dynamic negotiations of identity and values between these two cultural and religious traditions. These literary works not only depict the complexities of cultural hybridity but also provide insights into the evolving nature of cultural identity in Hong Kong, illustrating how global religions and local traditions can merge and transform each other. This study contributes to understanding the intricate dance of religious exchange, conflict, and compromise in Hong Kong’s cross-culture setting, suggesting that such literary explorations can bridge Christianity with the socio-economic, cultural, and historical fabric of Chinese society.

Keywords: contact zone; Chinese theology; Hong Kong literature; cross-cultural encounter

1. Introduction

Hong Kong has historically been a significant contact zone between the East and the West, largely due to its colonial past under British rule from 1842 to 1997 (Tsang 2003). This unique position facilitated the exchange and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, making the city a vibrant hub for cultural hybridity. This intersection of cultures has fostered the city’s unique identity, distinguishing it as a place where Eastern and Western elements coexist and influence each other.

Christianity was introduced to Hong Kong in the early 19th century, primarily through British colonization and missionary efforts (Smith 2005). This introduction marked the beginning of a complex interaction between Christianity and Chinese culture. In a predominantly Confucian society, Christianity presented a new way of thinking, and over time, influenced various aspects of Hong Kong society, resulting in a unique blend of Chinese cultural traditions and Christian values. Hence, the colonial past of Hong Kong significantly shaped its cultural and religious discourse, creating a unique blend of East and West, the coexistence of traditional Chinese beliefs and Christian values, reflected in various aspects of culture, including literature, art, and religious practices.

In the 1990s, a movement known as “Sino-Christian theology” (漢語神學) emerged within Hong Kong’s Chinese theological community, specifically the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre (道風山基督教叢林 Lai 2001). It focused on a contextual interpretation of Christian theology based on Chinese philosophical and cultural precepts. This movement aimed to develop a Christian theology and culture through the historical, intellectual, and social resources and experiences of Chinese culture, striving to create a Christian theological culture imbued with Chinese intellectual and cultural characteristics (Starr 2016). Over the decades, Sino-Christian theology evolved from a purely religious movement into a multifaceted cultural striving, as in the case of Confucianism, giving rise to a diffuse community...
with a common faith but without a clear clerical system and becoming integrated into existing academic, educational, and cultural institutions. Pan-Chiu Lai and Jason T. S. Lam have curated a valuable and timely anthology titled “Sino-Christian Theology: a Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China”, which showcases the work of some prominent Chinese thinkers. These individuals have successfully integrated the study of Christian theology into the humanities and social sciences at major universities (Lai and Lam 2010). However, research on religious literature has not been the focus of this movement.

The present study responds to the Special Issue Expressions of Chinese Christianity in Texts and Contexts’ core intent and core value proposition, opposing the notion of “Chinese Christianity” as a singular entity, a simplification that overlooks intra- and inter-church exchanges across doctrinal and liturgical lines. I aim to position the reciprocal dynamics of Chinese–Christian interactions at the forefront of scholarly discourse, drawing upon fresh available archival sources. Hence, this study selects Hong Kong literature—a less frequently examined body of expression—as the focal point of its analysis. Specifically, the accommodation and compromise between Christianity and Chinese culture, as reflected in modern Hong Kong literature, reveal a dynamic interplay in which the identities and values of both traditions are negotiated. This study explores how modern Hong Kong writers incorporate, challenge, and reinterpret Christian themes within the framework of Chinese cultural practices and beliefs. It uses these writers’ works to examine the encounters and correlations between expressions of Christian and Chinese social, economic, cultural, and historical forces, as well as those between Christianity and other existing Chinese religious and spiritual traditions. It posits that such literary works not only depict the complexities of cultural hybridity but also offer insights into the evolving nature of cultural identity in postcolonial Hong Kong, illustrating the nuanced ways in which global religions and local traditions can coalesce and transform each other.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of the “contact zone”, as articulated by Mary Louise Pratt, refers to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths in the contemporary world. Pratt’s theory emphasizes the interactive, improvisational, and often contentious nature of these encounters, in which individuals and groups of different backgrounds and hierarchies come into contact and influence each other in complex ways (Pratt 2012).

