

“If the Gospel We Preach Disregards Human Rights, I Would Rather not Preach This Gospel”: Towards a Lived Theology of Hong Kong Churches

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Abstract

Both pro-establishment Christians, who support ‘obeying the authority’ (Romans 13), and pro-democracy Christians, who participated in the 2014–20 protests, want what is best for Hong Kong and truest to their Christian faith, but they understand those aims differently. The former believe social stability is a way to create space for Christian faith to flourish, while the latter judge that we need to break the current unjust system for Christian faith to begin flourishing. After conducting interviews with lay Christians, we found that both sides can struggle to communicate their vision for faithful Christian political theology. One reason, which we explore here, is that the key theo-political concepts at issue—namely, protest, democracy, and rights—derive from the historical context of post-Christendom societies rooted in the Western Enlightenment tradition. Hong Kong is adjacent to that tradition, but not at home in it. Using the method of ‘narrative portraiture,’ we endeavor to explore their respective theologies. This method uses the participants’ own stories, so that we, as researchers, are not speaking *for* Hong Kong Christians, but instead illuminating their own ideas. Presenting these lived theologies can remind us, as church leaders, that our

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congregations are a source of God's revelation to us, even when they may lack the terms to communicate effectively, which is why we should not forget to listen to the "average Jane."

Keywords

lived theology, narrative portraits, Hong Kong studies, democracy, human rights, Asian theology

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lucas Kwong of the City University of New York wrote about the 'Sanctified Sinophobia' and Christian nationalism of so many American Christians, including not a few US senators. Senator Marsha Blackburn, a prominent Presbyterian, tweeted, "China has a 5,000 year history of cheating and stealing. Some things never change."¹ Against the backdrop of such statements, as well as the 2021 murders in Atlanta of eight Asian American women, it is understandable that Asian American Christians and their allies hope for a simple theological response: there should be no room in the gospel for even the least hint of racism, including Sinophobia. We, of course, agree. Our research of Hong Kong Christians can be instructive in this regard. The theology behind such sentiments is considerably more complicated than questions of race and nationality, involving, as it does, debates *among* Hong Kong Christians about theo-political concepts like rights, protest, and democracy.

In this article, we introduce narrative portraiture, a research method well known in sociology but less known in religious studies. One advantage to this method is that we can better hear the *lived theology* of the "average Jane" of our church communities, as opposed to only listening to the *written theology* of experts, in which European sources still dominate the theological landscape, especially in Hong Kong. Our goal is twofold: to hear Hong Kong lay Christians on both sides of current political divides as they want to be heard, and interpret and analyze their arguments and counterarguments in context. Both pro-establishment Christians (PEC) and pro-democracy Christians (PDC) want what they think is the best for Hong Kong, but they understand it differently. Put briefly, the former prioritize social stability to create a space for Christianity to flourish, while the latter think that we need to break the current unjust system for Christianity to begin flourishing.

Background

Our research investigates how Christians conceptualize civic engagement in light of Hong Kong's resistance movements, especially after the Umbrella Movement in

1. Lucas Kwong, "Against Sanctified Sinophobia," [religioussocialism.org](https://www.religioussocialism.org), July 22, 2021, https://www.religioussocialism.org/against_sanctified_sinophobia (accessed August 4, 2021).

2014.² This movement paralyzed key areas in Hong Kong for over two months by blocking major roadways. According to the Hong Kong government, there are about 480,000 Protestant Christians and 379,000 Roman Catholics as of May 2016.³ During the protests, individual Christians were prominent in their participation and often cite their faith as the reason for their participation, such as the organizers of the Occupy Central Movement, Benny Tai and Yiu-ming Chu.⁴ Limin Bao observes, “Christian scholars in Hong Kong and Taiwan seem to give a generally pessimistic assessment of the Christian impact upon the public life of the country as a whole.”⁵ Yet in the conversations we had with our interview participants, who are ordinary Christians—“average Janes” and “average Joes”—the opinion turns out to be more mixed. The theological convictions of the various camps in Hong Kong church communities are scattered and sometimes contradictory.

