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Wolfhart Pannenberg for Sino-Christian Theology: A Third Way between Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu

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Abstract: This article explores the reception to date and constructive potential of the late German Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014), for Sino-Christian Theology. While Pannenberg’s voice has not been as prominent as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich, I argue that his programme’s overall apologetic interests, interdisciplinary emphases, focus upon history, and framing of the public nature of truth carry relevance for Sino-Christian theological construction, especially when considered in the light of the contrasting proposals by two of the movement’s more prominent figures: Liu Xiaofeng (b. 1956) and He Guanghu (b. 1950). Specifically, I argue that Pannenberg’s programme can serve as a mediating third way for Sino-Christian Theology between Liu’s suprahistorical revelational positivism and He’s principled religious pluralism. Insofar as Pannenberg’s programme is often accused of being overly Western and Eurocentric in its reading and application of Christianity’s developmental history, I propose also that Pannenberg’s own thought contains internal resources which can help correct this alleged problem. Though Sino-Christian Theology as an academic modality of discursive engagement has come upon challenging times over the last couple decades, Pannenberg’s voice is still relevant in providing mediating correctives to the approaches put forward by Liu and He.

Keywords: Wolfhart Pannenberg, Sino-Christian Theology, Chinese Christianity, Liu Xiaofeng, He Guanghu

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der bisherigen Rezeption und dem konstruktiven Potenzial des verstorbenen deutschen lutherischen Theologen Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) für die chinesisch-christliche Theologie. Pannenburgs Stimme war zwar nicht so prominent wie die von Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr und Paul Tillich. Dennoch behaupte ich, dass die apologetischen Interessen, die interdisziplinären Schwerpunkte, der Fokus auf die Geschichte und die Formulierung des öffentlichen

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Charakters der Wahrheit in Pannenberg's Programm von Bedeutung für die chinesisch-christliche theologische Forschung sind, insbesondere wenn man sie im Lichte der gegensätzlichen Vorschläge zweier prominenter Figuren der Bewegung betrachtet: Liu Xiaofeng (geb. 1956) und He Guanghu (geb. 1950). Insbesondere argumentiere ich, dass Pannenberg's Programm als vermittelnder dritter Weg für die chinesisch-christliche Theologie zwischen Lius überhistorischem Offenbarungspositivismus und He's prinzipiellem religiösen Pluralismus fungieren kann. Insofern als Pannenberg's Programm oft vorgeworfen wird, in seiner Auslegung und Anwendung der Entwicklungsgeschichte des Christentums zu westlich und eurozentrisch zu bleiben, behaupte ich außerdem, dass Pannenberg's eigenes Denken interne Ressourcen enthält, die dazu beitragen können, dieses vermeintliche Problem zu korrigieren. Obwohl die chinesisch-christliche Theologie als akademische Methode des diskursiven Engagements in den letzten Jahrzehnten schwierige Zeiten erlebt hat, ist Pannenberg's Stimme immer noch relevant, indem sie vermittelnde Korrekturen zu den von Liu und He vorgetragenen Ansätzen liefert.

Schlüsselwörter: Wolfhart Pannenberg, Chinesisch-Christliche Theologie, Chinesisches Christentum, Liu Xiaofeng, He Guanghu

1 Introduction

The theological reception of the late German Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014), for Sino-Christian Theology is difficult to gauge because, comparatively speaking, the voices of other twentieth-century Protestant figures – like Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich – have been much more prominent and influential to the movement.¹ This is not to say that Pannenberg has been altogether ignored by those engaging Christian theology within the Chinese-speaking context, as his name does at times appear amidst broader argumentation² and as several summary reviews and interpretive studies of his thought have appeared in peer-reviewed journals devoted to the Sino-

¹ At the time of this writing, this disproportionate ratio can easily be confirmed by a quick search of the archives at both *Logos & Pneuma: Chinese Journal of Theology* (<https://repository.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/tc/item/cuhk-475760>) and the journal *Sino-Christian Studies* (<https://religion.cycu.edu.tw/jscsnew-content-index/>).

² This is again confirmable by way of a search of the word “Pannenberg” at the *Logos & Pneuma* archive (<https://repository.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/tc/item/cuhk-475760>).

Christian context.³ Earliest comment in Chinese on Pannenberg mostly surrounded his convictions concerning Christianity's place within the multicultural world of modernity, his belief that theology as a science must engage with the other sciences, and brief constructive, at times critical, description of his ideas concerning human freedom and his notion of "openness to the world" as humanity's instinct towards transcendence, especially as put forth in his shorter anthropological book, *Was ist der Mensch?*⁴ Recent translations of some of Pannenberg's major works into Chinese for the Modern Series of the Chinese Academic Library of Christian Thought, as published by the Logos & Pneuma Press of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, have been a further step in fostering a voice for Pannenberg in the Chinese-speaking theological world.⁵ Nevertheless, the translated works themselves

3 See for example Huang Yong (黃勇), 「潘能伯格和他的《人是甚麼》」 [Review of Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Was ist der Mensch?*], *Logos & Pneuma* 5 (1996): 274–81; Zhang Xian (張憲), 「救贖——一個體的生存見證抑或普遍的歷史意義？」 [Redemption: The Individual's Existential Witness or the Universal Meaning of History?], *Logos & Pneuma* 19 (2003): 99–125; Leng Xin (冷欣), 「從向世界敞開性到向上帝敞開性」 [From Openness to World to Openness to God: On Wolfhart Pannenberg's Fundamental Theological Anthropology], *Logos & Pneuma* 32 (2010): 229–50; Leng Xin (冷欣), 「論潘能伯格的敢示與歷史觀念」 [Revelation and History in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg], *Logos & Pneuma* 35 (2011): 167–92; Leng Xin (冷欣), 「潘能伯格三一上帝論及其對巴特主體性三一論的批判」 [Wolfhart Pannenberg on the Trinitarian God and His Critics on Karl Barth's Subjective Trinity], *Logos & Pneuma* 39 (2013): 283–307; Li Qiuling (李秋零), 「基督教神學的哲學情結——潘能伯格的《神學與哲學》一書評論」 [The Subtle Relationship between Christian Theology and Philosophy: A Review of Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Theologie und Philosophie*], *Logos & Pneuma* 23 (2005): 247–58; Deng Xiaomang (鄧曉芒), 「發人深思的互補——讀潘能伯格的《神學與哲學》」 [Contemplation of Deep Thoughts: On Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Theologie und Philosophie*], *Logos & Pneuma* 30 (2009): 299–310; Jin Li (李晉), "Meaning, Objectivity and Universality: Bavinck and Pannenberg on History and Revelation," *Journal of Chinese Theology* 8 (2022): 220–49.