The notion of the contact zone is uniquely appropriate in analyzing Hong Kong, a city distinctly positioned at the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures due to its colonial past and its present role as a global financial center. This framework allows for an exploration of how Christianity and Chinese culture are negotiated, particularly in the literature of Hong Kong, highlighting the processes of accommodation, resistance, and adaptation that characterize their interaction. Through this lens, this study seeks to understand how modern Hong Kong literature serves as a fertile ground for examining the intricate dance of religious exchange, conflict, and compromise in a postcolonial setting, how these literary works, in their confrontation in the contact zone, interilluminate—that is, dialogize—each other.

In Hong Kong, almost no utterance exists in isolation but is always in dialogue with others—past, present, and future. We will learn from Bakhtin’s term “inter-illumination”. Inter-illumination describes the process by which various voices, discourses, or points of view within a text or between texts illuminate each other (Bakhtin 2010). This interaction enables a deeper exploration of themes and narratives, allowing readers to gain insights that might not be evident when texts are considered in isolation. Based on these theoretical frameworks, this study uncovers a highly unique thread that has been virtually unexplored before. It involves an analysis of selected works from Xu Dishan (許地山) and Chen Zanyi (陳贊一).
This line of confrontation and interaction decipherable in these two writers’ works is unique and significant in that both authors are among Hong Kong’s most important Christian writers working in two different periods of the 20th century. Xu Dishan (1893–1941 许地山) was a prominent Chinese writer, scholar, and educator known for his contributions to literature, religious studies, and cultural exchange between Christianity and Chinese culture. Around the age of ten, Xu Dishan joined the Protestant church in Fujian. At that time, he received a traditional Confucian education and studied English with a British missionary. Xu learned to combine faith in religion with sincere respect for it. In 1917, Xu Dishan received a church scholarship to enter Yenching University⁴. Under the education of this famous missionary university, he and several of his classmates later became famous Christian writers in modern China (Elia 2019). In 1920, he earned a Bachelor’s degree in Chinese Literature. During those years, Xu Dishan participated in many religious groups, including the Beijing YMCA (Robinson 1986).

Although primarily associated with mainland China, Xu’s connection to Hong Kong is significant due to his role in the broader context of the cultural and religious exchanges between the East and the West. In 1934, under the initiative of Sir William Woodward Hornell (1878–1950), the University of Hong Kong began the reorganization of its Chinese Department, inviting Xu to serve as the department head. Xu’s move to British Hong Kong to teach became a sensational event among the city’s academic and cultural circles. Xu has long been acclaimed as a pioneer of Hong Kong’s local culture. Liu Yazi (柳亞子) even remarked that Hong Kong’s culture was “single‑handedly developed by Mr. Xu (Hou 2009)”. His literary works, characterized by their exploration of Christian themes in Chinese society, contributed to the cultural dialogue between the Christian and Chinese traditions. His stories and novels, addressing issues of faith, morality, and the human condition, resonated with readers in Hong Kong, a city known for its multicultural and multireligious fabric. During his time in Hong Kong, Xu wrote only two short stories, Yu Guan (玉官) and The Gills of an Iron Fish (鐵魚底鰓), with the former eventually becoming an indispensable classic in the study of Chinese Christian literature (Riep 2004). His work paved the way for a unique literary tradition in Hong Kong that reflects the city’s complex cultural and religious landscape.

Xu died in Hong Kong in 1941, but his exploration of Christian themes in the context of Chinese culture continued to influence Hong Kong literature and inspire local writers and intellectuals to engage with similar themes. Even within the specific category of the Chinese Christian literati to which he belongs, Dr. Chen Zanyi (original name Chan Wai‑keung 陳偉強), a Hong Kong pastor, stands out. In an era when “excellent Chinese literature flourished, yet outstanding Chinese Christian literature did not (Wen 1994)”, Chen was recognized for his distinctive and productive contributions. He was born into a commercial family during the British colonial period in 1960s Hong Kong. His parents did not adhere to Christianity but instead followed traditional folk beliefs common in the Chinese society of Hong Kong, with an ethical code that integrated Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Chen, through his independent exploration, decided to become a Christian in his adulthood. Initially enrolling at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in Chinese Language and Literature, he later moved to the Division of Religion and Theology after earning his Bachelor of Arts with honors⁶. Since the 1990s, Chen has been diligently working toward the development of a public culture of Christianity, publishing over thirty works, including novels, hymns, poetry, and essays. His main genre is the short form, specifically micro fiction, as represented by his four independently published collections Orange and Tangerine (橙與桔 Chen 1993), A Bit of Reason (一點道理 Chen 2000), Death Death (死亡死亡 2002), and Variations of Chen Zanyi’s Micro Fiction (陳贊一微型小說變奏 Chen 2014), which together comprise nearly a hundred short stories.