We initially imagined that we could understand our fellow churchgoers in Hong Kong, whether PEC or PDC, by conducting interviews. However, what our participants said was messier than a casual chat over tea could sort out. It became apparent that if we wanted to give voice to the lived theology of Hong Kong Christians, we needed to let the contradiction stand. Only afterwards, could we theologially reflect on these interviewees’ beliefs and practices. Doing otherwise would risk artificially harmonizing their contradictions or theorizing ideas in abstraction.

There are three parts to this article. First, we explain our methodology of narrative portraiture. Second, we illustrate two contrasting narrative portraits, one PEC and one PDC. Labels like these cannot be understood from the American political standpoint. PEC, who side with the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of government, want access to China for evangelical and humanitarian welfare goals; PDC view the current governmental structures as unjust—so unjust that cooperation by Christians risks Christians corrupting their witness.⁶ Third, we analyze the lived theologies derived from the narrative portraits.

Methodology

“Lived theology” is a way to give voice to the “average Jane” in a context where theologians’ voices are privileged. We are of the conviction that it is the practice of individual Christians in community that leads to a lived theology worthy of being theorized by theologians and cross-checked again in communities, even if lived theology is confusing, complex, and sometimes contradictory and incoherent compared to written theology. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson describes this relationship: “ethnographic theologians

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2. We use the first-person plural even though only one of us (Chu, a Hong Kong Christian) conducted the interviews on which this article based.
 3. “Hong Kong: The Facts – Religion and Customs,” Home Affairs Bureau, Hong Kong SAR Government, May 2016, <https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/religion.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2021).
 4. “Occupy Central with Love and Peace,” November 6, 2014, <http://oclp.hk/index.php?route=occupy/eng> (accessed May 8, 2021).
 5. Limin Bao, “The Intellectual Influence of Christianity in a Changing Maoist Society,” *Theology Today* 55:4 (1999): 532–46.
 6. There are also some, usually termed localists, who work toward challenging and perhaps overturning the existing regime to make it more just and separate from China. We set these aside for this article.

acknowledge and accept that there is no theological ‘view from nowhere’ that we can access, and that all theological claims are embedded in and produced by particular contexts, practices, and systems of power and privilege.”⁷ Hong Kong theologians John Chan and Lap-yan Kung also write about theology in the Hong Kong context, but we find voices of average people important. Asian American scholars such as Sam Tsang and Justin K. H. Tse are well versed with both the Asian American church context and what is happening in Hong Kong churches, but, as they are both prolific writers, their voices are loud and clear.⁸ Meanwhile, there are many Hong Kong Christians, both in Hong Kong and in America, who write for their own circle of friends using social media, but their theological beliefs and practices could get lost in a sea of information unless we pay special attention. Paying special attention is our goal here.

What published theologians write is already heavily edited and revised, and we are missing out if we do not listen as well to the raw speech and actions of Christians in local communities. Written theologies are distillations of lived theologies and are harder to decipher than theological writings, since “most Christians do not need a detailed theological understanding of their religious practices to participate fully in them.”⁹ The study of lived theology is “an enterprise that elucidates how ‘ordinary’ men and women in all times and places draw on religious behavior, media, and meanings to make sense of themselves and their world.”¹⁰ “Almost everyone does ‘theology.’ We look for or construct meaning, a universal task, with religious people looking beyond the ordinary to see transcendence or indications of the divine.”¹¹ We argue that there is spiritual power in conducting ethnographic theological fieldwork.

In drawing theological convictions from the lived theology of the average churchgoer, Mary Clark Moschella argues that “a rich description is a faithful and recognizable description of a setting or an experience. One mark of credibility would be that other people could recognize the setting or the experience described, if they encountered it,

7. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 170.