4 In addition to note 3 above: Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓), Chinese Preface to Wolfhart Pannenberg, *人是什麼?* [Chinese translation of *Was ist der Mensch?*], trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) and Tian Wei (田薇) (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 1994): 11–13; Ou Liren (歐力仁), Chinese Preface for a reprint of Wolfhart Pannenberg, *人是什麼?* [Chinese translation of *Was ist der Mensch?*], trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) and Tian Wei (田薇) (1994; reprint, Taipei: Shang Zhou, 2006): 15–23. Prior to the 1994 Chinese translation of *Was ist der Mensch?*, the only work of Pannenberg's that had been translated into Chinese was Wolfhart Pannenberg, *天國近了——神學與神的國* [Chinese translation of *Theology and the Kingdom of God*], trans. Deng Shaoguang (鄧紹光) (Hong Kong: Logos Book House, 1990).

5 See for example Wolfhart Pannenberg, *神學與哲學——從它們共同的歷史看它們的關係* [Chinese translation of *Theologie und Philosophie. Ihr Verhältnis im Lichte ihrer gemeinsamen Geschichte*], trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2006); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *近代德國新教神學問題史——從施萊爾馬赫到巴特和蒂利希* [Chinese translation of *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland. Von Schleiermacher bis zu Barth und Tillich*], trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2010); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *潘能伯格早期著作選集* [The Early Works of Wolfhart Pannenberg], ed. Lin Zichun (林子淳), trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) and Deng Shaoguang (鄧紹光) (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2011); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *系統*

have yet to generate any substantial constructive responses, even if the Chinese Prefaces for those works, along with a few other article-length introductory essays, have sought to provide hints regarding Pannenberg's constructive potential for Sino-Christian Theology.⁶ Of these, the suggestions of Li Qiuling (李秋零) and Kwok Hongbiu (郭鴻標) have been most significant. While Li has called for a full-length work that does for Chinese philosophy and thus for Sino-Christian Theology what Pannenberg's *Theologie und Philosophie* did for Western philosophy and the European Christian tradition,⁷ Kwok has called for more attention to be paid by Sino-Christian Theology to Pannenberg, and particularly, to Pannenberg's ecumenical emphases.⁸ More recently, Jacob Chengwei Feng (馮成偉) has suggested that a post-foundationalist approach to theological method can provide a way forward for Sino-Christian Theology to overcome what Feng perceives as Chinese theology's current "elitist-grassroots divide."⁹ In Feng's mind, Pannenberg's postfoundational approach carries a dual commitment to theology's inherently transcommunal and intersubjective nature as well as theology's requisite culturally-conditioned provisionality in the present.¹⁰ If a full-length engagement with Sino-Christian Theology

神學（卷一）[Chinese translation of *Systematische Theologie*, Band 1], trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2013); Wolfhart Pannenberg, 系統神學（卷二）[Chinese translation of *Systematische Theologie*, Band 2], trans. Li Qiuling (李秋零) (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2017).

6 Li Qiuling (李秋零), Chinese Preface to Pannenberg, 神學與哲學, xv-xxxi, at xxix-xxxi; Li Qiuling (李秋零), Chinese Preface to 近代德國新教神學, xvii-xxxi, at xxx-xxxi; Lin Zichun (林子淳), Chinese Preface to Pannenberg, 潘能伯格早期著, xv-xxxi, at xxxi; Kwok Hongbiu (郭鴻標), Chinese Preface to Pannenberg, 系統神學（卷一）, xv-xxxi, at xxxv-viii; Kwok Hongbiu (郭鴻標), Chinese Preface to Pannenberg, 系統神學（卷二）, xv-xxix. See also Kwok Hongbiu (郭鴻標), 「潘能博的神學思想及其對華人宗教文化處境的啟迪」 [Pannenberg's Theological Thought for the Chinese Religious and Cultural Context], in 柯布、潘能博、侯活士與當代華人處境 [Cobb, Pannenberg, Hauerwas and Contemporary Chinese Context], ed. Deng Shaoguang (鄧紹光) (Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1999): 51–92, at 77–78 and 86–89.

7 Li, Chinese Preface to Pannenberg, 神學與哲學, xxix-xxxi; see also Jiang Lu (江璐), 「神學與哲學互動下的漢語神學」 [Sino-Christian Theology from the Perspective of the Interrelation between Theology and Philosophy], *Logos & Pneuma* 45A (Winter 2016 Special Issue): 17–37.

8 Kwok, 「潘能博的神學思想」, 88–89.

9 Jacob Chengwei Feng (馮成偉), "Theological Method of Chinese Theology in the Republican Era (1911–1949): A Case Study of Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee," *Journal of Chinese Theology* 9 (2023): 38–65, at 59–60. Feng positions Chloë Starr's *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) as representing an "elitist" approach and Simon Chan's *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014) as representing a "grassroots" approach. As for Feng's preferred interpretation of Pannenberg's *Grundprinzip* and theological method, see F. Leron Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

10 Feng, "Theological Method," 60.

from such a perspective is produced, it certainly would be a worthwhile contribution to the academic conversation.

The aims of the present work are more modest. My goal is simply to establish Pannenberg's voice as a third way between the contrasting approaches to Sino-Christian Theology that have respectively been put forward by two of its more prominent figures, Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓, b. 1956) and He Guanghu (何光滬, b. 1950). In doing so, I argue that Pannenberg provides an alternative mediating approach that is actually very well-suited to Sino-Christian Theology's discursive rather than confessional mode of engagement as such takes place within the secular atheistic contours of the Chinese academy rather than within the church. Not only does Pannenberg's own theological programme arise from a strong apologetic awareness of the challenge of atheism and the necessity of interdisciplinary studies when it comes to the task of theological construction, but his emphasis upon history and the public nature of truth over against purely fideistic and dogmatic expressions of Christian faith also aligns well with Sino-Christian Theology's overall tone and tenor. Whereas Pannenberg's apologetic concern, penchant for interdisciplinary work, and emphasis upon public truth will serve as the main basis for situating Pannenberg as a response to the proposals of Liu Xiaofeng, an adaptation of Pannenberg's understanding of history will serve as the primary basis for situating his programme as a response to the work of He Guanghu. After describing the Sino-Christian Theology movement in general as well as the relevant aspects of Liu's and He's respective proposals, the argument will loosely proceed by way of the above ordering.

