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建设中国的耶路撒冷：基督教与城市现代性变迁

(Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou),

Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2014.



Four years after its first publication in English, Cao Nanlai's masterpiece *Constructing China's Jerusalem. Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* was translated into Chinese in 2014. Many things have changed since then. It is time to see whether the conclusions and arguments in this book are still pertinent.

The focus of research on Chinese Christianity has long moved away from the impact-response paradigm, which relies on the active role of Western Christianity to a China-centred approach underlining the importance of setting Chinese problems in their own context.

Far from the portrait of reticent believers with herd mentality that we can see in some research on Chinese Christianity, Cao Nanlai describes a group of male Protestants of Wenzhou. They are businessmen and take full advantage of the economic development. They seek to combine biblical discourse with that of the Chinese government and are inclined to cooperate with it. They aspire to a Western lifestyle and do not hesitate to show off their quality of life. They are aware of their identity and lay stress on morality. These Boss Christians have their own vision of the organisation of the church. They invest money in their churches and boost projects of church construction. Furthermore, they have adopted some management methods to govern the church. In this context of male dominant discourse, the image of female believers in church is conceived in a passive way and makes a sharp contrast to that of male Christian bosses. They are said to be emotional and play a different role from that of their male coreligionists in church. Another "antipode" for Christian bosses is the rural migrant workers, also called "mingong 民工," who, according to the author, seek a modern identity as citizens by converting to Christianity (an identity Christian bosses often boast about).

This book makes a great contribution to our understanding of Chinese Christianity and its evolution in the contemporary period. At the same time, it gives rise to some remarks. One of the ambitious goals of the book is to move away from a domination-resistance model that often prevails over Chinese church issues in journals. But the author creates another opposition, that between city Christianity and countryside Christianity.

In the preface to the Chinese edition, Cao Nanlai declares that the book cannot cover the whole Christian community in Wenzhou. However, when it comes to the conclusion of a chapter or to that of the book, the author, implicitly or explicitly, puts forward his case study to represent Christianity in "China's Jerusalem." The question is: can Christian bosses be seen as a general phenomenon in Wenzhou

and thus represent the situation of Christianity in Wenzhou as a whole? When we are in Wenzhou, we find it is not the case: the diversity of Christianity in Wenzhou is one of its fascinating features, like in other parts of China. Even though many Christians are businessmen, they are very far from representative, and just part of the large landscape of Christianity of Wenzhou also composed by intellectual, local public servants, retirees and especially peasants. If Cao Nanlai tends to distinguish the protagonists of his book from Christian peasants, it must be remembered that the latter are a majority everywhere in China. Wenzhou is no exception.

Another problem in this book is the pertinence of the use of some conceptions related to modernity, such as “citizenship,” in the context of the present book. Cao Nanlai declares migrant workers in Wenzhou seek to gain citizenship by joining the church (p.128). But it should not be forgotten that in China citizenship is inseparable from the famous “*bukou*” system – urban *bukou* in this case. That is certainly what a migrant worker cannot get in a church! As to jobs, housing and social network, which Cao Naolai suggests a migrant worker might get in a church, they have more to do with living conditions than urban citizenship. When a migrant worker leaves his native village to work in a city, he also leaves behind him his local social network. In a new place, he has to find and integrate a new one that may give him necessary information about housing and jobs. In this manner, he is no different from a migrant worker in the Qing Dynasty.

Here comes the biggest problem of the book: the absence of contextualisation, both diachronic and synchronic. The book tells us nothing about other religions in Wenzhou, or about the historical evolution of Christianity at a local level. This absence of contextualisation makes it difficult to situate the Christian boss phenomenon in the general religious landscape of Wenzhou. While some of Cao Nanlai’s analyses on Boss Christians are revealing, we cannot help but wonder whether they are general features that we can find in other religious practices or particular characteristics of Wenzhou Christianity. For example, the author’s analysis of the different roles and statuses of male and female believers in Wenzhou Christian church is interesting and convincing. However, this difference is part of a long and general evolution of Chinese society, in which men take the public dimension (politics) and are given a rational image, whereas women are relegated to the private dimension (household) and considered as emotional. Belonging to the Yin side, women are believed to be weak in Qi and to be more easily affected by an external spirit intrusion. That is why they are believed to have a more “spiritual nature 灵性.” So the Wenzhou Christians’ discourse on female believers is just a traditional discourse. It shows how regrettable the absence of historical and religious context is. Without a frame of reference, we cannot help but wonder why this discourse matters in the Boss Christianity phenomenon, what the particular features of its expression in Christian context are, and finally to what extent Wenzhou Christianity is special. A contrario, Wenzhou prayer lady is a particular phenomenon, and should have been compared to that of Wenzhou female medium. However, this topic is not well developed in the author’s analysis frame.

We also regret the fact that Cao Nanlai's research on Wenzhou Christians relies too much on the analysis of his interviewees' discourse. It should not be forgotten that discourse can be deceptive and fabricated and it is very dangerous to take it for granted, for example, "Christianity as a patriotic power for constructing a modern China" (p.52) or "promoting the status of Wenzhou churches at an international level" (p.84), especially when a questionnaire is ill-designed. Some of Cao Nanlai's questions cited in his book seem to be too intellectually oriented, for example asking a migrant worker if the urban *hukou* is important to him (p.130). In these cases, interviewees may be driven to invent a discourse. And to invent a discourse, people often adopt some common discourses promoted by institutional propaganda. That is why one may find the discourse of some of Cao Nanlai's interviewees familiar. They are just standard answers to standard questions.

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