8. John Chan is an associate professor of theology at the Alliance Bible Seminary, Hong Kong. See “John Chan,” Alliance Bible Seminary, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.abs.edu/en/%E5%BB%BA%E9%81%93%E6%95%99%E8%81%B7%E5%93%A1/dr-john-chan-wai-on/>. Lap-yan Kung is an associate professor at the Divinity School of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. See “Lap-yan Kung,” the Divinity School of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2021, <https://www.theology.cuhk.edu.hk/en/academics/teaching-staff/kung-lap-yan> (accessed May 8, 2021). Sam Tsang is a visiting professor at the Ambrose University, Canada. See “Sam Tsang,” Ambrose University, 2021, <https://ambrose.edu/profile/dr-sam-tsang-%E6%9B%BE%E6%80%9D%E7%BF%B0%E5%8D%9A%E5%A3%AB> (accessed May 8, 2021). Justin Tse is an assistant professor of religion and culture (education) at the Singapore Management University. See “Justin Tse,” Singapore Management University, 2022, <https://www.smu.edu.sg/faculty/profile/161831/Justin-TSE> (accessed October 11, 2022).

9. Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, 26. On lived theology more generally, see Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic, 2005), 6.

10. Jane Frances Maynard, Leonard M. Hummel, and Mary Clark Moschella, *Pastoral Bearings: Lived Religion and Pastoral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010), 2.

11. Bruce A. Stevens, “Grounded Theology: A New Method to Explore Luck,” *Theology Today* 73:2 (2016): 117–28.

after only reading your study.”¹² As such, narrative portraits illustrate a lived theology in a manner that can resonate with its readers, since narrative portraits are structured accounts that describe a phenomenon or experience as told by individuals from their perspective, letting participants speak for themselves. Narrative portraiture is a way to present lived theology contextualized in broader social narratives without losing sight of the unique personal qualities of the research encounter, bringing the participant and their everyday life experience into focus. More than just a method, narrative portraiture is a way to communicate research that helps others who are not in the same context to remember and relate, empathize, and re-live the complexity embodied in a situation. This method, as a way to communicate research, demonstrates the complexities of life by focusing on how the lives of people are shaped by their environments and the wider context.¹³ These narrative portraits are not meant to be generalizable; nonetheless, the experiences, setting and perspectives should resonate with the readers.

We hope that through this method the voices of the “average Jane” will not be silenced, even if their theologies are messy and perhaps self-contradictory.¹⁴ This concept of lived theology and method of narrative portraiture could be helpful for pastoral practice because it gives pastors an intentional space to think about who is in their congregation and how their congregants approach the world. Through sketching portraits, we are given the opportunity to read the congregants as you would read John Calvin or Thomas Aquinas. They can be a theological source, too.

Two Narrative Portraits of Hong Kong Christians

In the following, we let our participants speak for themselves by choosing what they want to share and how. In bringing participants’ narratives to the center of the research, we hope to show that the “average Jane” could be an authentic theological source.

A Pro-Establishment Hong Kong Christian’s Narrative

Tone: Frustrated

Demographic: Middle-class, Baby Boomer. I am not pro-government. No, no, I criticize the Carrie Lam government, too. I know there are problems in China, but China is a huge country, and you need to give it time to catch up. They cannot implement everything all in one go. Kids nowadays know nothing about China. I work in finance, and my line of work requires travel to China all the time. I meet real Chinese people. They are friendly, hardworking, and logical. China is not what these kids imagine it to be.

I am the rational, neutral voice in all this. But I find myself being silenced by those who do not agree with me. Those rioters are super loud and will attack anyone who speaks

12. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2008), 198.

13. Edgar Rodriguez-Dorans and Paula Jacobs, “Making Narrative Portraits: A Methodological Approach to Analysing Qualitative Data,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 23:6 (2020): 611–23.

14. *Ibid.*

differently from them. My church was once surrounded by those radical Christians who just listened to parts of our pastor's sermon online and labeled us "China's lapdog." I am scared for my safety and the safety of my family. My mom is old and fragile, and my children are young and impressionable. What if they put our personal information online? What if they stalk us? How did our world become what it is now?

Being law-abiding is super important. That makes Hong Kong what it is. These kids are talking about rights. But what about God's sovereignty? Human rights are just being selfish and not obedient to God's will. Well, *my* rights have been stifled because I cannot go to certain places in the city anymore because of the mob. We need to pray for our city to submit to God's will. The government is not perfect, of course, but destroying everything in sight is not helpful either. What is the good in provoking the Chinese government? Look at Singapore. People are contented, but they are not a democracy. We need to bring ourselves back to a stable, rational society, so that we can catch up with Singapore, who is doing so much better than us now financially.