Unfortunately, space limitations do not allow for a more thorough exploration of how Pannenberg's musings regarding a secular conception of election can help provide theological legitimization for Sino-Christian Theology's non-ecclesial place within the historicity of the divine economy.¹¹

2 Sino-Christian Theology in Broad Outline

Before we can bring Pannenberg into dialogue with Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, a brief general introduction to the Sino-Christian Theology movement will help situate the ensuing conversation. It is commonly acknowledged that the term "Sino-Christian Theology" is multivalent and comes in both "wide" and "narrow" vari-

¹¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 435–526.

eties. In its wide sense, Sino-Christian Theology refers to all Christian theology that has ever been written using the language of Chinese. In its narrow sense, Sino-Christian Theology (*Hànyǔ shénxuē*) refers to a particular academic theological movement which was spearheaded by the likes of Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu during the People's Republic of China's Reform and Opening Up Era of the 1980s and 1990s (a time of "religious fever" [*zōngjiào rè*] in China), and which has since been promoted by the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong for sake of furthering the academic study of Christianity within China's universities.¹² As the main interlocutors in the present study are Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, it is this more narrow sense of Sino-Christian Theology that we will primarily be concerning ourselves with (and from here forward, use of the term will be in reference to this more narrow sense unless otherwise indicated).

The pursuit of theological reflection in Mainland China has been fraught with ambiguities and difficulties at least since the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). It is these challenges that have given rise to the distinctive movement of which we speak, as the situation of Mainland China has allowed for freedom of religious belief in the sense of private opinion (*zōngjiào xìnyǎng zìyóu*) but not freedom of religion in the sense of public expression and practice (*zōngjiào zìyóu*). As such, Sino-Christian Theology does not take the form of confessional writings by self-professed believers from within the local churches of China.¹³ Insofar as Christian studies and theology cannot be taught as its own distinct discipline within the academic setup of China's universities but can only show itself as an interdisciplinary endeavor under the departmental guises of religion or philosophy or literature, the movement is necessarily an "adjunct" effort surrounding the academic study and research of Christianity and Christian theology by scholars of various disciplines, mostly within the humanities, who carry out such work under the auspices of their respective fields while maintaining a professional neutrality regarding faith convictions for sake of academic integrity.¹⁴ This scientific and reflective neutrality for theology is

12 Naomi Thursten, *Studying Christianity in China: Constructions of an Emerging Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 38–40.

13 The reconstructive theology done by the Chinese Church (e.g., the work of Bishop K. H. Ting) is classified by some as "Chinese theology" (*zhōngguó shénxuē*); see Zhuo Xinping (卓新平), "The Status of Christian Theology in China Today," in *Christianity*, ed. Zhuo Xinping, trans. Zhi Chen and Caroline Mason (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 7–29, at 10.

14 Yang Huilin (楊慧林) and Daniel H. N. Yeung (楊熙楠), "Editor's Preface," in *Sino-Christian Studies in China*, eds. Yang Huilin and Daniel H. N. Yeung (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006) [hereafter = SCSC]: xiii–xvii, at xiii; cf. Alexander Chow (曹榮錦), *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 78–9, 88; Zhuo, "The Status," 14; Thursten, *Studying Christianity in China*, 187, attests also to the movement's "peripheral or marginal" status.

especially important given “the broader atheistic worldview of China’s historical location” and the desire on the part of these Sino-Christian scholars to engage it.¹⁵ For these reasons, Yang Huilin (楊慧林, b. 1954) prefers the more neutral “Sino-Christian Studies” (*Hànyǔ jīdū zōngjiào yánjiū*), Zhuo Xinping (卓新平, b. 1955) prefers “academic theology” (*xuéshù shénxué*), and Chen Cunfu (陳村富) proposed “Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity” (SMSC) while at the same time recognizing a subset of so-called “cultural Christians” (*wénhuà jīdūtú*) within the broader SMSC that had come to faith in Jesus Christ through such scholarly endeavors but who also have intentionally stayed unaffiliated to any local Chinese church.¹⁶ In this vein, these cultural Christians have at times been referred to as “unbaptized Christians,” “China’s Nicodemuses,” or “China’s Apolloses.”¹⁷

Regardless of the question surrounding faith convictions, Sino-Christian Theology is a public theology that has brought Christianity and its ideas into the public sphere of China’s intellectual life through the open exchange of secular academic discourse – yet in a way that not only seeks through the study of Christian ideas to facilitate the further modernization of China,¹⁸ but that also self-consciously goes beyond the mere tasks of comparative and interdisciplinary studies so as to aim at the pursuit of truth and meaning, morality and ethics, and the expression of a theological aesthetics that “expresses the depth of man’s spiritual longing.”¹⁹ In the words of Easten Law (樓靜武): “Of its many distinct traits, Sino-Christian Theology has been credited with building a platform for the Chinese academy to engage questions regarding Christianity’s role in Chinese culture and society with an academic and philosophical rigor that many intellectuals felt were absent in ecclesial discourses.”²⁰ Sadly, it is thus of no surprise that many within China’s local churches

15 Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 78.

16 Ibid., 72, 78–79; Chen Cunfu (陳村富), “The Historical and Cultural Background to the Emergence of ‘Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity’ (SMSCs),” trans. Samuel Ling, in *Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel*, eds. Samuel Ling and Stacy Bieler (San Gabriel, CA: China Horizon, 1999) [hereafter = *CIG*]: 83–108.

17 Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 71; Ping Cheung Lo (羅秉祥), “China’s Apolloses’ and the 1997 Crisis for Hong Kong Theologians,” trans. Samuel Ling, in *CIG*, 77–82.

18 Zhuo Xinping (卓新平), “The Significance of Christianity for the Modernization of Chinese Society,” in *SCSC*, 252–64; Bao Limin (包利民), “The Intellectual Influence of Christianity in a Modern China Society,” in *SCSC*, 265–79; You Xilin (尤西林), “Modernity and Secularity: The Dual Significance of Christianity for China’s Modernisation,” *China Study Journal* 18:1–2 (August 2003): 5–13.