The relationship between Chen and Xu can be figured not just based on their sequential creation of a body of literature with distinct Christian themes in Hong Kong. It also involves the successors’ conscious and profound inheritance and reflection on the cultural heritage of the predecessors. Therefore, compared with the weak or ambiguous connec-
tion in some studies, Xu Dishan and Chen Zanyi’s stories are very suitable materials for the adoption of inter-illumination. As a scholar of Chinese theology, Chen is particularly known for his expertise in the study of Xu’s religious thought, even completing his Ph.D. with the thesis “Christianity Meets the Chinese Religions-A Case Study of Xu Dishan (基督教與中國宗教相遇: 許地山研究 2002)”. Positioned in the rapidly evolving context of Hong Kong and keenly aware of the trends in the development of the Chinese theological movement, Chen endeavors in his literary works to perpetuate Xu’s religious stance characterized by peace, tolerance, and non-aggression. At the same time, he attempts to address the unresolved issue in Xu’s work: how Christianity can be adapted to Chinese culture and society.

The next section presents a detailed discussion of how the literary works of these two writers represent the opposing forces of accommodation and compromise between Christianity and Chinese culture. The analysis focuses on the recurring themes in their works that illustrate the interaction between Christianity and Chinese culture, such as redemption, suffering, moral dilemmas, and family dynamics. In particular, the characters and narratives that embody the fusion of and conflict between these two cultures are examined. In instances of the fusion of Christian and Chinese elements, the implications of such syncretism for the identity, tradition, and cultural continuity of Hong Kong are fleshed out.

3. Xu Dishan: Colonization and Legitimacy

The spread of Christianity in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a significant period of religious and cultural exchange, influenced by historical events and social changes. During this period, the nature of the Christian missions in China was shaped by the treaties that followed the Opium Wars, which opened China to foreign missionaries and evangelical activities from the West. In the early 20th century, China became one of the key regions for Christian missionary efforts and saw a significant influx of overseas missionaries who were mostly well-educated and professionally trained in theology (Witek 2015). Under Nationalist rule, Chinese Christians experienced a relatively friendly political environment, which allowed homegrown Christian movements to expand. The Constitution of the Republic of China, as promulgated during this period, stipulated and protected the freedom of religion, a factor that contributed to the rapid increase in the number of Christian converts in China. Consequently, the period from 1900 to 1920 is often seen as the “Golden Age” of Christianity in China, marked by a significant expansion of the Christian community and influence across the country (Bays 1996). This period saw the rapid growth of Protestantism as foreign missionaries established schools and hospitals, contributing significantly to Chinese education and healthcare.

However, Christianity’s association with Western imperialism led to a backlash against its expansion during the anti-imperialist movement of the early 1920s. This anti-Christian movement, part of a broader wave of nationalism and anti-foreign sentiment, was fueled by a variety of factors, including resentment toward the privileges and protections afforded to foreign missionaries under unequal treaties, as well as concerns over cultural imperialism and the loss of Chinese sovereignty (Liu 1989).

In contrast to peasant movements like the Boxer Rebellion, the anti-Christian movement was primarily initiated by intellectuals who advocated science, democracy, freedom, and equality and sought to replace violent confrontations with ideological disputes. Many writers and scholars joined this movement, contributing to a broad intellectual debate on the role and influence of Christianity in Chinese society. Hong Kong also became a focal point for the debates of this movement.

A prominent figure in the anti-Christian movement of the time was Xiao Qian (萧乾1910–1999), a noted writer of modern Chinese literature and at one point the chief editor of Hong Kong’s Ta Kung Pao (大公报). American Sinologist Lewis Robinson calls Xiao an “anti-Christian writer”, particularly in his fictions, such as Tan (昙), Conversion (皈依), and Peng Cheng (鹏程). These works explicitly expose the imperialist use of religion to
poison the Chinese people and the corruption within the church, showing distinct “anti-religious” attitudes (Robinson 1986). In “The Monologue of an Optimist (一個樂觀主義者的自白)”, Xiao claims that religion serves to extract national sentiment from the souls of Easterners with an invisible knife, supported by the gunboats of those who come from afar to proselytize. This fact motivated him to write novels exploring imperialist cultural aggression (Xiao 1998:149).

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, such as Xiao Qian, Xu Dishan displayed a markedly different stance amid the anti-Christian movement. In articles like “The Growth and Decline of Religion” (宗教的生長與滅亡 Xu 1922) and “What Kind of Religion Do We Want?” (我們要什麼樣的宗教? Xu 1923), Xu adopted a cautious approach toward the vigorous anti-Christian activities around him. He favored the rational analysis of religion’s development, nature, function, and value.

Based on his experiences in and observations of the Christian church, Xu proposed that the religion needed in China should be (1) practical and easily integrated into daily life, (2) accessible not just to specific individuals but to the masses, (3) morally and emotionally robust, (4) embodying a spirit of science, (5) rich in emotion, (6) universal in nature, (7) life-focused, and (8) logical and reasonable (Xu 1923). Xu believed that Christianity suited the social needs of China at the time, particularly admiring its principles of equality, fraternity, and tolerance. Amid the vigorous anti-Christian movement, he saw the necessity for a more accessible and Sinicized interpretation of the Christian doctrine so ordinary people could understand and accept it. Thus, he wrote a series of literary works with religious themes. For example, his 1922 novel The Vain Labors of a Spider (綴網勞蛛), spanning mainland China and Southeast Asia, thematized forgiveness and reconciliation. The protagonist, Shang Jie, a devout Christian and former child bride, faces numerous trials, including physical and spiritual harm, abandonment, and the loss of her daughter’s custody, yet her faith enables her to treat others with tolerance, calmly endure misfortune, and love humanity without complaint.

At the peak of the anti-Christian movement, Xu penned “Anti-Christian China” (反基督教的中國 Xu 1927), which explored the historical processes and reasons behind China’s opposition to Christianity. By reflecting on China’s own cultural and psychological landscape, Xu’s articles identified the differences between religion and superstition and demonstrated the compatibility of science, humanity, and Christianity. In 1939, after arriving in Hong Kong, Xu once again responded to the anti-Christian movement with the novel Yu Guan. This extensive narrative depicts the clash between Christianity and Chinese society. For instance, in the novel, Xing Guan, a Christian character, and her family are seen by their neighbors as follows:

“She has a lot of foreign power, and no one dares to mess with her. However, those who know her do not think highly of her…Her nephew used to be a pharmacist in the church hospital, and there is no one who does not regard him as an expert at making psychedelic potion and destroying idols (Xu 2005, p. 225)”.

The perception of Xing Guan and her nephew by their neighbors encapsulates the conflict between the foreign (Christianity) and the local (Chinese beliefs). In this typical Chinese community where Western forces have intervened, people’s respect mixed with disdain reflects a complex societal response to new religions and cultural practices, highlighting a fear of the unknown and the perceived threat to traditional values. Xing Guan and her nephew’s identity and belonging are shaped by their association with Christianity, which both empowers and isolates them within their community.

However, after that, Xu’s further writing neither reinforces the stereotypes of Christianity nor highlights the tensions between foreign religious influence and national identity nor does it fuel the rejection of a foreign religion. Instead, his work strives to elucidate what he sees as the true spirit of Christianity and how to foster a path of mutual negotiation and inclusive understanding. He believes that the conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture stems partly from the former’s inflexible evangelism, notably its disrespect for Chinese traditions and national psyche. Given Christianity’s opposition to the worship
of idols, it inevitably goes against Chinese gods and monuments of the dead. Another crucial issue is the lack of basic communication and understanding between the two, a theme that Xu emphasizes repeatedly in his work. Before encountering Christianity, the novel's protagonist, Yu Guan, like most people, harbors misunderstanding and even fear toward Christianity and its adherents.

“When she saw foreigners, she was always afraid. She was afraid of foreigners cutting off her hair to make spells, afraid of foreigners taking her eyes to make medicine. She was afraid that foreigners would throw psychedelic potion bombs on her body, make a cross on her forehead, and commit blasphemy and insult her ancestors (Xu 2005, p. 226)”.

However, after becoming widowed and losing her financial support, Yu Guan is forced to work as a nanny for a female missionary, through which she discovers the approachability and respectability of Western missionaries. Sheltered by the church, she manages to retain her late husband’s assets. Her son receives education in a mission school and even gets a chance to study abroad. Learning to read from missionaries and converting to Christianity, she becomes a “Bible woman” capable of reforming thugs. Although she never fully severes ties with Chinese traditional culture, even privately worshiping ancestors and keeping both the Bible and the I Ching (易經), her dedicated service to the church remains unaffected. Yu Guan’s life reflects how the conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture can be diminished through enhanced communication and understanding.