19 Yang and Yeung, “Editor’s Preface,” xiv–v.

20 Easten Law (樓靜武), “Decentering China in Chinese Christianity: Reconsidering Sino-Christian Theology and the Prospect of a Sinophone Theology,” in *Modern Chinese Theologies*, vol. 3, *Academic and Diasporic*, ed. Chloë Starr (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024) [hereafter = *MCT3*]: 149–69, at 152.

have not been willing to recognize the cultural Christians scholars of the Sino-Christian Theology movement as bona fide Christians.²¹

As a final comment before getting to our main task of teasing out how Pannenberg's thought can serve as a response to Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, we observe along with Alexander Chow (曹榮錦) that both Liu and He were born in the 1950s and lived through the Cultural Revolution during their formative years – a biographical fact which helps to explain the kind of developed instinct towards self-censorship on religious matters that is required to survive contemporary public life in China.²² For this reason, it makes sense that their modality of religion is “more discursive than confessional,” thereby giving them voice “into various publics of contemporary China in ways that conventional Christian theologians would otherwise not be able to [have].”²³

With Sino-Christian Theology now having been generally defined and its discursive mode as requisite now having been explained, we turn our attention to briefly describing the pertinent elements of Liu's and He's proposals before bringing Pannenberg into the conversation as a response to both.

3 Two Approaches: Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu

Liu Xiaofeng currently serves as a professor in the School of Liberal Arts at Renmin University of China. Though his academic interests have shifted towards research and writing about Greek and Chinese classical studies as well as Leo Strauss's political philosophy, he at one point was considered the leading representative of Sino-Christian Theology and even served as the first academic director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies from 1995–2002. Today, he continues to be an inspirational figure for younger generations of the Sino-Christian Theology movement.²⁴ While much could be said about Liu's contributions to the field of Sino-Christian Theology and its discourse, what will be highlighted here is the way in which his work relies upon Karl Barth's theological inclinations and categories. This makes sense given that Liu pursued his doctoral studies in theology from 1989–1993 under Heinrich Ott, Barth's successor as Chair of Systematic Theology at the University of Basel.²⁵ In this regard, the fact that Liu and others within the Sino-Christian Theology movement are willing to draw from European figures like Barth is a sign of the para-

²¹ Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 70.

²² *Ibid.*, 72–3.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Thursten, *Studying Christianity in China*, 28, 77, 160–1; Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 170.

²⁵ Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 170; Thursten, *Studying Christianity in China*, 77.

digm's general openness towards European-heritage theologies. This openness comes, however, with a specific qualification acknowledging the inevitable linguistic limitations of all theologies, European and non-European, so as to encourage the prospect of Christian theology being opened to new possibilities and discoveries in its search for universal truths by way of the particulars of different languages and contexts – and in the case of Sino-Christian Theology, the Chinese linguistic and cultural context specifically.²⁶ Hence, Liu writes that:

The relationship between Sino-Christian theology and other historical forms of Christian theology (such as Western or Eastern Christian theologies) is an *interactive relationship between the linguistic experiences of historical Christian thoughts*. An interactive relationship rules out ethno-centric theological positions (rejection of all Western theological experiences) as well as non-ethnic theological positions (theology does not admit the experiences of Western theological positions). *An interactive relationship* attains the common accumulation of the linguistic experiences of Christian thoughts.²⁷

In light of this “interactive relationship” towards “common accumulation,” Liu sees the particularization that is Sino-Christian Theology as inherently carrying universal significance for the task of Christian theology at large. Liu's ideational justification for this universal significance bears the earmarks of Barth's conceptional language while also being platonic in construct.²⁸ As Liu writes: “Christian theology is a confessional and rational reflection and discourse on the Christ-event that presents itself as the Word of God.”²⁹ In this regard, it is “necessary to distinguish between the concrete historico-geographical Christian theologies and Christian theology as an ideology.”³⁰ What this means for Liu is that the Christ-Event and the ideological form of Christian theology, proper, are both to be distinguished from geographical Christian theologies which, as mere “human thoughts,” have been constructed and determined via “the linguistic orientations and boundaries of ethno-geographical thoughts” in a restrictive manner when it comes to Christian theology's concrete discourse.³¹ Specifically, the Christ-Event funds the ideological form that is Christian theology. This ideological form is what the linguistic expressions of concrete historical forms like Greek theology, Latin theology, European-language theologies, and of

²⁶ Law, “Decentering China,” 152.

²⁷ Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓), “Sino-Christian Theology in the Modern Context,” in *SCSC*, 52–89, at 75, *emphasis in original*.

²⁸ Liu explicitly mentions Barth in “Sino-Christian Theology,” 74.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*; the English translation given here as “ideology” would perhaps be better translated as “ideal” or “form” in the platonic sense.

³¹ *Ibid.*

course, Sino-Christian Theology, then point to.³² In this way, Sino-Christian Theology is given the same status as all other historical forms of theology and thereby carries inherent significance as it makes an explicit contribution to the universal task of Christian theology.

Along such lines, Liu disavows the idea of an essentialized version of Christianity (e.g., Western or European-heritage theology) which must be translated through “indigenization” (*běnsèhuà*) or “sinicization” (*Zhōngguóhuà*) into the Chinese situation.³³ His Barth-inspired focus upon the Christ-Event, which has “demonstrated the crises of all religions” so as to be “a critique of all religions,” means that Liu similarly opposes the notion of “contextualization” (*yǐjīnghuà*) for the way in which contextualization’s emphasis upon the expressive importance of local context and its religious systems all too readily brings about the illegitimate phenomenon of syncretism.³⁴ In contrast to what Liu has thus called the “ontological” approach to Sino-Christian Theology, which seeks comparatively constructive but inevitably syncretistic dialogue with the Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist systems of thought that have historically been prevalent within Chinese culture (but that are ultimately incompatible with the Christ-event and thus with Christianity), Liu opts for what he calls an “ontic-christological” approach by which “the gospel message of the Christ-event is addressed to the original life experiences of individuals rather than the ethnic world-and-life views.”³⁵ As Liu would have it: “Christian theology is supposed to be an encounter between the Word of God and human life experiences, instead of the result of an encounter with intellectual systems.”³⁶ In this regard, “The basis of such construction is not the syncretism of the Christ-event and existing ontological theories of various ethnic thinking (be they Jewish, ancient Greek, Roman, Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist) or various modern philosophies. Rather, it is an encounter with the original individual life experiences in the ethno-geographical linguistic fabric.”³⁷ There is here something of a more direct line of revelational encounter with Christ the Word by way of one’s own particular ethno-geographical location and linguistic experiences as opposed to needing the truth of the Christian faith to be mediated by way of an entrenched intellectual system of thought that has come down to us through the ages in an inescapably syncretized fashion (e.g., Western Christian theology in its Hellenized forms or Christianity as syncretized with Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist systems of thought). This not only aligns well with Liu’s

³² Ibid., 75.