This literary example offers a profound exploration of the cultural and religious tensions that can arise when Christianity is introduced into a deeply Confucian and traditionally polytheistic society like China’s. Through the narrative journey of the protagonist, Yu Guan, the text delves into the misunderstandings, fears, and eventual reconciliation between these seemingly disparate worlds. Despite her conversion and dedication to the Christian faith, Yu Guan maintains connections to her Chinese cultural heritage. This blending of beliefs symbolizes the possibility of a harmonious coexistence between Christianity and traditional Chinese practices, suggesting that faith and cultural identity are not mutually exclusive but can enrich each other.

Xu emphasizes the need for Christianity’s indigenization in China and its integration with traditional and contemporary realities. Here, he echoes the intellectual elites who stood at the intersection of two cultures and endeavored to reconcile traditional Chinese values with modern concepts introduced by Christian missions and Western influence. Xu’s education and work history, which combine Chinese and Western elements, are the result of various cultural forces. As such, his understanding of Christianity cannot be extricated from the unique interpretative context that grounds it. He seemed to appreciate the moral and ethical dimensions of Christian teachings, particularly their emphasis on compassion, love, and the transformative power of faith. However, he also appeared critical of the institutional aspects of the church and its dogma, suggesting a more personal and individualized approach to spirituality. Xu’s work reflects a blend of admiration for Christian ethical principles and a desire for freedom and flexibility in religious practice, indicating a thoughtful engagement with the faith rather than an outright acceptance or rejection. It represents the integration of Chinese and Western cultures on the level of faith, reflecting both the challenges of Christianity in confronting Chinese culture and the proactive pursuit of the Chinese culture for renewal through Christian cultural elements.

4. Chen Zanyi: Practicality and Applicability

Chen Zanyi has long been engaged in the study of Chinese theology, Christianity, and Chinese literature. His master’s thesis in theology, “An Indigenized Perspective on the Descriptions of Nature in Chinese Christian Hymns (從本色化角度看華文聖詩對大自然的描寫)”, argues that Chinese Christian hymns should not rigidly adhere to the text, words, and symbols of the Bible, but should be expressed in the traditional symbols of Chinese culture. The essence of this argument is that faith needs to be lived and expressed in ways that are meaningful to the local community. By integrating traditional Chinese cultural
symbols into Christian hymns, the practice of Christianity in China can become a more inclusive, respectful, and effective ministry. He developed his argument further. In his doctoral dissertation, an in-depth exploration of Xu Dishan’s literary works, emphasizes that “Chinese Christians must inevitably confront Chinese religions unless they choose to sever themselves from Chinese culture and society, and even from their compatriots and relatives (Chan 2002).” His work focuses on the cross-border dialogue between Christian doctrine and Chinese tradition, with the cross of faith positioned horizontally in Christian theology and vertically in Chinese culture, intertwining religious thought and literary creation. His Christian novels portray the relationship between Western religious beliefs and traditional Chinese consciousness in the Chinese society of contemporary Hong Kong not as a binary opposition but rather as exhibiting a degree of “adhesion”.

At first glance, this stance does not appear to be fundamentally different from Xu’s. However, the social context in which Chen Zanyi writes has undergone significant changes relative to that of Xu Dishan. By the late 20th century, after half a century of conflict and integration, Christianity has become an inseparable part of Hong Kong culture. After 1997, with Hong Kong becoming a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, it shed its label as a British colony. Thus, in creating Christian literature, Chen could set aside the heavy historical burdens that Xu reckoned with throughout his life. Chen’s works downplay the debate on the legitimacy of Christianity in Chinese society and primarily adopt an inculturation paradigm. Hong Kong is more often seen as a highly developed modern city and financial center, where the main issue is no longer whether the introduction of foreign religions would exacerbate the crisis of national extinction under colonial rule. Instead, the focus is on how religion can be adapted to contemporary human living conditions while expressing the universal truths of Christianity as succinctly and understandably as possible in a fast-paced urban society.

Many of Chen’s contemporaries tend toward the harangue, such as the Chinese American female writer Shi Wei (施瑋), whose work The Apostate (叛教者) pays homage to monumental epics like The Divine Comedy and Paradise Lost through hundreds of thousands of words. By contrast, Chen’s Christian fiction shows the opposite tendency toward minimalism, embodying the principle of “less is more”. This approach emphasizes the balance and tension between the volume of the text and its aesthetic appeal. As Jason Lam, a Hong Kong theologian points out, “Theologians, in constructing theology using biblical narratives, have an additional layer of consideration compared to literary critics, as they cannot think solely from a textual theoretical perspective (Lam 2007).” Instead of identifying primarily—or only—as a literary writer, Chen often approaches issues from the perspective of a clergyman, exploring how religious doctrine can be applied to the daily lives of Christians and advocating the saving of the reader’s time above all. Since the publication of his first collection of Christian fiction Orange and Tangerine in 1993, he has taken a unique path that does not rely on volume or word count to succeed. Except for a few special cases, most of his stories are concise and clear, not exceeding a thousand words. He has consistently used the fewest words to express his deepest concerns, focusing on how to bridge the gap between the religious practices of Christians and the Chinese and how to rationally resolve the contradictions between Christianity and Chinese folk traditions. Through literature, he seeks to provide more accessible and artistic expressions. The diverse religious world depicted in his writings adheres to a widely circulated Christian maxim: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity”.

This maxim has been widely cited to demonstrate the theological freedom and religious tolerance of Christianity. Yet, simultaneously, it also presents an unresolved question with no definitive answer: What exactly constitutes the “essentials”, and what falls under the “non-essentials”? Chen’s micro fictions exhibit a steadfast adherence to the principles at the root of theology—the truths of Christianity and the fundamental ethics centered around God, without compromise.

Within the traditional Chinese cultural framework, especially among the Han people, religious faith typically did not play a pivotal role in determining choices for marriage un-
under ordinary circumstances. However, some Christian denominations, especially conservative and traditional ones, teach adherents not to marry non-Christians (pagans), based on interpretations of parts of the Scripture, notably certain passages from 1 Corinthians, which are understood to encourage Christians to marry fellow believers to avoid religious disagreements. Chen adopts this stance, maintaining that marriage among orthodox believers is God’s teaching and should not be violated lightly. The Orange and the Tangerine exemplifies his views on marriage, telling the story of Lian Ai, a Hong Kong woman who remains single due to her religion’s expectations and stringent requirements for marriage, reflecting a deep belief in marrying within one’s faith to uphold Christian values.

However, in terms of the specific ways of following God and interacting with non-believers, Chen, much like Xu, opts for a path of tolerance, gentleness, and non-extremism. He fully acknowledges the heterogeneity of personal experiences, prioritizing the metaphysical essence of religion over the attention to the physical norms of rituals. This is reflected in his literary stance, which does not flaunt the identity of a Christian believer nor condescend to, arbitrarily scrutinize, and judge non-Christians’ behaviors. While insisting on the orthodox transmission of Christian theological history, he also strives for practical breakthroughs by integrating the merits of different religions within the living environment and mindset of Chinese culture.

Chen simultaneously acknowledges the “path of inclusivity”, premised on respecting others’ beliefs and established lives, and concedes that it is “quite challenging to resolve the contradictions between Christianity and Chinese religions on a rational, theoretical level (Chan 2002, p. 162)”. Christian faith acknowledges only one true God, advocating monotheism. The Bible explicitly states that only God is worthy of worship, denouncing all other gods or idols as false (Exodus 20, pp. 4–6). The Second Commandment specifically prohibits the making and worship of idols, emphasizing the pure worship of God without the interference of any idols. Idolatry—the worship of and reliance on fictitious deities or objects instead of the true God—is seen as a deviation from faith and a betrayal of God. This stands in stark conflict with long-standing Chinese practices of ancestor worship and family rituals. Despite Xu’s portrayal of the protagonist Yu Guan as a devout Chinese Christian, Chen comments about the character, “Her enlightened selfless service did not resolve the issue of ancestor worship (Chan 2002, p. 163)”.

To address this unresolved issue, Chen explores how to reconcile the behaviors of families that are not restricted by the Christian prohibition on idolatry and how to overcome cultural dissonances to harmonize the contradictions between Christian and non-Christian identities in familial relationships. He leans on Confucian culture’s core value of filial piety to elucidate the relationship between God, individuals, and ancestors. Chen teaches Chinese moral philosophy in various theological seminaries in Hong Kong, using Confucian classics as materials, and he instructs congregants to honor their parents. This is reflected in his micro fictions that depict Christians participating in Chinese religious ceremonies, such as tomb sweeping, vigil keeping, and burning paper money, where such acts, stemming from respect for one’s elders, are exempt from doctrinal criticism.