³³ Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 77–8.

³⁴ Liu, “Sino-Christian Theology,” 74, 78; Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 78.

³⁵ Liu, “Sino-Christian Theology,” 77–78.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 78.

self-identifying with the mysticism-type rather than the church- or sect- types put forth by Ernst Troeltsch's church typology in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1912), but also provides rationale for why Liu does not feel a need to participate in the life of any local church.³⁸

Liu's suprahistorical ontic-christological proposal for Sino-Christian theological method represents an avenue by which theologically imperialistic forms of Christianity (e.g., Western and European-heritage Christianities) can be relativized. Even so, Liu recognizes that the ancientness and thus richness of Chinese thinking and language parallels that of the Greco-Latin heritage and, since this ancient richness has not yet been fully resourced, there exists "an unending prospect" for future Sino-Christian theological reflection of the ontological variety.³⁹ Liu's own resourcing of this ancient Chinese richness, however, is subversive of it. For example, in Liu's *Delivering and Dallying* (*Zhěngjiù yǔ xiāoyáo*), a dialogue with Qu Yuan's (屈原, c. 340–278 BCE) *Heavenly Questions* (*Tiān wèn*) is meant to exemplify the mundane limits of Confucian reflection as opposed to the transcendence (*chāoyuè*) of the God of Christianity who, being "beyond this world" in a way that surpasses nature, the cosmos, life, and history, is – as Barth would also have it – "Wholly Other."⁴⁰ Likewise, throughout Liu's book, the cultural resources of Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism are characterized as "leisurely wanderings" (*xiāoyáo*) due to their shared modality of human sufficiency towards moral and social self-cultivation while Christianity is accentuated as transcending these resources due to an emphasis upon a human insufficiency that necessitates divine deliverance (*zhěngjiù*).⁴¹ Thus, the Chinese religions are ultimately seen by Liu as irrelevant to the transcendent ontic truth of the Christ-Event and the syncretistic tendencies of the ontological mode are completely delegitimized and disavowed. While the political situation of Mainland China dictates that interdisciplinary studies be the necessary discursive mode of engagement for Sino-Christian Theology, Liu's Barth-inspired reflections are ultimately meant to demonstrate Christianity's all-encompassing transcendence over and above the interdisciplinary discourse.⁴²

38 Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931); Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 74–5.

39 Liu, "Sino-Christian Theology," 77–78.

40 Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓), 拯救與逍遙——中西方詩人對世界的不同態度 [Delivering and Dallying: Different Attitudes of the World by Chinese and Western Poets] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1988), 90–100, 129, 135–9; Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 81–85.

41 Liu, 拯救與逍遙; Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 81–85.

42 For more on the Barthian tilt in Liu's proposals, see Kwan Seui-man (關瑞文), 「評劉小楓的漢語基督神學」 [On Liu Xiaofeng's Sino-Christian Theology], *Logos & Pneuma* 4 (1996): 220–39.

He Guanghu's approach to Sino-Christian Theology can be described as standing on the other side of the spectrum. Whereas Liu pursued his doctoral studies in theology at Basel, He was one of the first to pursue doctoral work in religious studies at the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in China (1989). He then served as a researcher there (1989–2001) before becoming Professor of Religious Studies for the School of Philosophy, also at Renmin University (2001–2015).⁴³ Unlike Liu's understanding of Christianity as being in antithesis to Chinese religion and philosophical thought by way of Barth's conception of God as "Wholly Other," He primarily resources John Hick's Christian rendition of religious pluralism and Paul Tillich's emphasis upon "ultimate concern."⁴⁴ In doing so, He moves towards an ecumenically "wider" Sino-Christian Theology that intersects with the philosophy of religion in a conscious effort to emphasize the commonalities (rather than differences) that exist between the different religious traditions.⁴⁵ It is thus significant that He sees the religions as expressions for the search of "transcendence" – not in the *chāoyuè* manner of God's "Wholly Otherness" (e.g., Liu's Barthian understanding) – but rather as that which is "beyond humanity" (*chāorén*).⁴⁶ Rudolf Otto's conception of *Das Heilige* is explicitly used by He to express how "the difference in theories concerning the attributes of God or Divinity among certain religions is smaller than among some others" and how "the possibility that the theories could be compatible with each other is much greater."⁴⁷ He argues by way of comparative textual examples that "the theories of the Divinity of Christianity and of the traditional Chinese religions – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism – belong to this category."⁴⁸ For these reasons, it is not difficult to imagine why He's theological approach has often been classified as syncretistic even as his proposal of a public interreligious dialogue aims at pushing beyond contemporary China's overtly humanistic orientation towards a spiritual improve-

43 Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 170–1.

44 Ibid., 83–84.

45 See for example He Guanghu (何光滢), 百川歸海——走向全球宗教哲學 [All Rivers Return to the Ocean: Towards a Global Religious Philosophy] (Beijing: China Social Science Publishing, 2008).

46 Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 83–84; He, 百川歸海, 137–42.