For example, in the novella Preaching at the Funeral (佈道會), which features a finely crafted plot with an unexpected ending, the believer Xiao Yi wishes to conduct her father’s funeral through Christian rites. Because the church’s denial, grounded in its policy against conducting Christian funerals for non-believers, Xiao Yi turns to Pastor Ma for assistance, and Pastor Ma consents. When questioned by Deacon Ho about his reasons for going against the policy, Pastor Ma responds, “I went to hold a preaching session for a non-believer relative (Chen 2002, p. 195)”.

In this story, Xiao Yi is a character who represents a believer’s struggle to reconcile personal religious convictions with her original family. Pastor Ma’s decision to assist Xiao Yi is a pivotal moment in the novella, showcasing a nuanced understanding of religious duty that transcends strict adherence to policy. Deacon Ho’s questioning of Pastor Ma’s motives introduces a critical voice within the religious community, representing those who prioritize doctrinal purity over compassionate practice. This internal conflict within the church
highlights the ongoing struggle between tradition and adaptation, doctrine and compassion, that religious communities face. The unexpected ending, where religious rites are performed for a non-believer, serves as a powerful narrative device that challenges the reader to reconsider the essence of religious practice. It prompts questions about the purpose of religious rituals: Are they meant to be exclusive, reserved only for the faithful, or can they serve a broader, more inclusive role in society? This literary example is particularly illuminative of how individual beliefs and institutional policies can clash yet also find resolution through empathy, understanding, and a flexible interpretation of religious teachings.

In another short story, “Faith and Doubt (信與不信)”, the Christian Shen An’s old uncle Ah Xiang passes away suddenly in his sleep. Ah Xiang’s 83-year-old wife expresses to Shen An the desire to hire a medium to contact her husband’s spirit for any last words, but she does not have enough money. Shen An immediately offers a thousand yuan for this purpose. When questioned by his wife, who knows he does not believe in spirits, Shen An simply responds, “Because she believes (Chen 2002, p. 78)”. This narrative, through its straightforward storytelling, addresses the complexities and negotiations between the legacies of Chinese cultural thought and the Christian religious system introduced later on, focusing on their transformation and reconciliation.

In the story “Nostalgia (思念)”, Mr. Li, a recent theology graduate, visits Sister Zhou Nianci, whose father has just passed away. Seeing the father’s portrait in Nianci’s home, Li remarks disapprovingly, “You know, our religion does not allow idol worship. When people die, they are unaware of anything, you know?” She obediently puts away the photo frame, but after Mr. Li takes his leave, she takes out her father’s portrait again and promises that she will never let Mr. Li visit her home again. After leaving the Zhou family, Mr. Li visits the seminary teacher Pastor Zhao’s home and also finds on display a large photo of his wife who passed away three years earlier, with flowers placed in front of the portrait. The following conversation ensues:

“However, she’s dead. She cannot see the flowers”.

“You are right”.

“So why do you put lilies in front of her picture?”

“When you’ve really loved, you’ll understand (Chen 2002, p. 92)”.

These examples highlight the conflict between the Christian injunction against idolatry and the traditional Chinese practice of honoring deceased relatives, illustrating the challenges of reconciling religious doctrine with cultural customs. When Chinese Christians face ancestral rites, Chen attempts to gradually diminish their original religious significance while highlighting their ethical meaning. He employs an ethical model akin to Simone Weil’s concept of “the love of God”, suggesting a practical path for Christian practice that transcends religious differences through love. According to Weil’s theory, the love for God is not merely about loving God directly. God’s love for us is not the reason for which we should love him. God’s love for us is the reason for us to love ourselves. How could we love ourselves without this motive (Weil 1997)?

Reviewing Chen Zanyi’s micro fiction novels with the theory of Weil, people’s commemoration and worship of their beloved dead stem from the deep love they shared. Since humans are created in the image of God, human existence itself is the existence of love. This mutual love among people does not contradict the love of God; instead, it aids us in seeking the origin and object of love. Chen’s Christian micro fictions evolve from the tenet of “accepting each other according to one’s own views and circumstances (Chan 2002, p. 163)” to understanding and connecting opposing sides from a rational and principled perspective, ultimately achieving a localized interpretation based on “in all things charity”. Beyond its literary significance, this approach can also be seen as a metaphor for the fluid crossing and redefinition of intangible boundaries, such as religious belief and ethnic culture, while also concerning the religious and cultural identities of Hong Kong’s traditional Chinese community amid changes and the reshaping of identity in times of transition.
5. Conclusions

The examination of the inter-illumination between Christianity and Chinese culture in modern Hong Kong literature, particularly through the works of Xu Dishan and Chen Zanyi, highlights the nuanced and complex processes of accommodation, negotiation, and compromise. These literary expressions not only demonstrate the practicality and pragmatism with which Christian elements have been integrated into Chinese culture but also underscore the rich tapestry of cultural hybridity that characterizes Hong Kong’s unique identity. The contact zone of Hong Kong, a product of its colonial past and its role as a global financial hub, has fostered a fertile ground for the emergence of a distinct literary discourse that bridges East and West, ancient and modern, global religions and local traditions.