47 He Guanghu (何光滢), "The Compatibility of Christianity with the Traditional Chinese Religions in Their Theories of the Divinity," in *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, eds. Miikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) [hereafter = CCC], 56–69, at 56; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

48 He, "The Compatibility," 56. Paulos Huang's (黃保羅) response to He seeks to frame these commonalities as "only contact points in the encounter," so as to remind He that there are also "many differences" that need to be accounted for ("A Response to Professor He Guanghu: Different Reactions to the Similarities between Christianity and the Traditional Chinese Religions," in CCC, 70–84, at 84).

ment that can bring about true reform when it comes to China's efforts at modernization.⁴⁹

Methodologically, He prioritizes three moves. First, theology needs to come from “inside out” (*cóng nèi xiàng wài*) in the sense that Christianity should not be marginalized as a foreign Western religion that has imperialistically invaded from the outside but should be creatively constructed from the life experiences, practical struggles, rich history and cultural resources of native Chinese-speakers to the furthest extent possible, all the while remaining open to “outside in” translations when such may be beneficial.⁵⁰ Second, the work of theology should move “from plane to point” (*cóng miàn dào diǎn*) in the sense of beginning with observations regarding the doctrine of God (general revelation) before progressing to Christology (special revelation), as such is deemed by He to be more amenable to the Chinese way of thinking about things.⁵¹ Finally, theology is to arise from the “bottom up” (*cóng xià wǎng shàng*), not only with regard to theological construction using one's mother tongue and contextual resources, but also with regard to meeting the “rational, ethical, and cultural” concerns driving China's increasingly secular humanistic culture by way of philosophical, moral, and cultural theology.⁵² Nevertheless, like Liu, He believes that though Sino-Christian Theology is to be done for Chinese-speakers in the Chinese language by Chinese-speakers (in the spirit of 1 Cor. 9:19–23), the paradigm carries global significance as it is a unique contribution to universal theological discourse.⁵³

4 A Third Way: Wolfhart Pannenberg

Having now surveyed the contrasting approaches to Sino-Christian Theology by Liu and He, we at last can showcase how Pannenberg represents a third way between the two. Like Liu, Pannenberg is interested in demonstrating the distinctive universality of Christ and of Christian truth through the apologetic means of placing differing “total views of reality” into critical comparison and dialogue with Chris-

49 Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 87–88; He Guanghu (何光滢), “Religion and Hope: A Perspective from Today's China,” *China Study Journal* 13:2 (August 1998): 5–11.

50 He Guanghu (何光滢), “The Methodology of and Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology,” in SCSC, 106–119, at 112–5; Thurston, *Studying Christianity in China*, 41–2.

51 He, “Methodology,” 115–6; Kwok Hongbiu (郭鴻標) is the one who sees “from plane to point” as being analogous to “from general to special revelation” in “A Response to He Guanghu's ‘The Basis and Significance of Sino-Christian Theology’ and ‘The Methodology and Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology’,” in SCSC, 133–49, at 142–3.

52 He, “Methodology,” 116–8.

53 Ibid., 109.

tianity.⁵⁴ Though Liu says that this is more a feature of the ontological mode for Sino-Christian Theology (where Christianity as a system of thought dialogically engages Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism as systems of thought),⁵⁵ as we saw above, Liu himself engaged in such dialogical comparisons in his most acclaimed work, *Deliverance and Dallying* – yet, not for the purpose of discovering commonalities but rather for the purpose of accentuating the insurmountable differences.⁵⁶ Such an interest would certainly be shared by Pannenberg, even if Pannenberg would also be open to observing the commonalities as well as the constructive compatibilities – the latter being a reason for why Pannenberg should be seen as a middle way between Liu and He. Nevertheless, we here simply mention that this strong apologetic concern to Pannenberg's overall theological programme is no surprise given his intellectual pilgrimage to Christian faith and to the work of Christian theology from a deeply entrenched atheism that was influenced by Nietzsche.⁵⁷ These biographical details underlie Pannenberg's methodological conviction that the divine inspiration of the Scriptures cannot be presupposed as a pre-guarantee of their truthfulness prior to the task of theology's systematic presentation but that such an explanatory hypothesis is to be tested and thereby demonstrated as the plausible (or implausible) end result by way of the systematic presentation itself.⁵⁸ For Pannenberg, "The question about the truth of the Christian message has to with whether it can still disclose to us today the unity of reality in which we live, as it once did in the ancient world"⁵⁹ – this in a way that is not relegated to the subjectivity of the private sphere but is instead through the avenue of rational argumentation which showcases Christianity's reasoned coherence as public universal truth.⁶⁰ In the words of Carl Braaten: "Pannenberg's method takes the risk of placing all of his theological principles on the open market of public accountability, holding nothing back on a private Christian reservation. The commitment of faith, however ex-

54 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, vol. 2, trans. George H. Kelm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971) [hereafter = *BQT2*], 88.

55 Liu, "Sino-Christian Theology," 77–78.

56 Liu, 拯救與逍遙, 90–100, 129, 135–9; Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 81–85.

57 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "An Autobiographical Sketch," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques, with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) [hereafter = *TWP*]: 11–18, at 12–13; Wolfhart Pannenberg, "An Intellectual Pilgrimage," *Dialog* 45:2 (2006): 184–91, at 184–5.

58 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 16–18; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) [hereafter = *ST1*], 17–48; Charles E. Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 21–22.

59 *BQT2*, 1.

60 *ST1*, 17–48; Gutenson, *Reconsidering*, 20–44.

intentionally meaningful, cannot be used as an argument for the validity and truth of a proposition.”⁶¹ Stanley Grenz further observes that in Pannenberg’s view: “Because God’s reality is presently contested, the theologian cannot simply launch into the presentation of Christian doctrine. The theological task cannot assume God’s reality but must place itself in this situation of contestability in order to win its own starting point.”⁶²

In terms of an overall approach to scholarly discourse about Christianity and Christian theology in the secular atheistic context of Chinese academia, Pannenberg’s methodological assumptions as outlined above are much more consonant with the tenor of Sino-Christian Theology than the suprahistorical revelational positivism that Liu inherits from Barth, in which the “ordinary” (e.g., history, philosophy, etc.) is dualistically defined against the “unordinary” revelation that is the Christ-Event. As Pannenberg retrospectively wrote:

It seemed to me that the truly sovereign God could not be regarded as absent or superfluous in ordinary human experience and philosophical reflection, but that every single reality should prove incomprehensible (at least in its depth) without recourse to God, if he actually was the Creator of the world as Barth thought him to be.⁶³

A critical adaptation of this to Liu would perhaps read as follows: “Should not the truly sovereign God be present in ordinary human experience and Chinese philosophical reflection in a manner that every single reality (including all ethnic intellectual systems) should, at least in their depth, prove incomprehensible without recourse to God if God truly is the creator of the world?”

Pannenberg’s instincts towards undoing the dualism he perceived in his former teacher while an exchange student of Barth’s at Basel (1949–1950) would be sharpened during his student years at Heidelberg (1950–1955). Though Pannenberg’s *Doktorvater*, Edmund Schlink (1903–1984), is primarily known for his ecumenical work and engagement, Schlink was also instrumental in fostering an academic culture at Heidelberg that prioritized interdisciplinary studies in a way that was in line with the school’s theological agenda of reformulating *Theologie als Wissenschaft* for a post-war era. On this, Schlink was convinced “that one of the most important tasks of systematic theology is concern for the theological foundation of the non-theologi-

⁶¹ Carl E. Braaten, “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions: Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Theology of Religion and the History of Religions,” in *TWP*, 287–312, at 294.

⁶² Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 18.

⁶³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “God’s Presence in History,” *The Christian Century* 94 (March 11, 1981): 260–3, at 261.

cal sciences,”⁶⁴ especially since the way in which the German academic context tended towards professionalization and specialization sadly served to work against the notion of a unity to all knowledge that was inherent to the original vision of *Wissenschaft*.⁶⁵ This interdisciplinary spirit caught hold of Pannenberg so as to undergird his own decades-long engagement with the natural sciences as well as his more broad-reaching Thomistically-influenced conviction towards the “attempt to understand and explain all things *sub ratione Dei* (under the aspect of their ‘relation to God’).”⁶⁶ When Pannenberg was tasked for the first time in 1961 with “treating the whole of Christian dogmatics and ethics” while on the faculty at Mainz, he “soon became persuaded that one first had to acquire a systematic account of every other field [...] before with sufficient confidence one can dare to develop the doctrine of God” (which he finally felt comfortable pursuing only in the 1980s).⁶⁷ Further to all of this, the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, as first introduced by Martin Kähler (1835–1912) before becoming foundational for Barth and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), was intolerable to Pannenberg – so much so that his now famous programmatic response not only sent shockwaves through the theological world but also implicitly legitimized and incorporated the place and significance of interdisciplinary engagement: “History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology. All theological questions and answers are meaningful only within the framework of the history which God has with humanity and through humanity with his whole creation.”⁶⁸

Pannenberg’s interdisciplinary programmatic trajectory as focused upon “History” pairs well with Sino-Christian Theology’s requisite “adjunct” status within the atheistically-oriented confines of Chinese academia. Ironically, Liu’s Barthian rendition of God and the Christ-Event as “Wholly Other” (*chāoyuè*) must be carried out under such discursive conditions all the while implicitly seeing the interdisciplinary context as itself being a syncretistic danger. Meanwhile, He’s search for transcendent (*chāorén*) commonalities through interreligious dialogue towards opportunities for mutual religious enrichment and transformation embraces a “principled” rather than merely “factual” pluralism that both the Barthian Liu and Pannenberg

64 Eugene M. Skibbe, *A Quiet Reformer: An Introduction to Edmundo Schlink’s Life and Ecumenical Theology – From a Gospel Voice in Nazi Germany to a New Vision of Christian Unity* (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 1999), 73 and 146 note 250.

65 Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 273, 277–9.

66 Shults, 92; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 235 note 465, 298, 329–330.

67 Pannenberg, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 16; *STI*, 253.

68 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, vol. 1, trans. George H. Kelm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1970), 15.

would oppose.⁶⁹ This is not to say, though, that Pannenberg would agree with Liu's negative assessment of syncretism. Rather, in Pannenberg's mind, the historical process of Christianity's definitional development is necessarily syncretistic⁷⁰ – though not to the same extent as the principled pluralism of He, which is more pragmatically concerned with peaceful coexistence than Pannenberg's prioritizing of the quest for universal truth.⁷¹ Unlike the Barthian Liu, Pannenberg believed that the religions inherently carry positive value and meaning as incomplete provisional expressions of divine revelation. Unlike He, Pannenberg saw these historically dynamic provisional expressions – the historical expressions of Christianity included – as undergoing an open-ended process not only of progressive development but also of confirmation and disconfirmation by way of a historical process whose forthcoming eschatological culmination will finally reveal truth as it definitively is in its all-encompassing unity and coherence. In the meantime, the public revelation of Jesus Christ within history will continue to be subjected to critical inquiry and debate until the eschaton.⁷² In the words of Grenz, “Pannenberg looks to the history of religions, seen as the struggle of rival religious truth claims, for the determination as to which conception of the ultimate can best illumine experience, understood in the broad sense, and thereby prove itself as true.”⁷³ This mode of discursive debate and discussion seems well-suited for implementation within the Chinese academic context. It could easily be paired with He's desire for “inside out,” “plane to point,” and “bottom up” dialogue while also seeking to demonstrate Liu's concern for Christianity's distinctiveness. As such, Pannenberg represents a middle way between Liu and He. In this way, Pannenberg's mode vulnerably opens Christianity to the risks of losing amidst true public debate (at least in the present) while also allowing for Christianity to hold to its belief of eschatological confirmation due to its proleptic view of Christ's first coming.⁷⁴

Sadly, Pannenberg's proposals regarding this theology of the history of religions and its accompanying views of the definitive historical development of Christianity as involving a necessary syncretism with Hellenism has been deemed as overly Western if not outright Eurocentric by some within the Sino-Christian Theology

69 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Religions from the Perspective of Christian Theology and the Self-Interpretation of Christianity in Relation to the Non-Christian Religions,” *Modern Theology* 9:3 (1993): 285–97.

70 BQT2, 87–8; Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Notwendigkeit und Grenze der Inkulturation des Evangeliums,” in *Christentum in Lateinamerika: 500 Jahre Seit der Entdeckung Amerikas*, ed. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz (Regensburg: Pustet, 1992): 140–54.

71 He, “Religion and Hope,” 5–11; cf. ST1, 48–61.

72 BQT2, 65–118.

73 Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 44–5.

74 BQT2, 65–118.

movement.⁷⁵ Whether fair or not, the charges of overly Western and Eurocentric has been an important reason for why Pannenberg's work continues to be under-employed as a constructive resource for the Chinese-speaking as well as broader Asian theological contexts as such a stigma has characterized Pannenberg's thought, especially his proposals surrounding "universal history," as being less than agreeable to non-Western contextualized expressions of Christian faith than the work of his more prevalently utilized aforementioned contemporaries (Barth, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Niebuhr, Tillich, etc.).