This study’s insights into the dynamic engagement between Christianity and Chinese culture through literature suggest an evolving narrative of cultural identity in colonial and postcolonial Hong Kong. It posits that such literary works serve as a microcosm of the broader cultural and religious dialogues occurring within society, illustrating how global and local forces can coalesce and transform each other. The colonial background, the unique East-meets-West dynamics of the city, and the social changes over the decades play crucial roles in shaping the narrative and thematic structures of their literature. Especially through the comparative analysis of Xu Dishan’s and Chen Zanyi’s works in the past half century, this study reflects the complexity of this dialogue, providing a process from conflict to reconciliation, from tradition to innovation.

As Hong Kong continues to navigate its beliefs and identity, the role of literature in shaping the discourse around Christianity and Chinese culture becomes increasingly significant. Future research should extend beyond the contributions of Xu and Chen to explore a wider array of authors and periods, further illuminating the diverse ways in which Christianity has influenced Chinese literature and culture. Such exploration will enrich our understanding of the multifaceted relationship between religion and identity, contributing to broader discussions on inter-religious dialogue and the shaping of cultural identities in times of transition and change. This expanding body of work will continue to highlight the importance of cross-cultural encounters, not only in the realm of literature but also in the ongoing construction of societal values and norms in Hong Kong and beyond.

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### Notes

1. The Church of England, as part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, was introduced to Hong Kong in the mid-19th century following the British colonization in 1841. The establishment of the church was closely tied to Britain’s imperial and colonial ambitions, serving not only as a religious institution but also as a vehicle for cultural and educational influence. Hence, Christianity in this study primarily to the Church of England.

2. As Joseph Tse-Hei Lee’s introduction, Sino-Christian Theology is described as a contemporary intellectual movement within Chinese academia, primarily involving scholars known as “cultural Christians” who engage more in theological research and interfaith dialogue than in religious conversion. This movement aims to integrate the study of Christian theology into the humanities and social sciences at major universities. It is characterized by its early stage of development and is not static or monolithic, comprising researchers from various disciplines studying Christianity without religious commitment, Christian intellectuals not affiliated with any institutional churches, and practicing Christian scholars applying their theological knowledge to serve the church and society. Diversity is a key feature, with varied conceptual insights, theological orientations, and methodologies among cultural Christians. The movement represents an effort to promote theology as a new academic discipline and way of thinking rather than merely as a tool for evangelization, indicating a significant step toward theological professionalism in China.

3. Currently, the literary works of Xu Dishan and Chen Zanyi have not been officially translated into English; therefore, all references to Chinese materials are based on the author’s personal translations from the original Chinese texts.
Yenching University was founded in 1919, resulting from the merger of several smaller colleges in Beijing. It was established with the support of American Protestant missions and was modeled after American liberal arts colleges, aiming to combine Western and Chinese educational philosophies.

Liu Yazi, born in 1887 and passing away in 1958, was a prominent Chinese poet and patriot whose work spanned the late Qing dynasty, the Republican era, and into the early years of the People’s Republic of China. Known for his fervent nationalism and deep commitment to social and political reform, Liu played a significant role in the modern Chinese literary movement.

The biographical information about Chen Zanyi in this article is based on author’s multiple face-to-face interviews with Chen and his wife in Hong Kong between 2017 and 2018.

The Boxer Rebellion, also known as the Boxer Uprising or Yihetuan Movement, was an anti-imperialist, anti-foreign, and anti-Christian uprising that took place in China between 1899 and 1901, towards the end of the Qing dynasty. It was initiated by the Militia United in Righteousness (義和團), known as the “Boxers” due to their practice of Chinese martial arts, which Westerners referred to as Chinese Boxing.

The I Ching, also known as the “Classic of Changes” or “Book of Changes” in English, is an ancient Chinese text and one of the Five Classics of Confucianism. The I Ching is a divination system, but it is also much more than that. It has been used throughout Chinese history as a source of philosophical insight, offering wisdom on how to live in harmony with the natural and social order.

References


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