In truth, it is understandable why Pannenberg's rhetoric has been perceived by many in the non-Western Christian world as being condescending. In the Foreword to the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg spoke of "the European history of Christian thought" as being "part of the spiritual heritage of all Christians, especially since the origins of most churches outside Europe are ultimately linked to the history of European Christianity."⁷⁶ In his mind, his theological programme was neither European or Lutheran "but simply the truth of Christian doctrine and the Christian confession."⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Pannenberg anticipated that the task of systematic comparisons of Christian theology with competing conceptions as found in other world religions would be "a particularly important contribution [that] might be made to Christian theology by the Third World churches" – as if the European West had already provided the definitive form of Christianity that can now be compared with religions like Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.⁷⁸ This type of assumption showed itself also in Pannenberg's response to certain liturgical elements used at the WCC's Faith and Order meeting in Bangalore (1978), in which the use of Sanskrit terms to express Christian content was interpreted as being burdened by "the cargo of millennia of Hindu religion" (which begs the question of whether he might say the same thing of religious expressions borrowed by Christianity from the

75 Among others, see for example Jason Tsz Shun Lam (Lin Zichun, 林子淳), "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions: A Study of Pannenberg's Theology" (MDiv thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2000), 67–8. Interestingly, Kwok Hongbiu (郭鴻標) has called for the necessity of theology's contextualization for the Chinese context, and this along the same lines as the type of work done by Taiwan's most famous, albeit controversial, contextual theologian, Choan-Seng Song (宋泉盛, 1929–2024). Yet, whereas Song explicitly accused Pannenberg's programme of being overly Western in orientation to the effective exclusion of Third World theological voices, Kwok himself ironically spoke against the common allegation that Pannenberg's thought was Eurocentric. Cf. Kwok, 「潘能博的神學思想」, 77; Choan-Seng Song, *The Compassionate God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982): 60–62; Kwok, Chinese Preface to Pannenberg, 系統神學 (卷二), xvii.

76 *STI*, xiii.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Ibid.*

traditional Chinese religions).⁷⁹ Pannenberg elsewhere asserted that “Christianity has a specific history” and that “Theological reflection must make its contribution within the context of that history” – a history which, in his mind, definitively ran through Europe.⁸⁰ On all of this, Geoffrey Wainwright’s comment seems relevant: “It is [...] noteworthy that [Pannenberg] has never lived or taught in Africa, Asia, or the Pacific, where he might have drawn on the life of the churches in less classical form.”⁸¹

Nevertheless, Pannenberg’s thought carries certain internal resources that can adaptively serve as the correctives which are needed to redeem his programme for use in the Sino-Christian theological situation. In this regard, Pannenberg once said in defense of the “Western academic style” of his theology that: “In doing theology, each theologian of our time should have in mind the global Christian community. But each of us must do it within his or her own context, while seeking not to be caught in the particularity of that context but to express what can claim universal truth.”⁸² Pannenberg went on to speak of how “the Christian culture of the West will remain part of the heritage of Christian churches everywhere” because of the way in which “contemporary Christians inherited the cultural glories of Greek and Roman antiquity” and thus played a crucial role “in keeping their memory alive.”⁸³ Though this latter thought about the Christian West as preserving “the cultural glories of Greek and Roman antiquity” was his own explicit focus in this passage, a broader point that he makes within the same paragraph carries constructively open-ended implications when it comes to contextual theologies (even if his imperialistic rhetoric of “conquering” needs perhaps to be tempered in our more postcolonial times): “In the history of the church, each culture that was conquered by the gospel has been turned into an element of the cumulative process of the Christian tradition.”⁸⁴ As per both Liu and Pannenberg, then, the historical developments of Sino-Christian Theology should be seen as “elements” of Christianity’s “cumulative process,” and if so, then Sino-Christian Theology can be seen as carrying universal and even necessary significance for the historical development of Christianity at large. Further, if Pannenberg’s traditional Western reading of Christian history’s definitive Hellenistic synthesis is capable of being broadened to include the entire “cumulative process” as a true cumulative process that is ongoing, his theology of

79 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Report from Bangalore,” *Mid-Stream* 18:1 (1979), 52–62, at 60.

80 Richard John Neuhaus, “Pannenberg Jousts with the World Council of Churches,” *The Christian Century* 99 (February 17, 1982): 174–6, at 175.

81 Geoffrey Wainwright, “Pannenberg’s Ecumenism,” in *TWP*, 207–23, at 222–3.

82 Pannenberg, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 18.

83 *Ibid.*

84 *Ibid.*

history could be adjusted so as to not overstate the historical place of Europe. A different set of conclusions regarding the contextual task could then emerge to carry a newfound constructive potential for his thought not only for Sino-Christian Theology but for all of world and global Christianity as well.⁸⁵

Over the last couple decades, the enthusiasm for Liu's and He's academically discursive brand of Sino-Christian Theology has been dampened due to the implementation in Mainland China of nationalist Sinicization policies. The passing of the National Security Law at the end of June 2020 has also unfortunately cultivated less favorable conditions for theological exchange in Hong Kong than was the case in an earlier era. This may mean that the future of Sino-Christian Theology as well as the emerging postcolonial development of "Sinophone Theology" – an up and coming paradigm which seeks to (a) de-center the place of a Mainland China that has been recast as a colonizing power while also (b) giving prominence to the diversity of Sinophone dialects beyond the ideological notion of Mandarin as the "common language" (*Pǔtōnghuà*) – will likely be more diasporic in origin and nature.⁸⁶ Either way, the path ahead will still require the type of discursive mode of engagement that Sino-Christian Theology has thus far exhibited and that Pannenberg's own style of theological engagement can readily be fitted to as a third way between Liu and He.

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⁸⁵ Dale T. Irvin states something similar about Pannenberg in *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning: Rendering Accounts* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 136.

⁸⁶ Jason Lam (Lin Zichun, 林子淳), "Sino-Christian Theology: A Peek into the Future," in *MCT3*, 111–28; Law, 149–69; Law's proposals build off of the broader postcolonial move towards Sinophone Studies, as found in Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernard, eds. *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

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