Those kids on the streets, they are being manipulated by Americans. They do not know what they are talking about. They do not even understand what democracy is. Do you think America has democracy? They have an electoral college. It is not one person, one vote. I have lived in a Western, democratic country before, and I witnessed firsthand how broken their system is. They just elect whoever says what they want to hear, but in China, we appoint whoever is competent. Our system is way better. And I mean, Hong Kong was a colony! Did you think we had democratic elections during colonial times? It is so much better now. At least we get to vote. Do not get me wrong, I am sympathetic to the democratic movements, too, which is why I participated in the vigil of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. I also signed petitions then. People can protest for sure, but it has to be the legal kind.

I am also doing a lot of good stuff with my church. I evangelize, I visit the poor, I do disaster relief in China. Would I be allowed in China if I did not have a good relationship with the authorities? This world will pass soon, and so will all governments. I do not think a democratic or any kind of system is all that important. We need to ground ourselves in God. Pray. Read the Bible. Spending time striving for social justice means we are not devoting our time to evangelizing, and that delays God's Kingdom coming.

A Pro-Democracy Hong Kong Christian's Narrative

Tone: Powerless

Demographic: Grassroots, Millennial. Why do I not have a stake in my own future? The murders are real. The sexual assaults are real. Police brutality is real. How can I live with myself if I forget everything that happened and just live as I did before? Like an ignorant Hongkie pig?¹⁵ God is angry in the Bible, too, and God is just. Vandalism is a suitable means to our ends, given that we are facing overwhelming violence from

15. 港豬: Hong Kongie pig. It refers to people who are politically apathetic and generally dismissive of social movements. See Gary Fong, King-wa Fu, and Elgar Teo, "Antielab Research Data Archive," Journalism and Media Studies Centre, the University of Hong Kong, <https://antielabdata.jmsc.hku.hk/> (accessed August 7, 2021).

the state. How else can we get the Chinese government to listen? Those who are pacifists are so dated.¹⁶ They are in it for the spotlight and for the Legislative Council seats, but look what happened. The Chinese government changed the rules of the game, and suddenly they are out. Their idea of wanting to convince the Chinese government with rational arguments and civil disobedience did not work. The nonviolent crowd does not represent me. In fact, nobody represents me. Only I can represent me. We need to take whatever means we can get our hands on. I have my bottom line, too. I am in the protests to protect other protestors. I do not actively inflict harm on the police. Instead, I stand between the police who want to harm other protestors. I am faithful to God.

The Chinese government cannot be trusted and the system is not democratic, so how could I live with myself if I did not give it my best shot to turn it around? Our system is so broken at this point we need to just break it and make a new one. When I say “Hong Kong independence,” I do not mean being an independent country. I am not stupid. I know we cannot survive on our own. What I mean is that Hong Kong is autonomous as the “One Country, Two Systems” guarantees and that we can preserve our own culture and language. How is that a big ask? I am a Hong Konger; I am not Chinese. And those who believe in democratic values, even if they just migrated to Hong Kong, can all be Hong Kongers.

We need to show our collective power to the Chinese government. That is why we need to persist with the yellow economic circle,¹⁷ where we only buy from vendors with the same convictions as we do. Of course, this would be difficult at the beginning, since large conglomerates would be reluctant to side with us, but we need to show them our economic power. Through the way I live my daily life, I continue to resist the Chinese government’s suppression in small ways.

I grew up in my church, and I have been working for my church for a while. My church does not talk about politics. They want to stay neutral. I cannot blame them. They are also in a difficult position. I just do my own thing as an individual Christian. Everyone can do their own thing according to their own convictions, and collectively we will be a force to reckon with.

I am now thinking of taking up the British Nationals (Overseas) visa and moving to the United Kingdom. Or perhaps seek asylum in the States. My mother holds a law enforcement job, and we have stopped talking for years already. It is getting increasingly difficult to live under the same roof. She thinks I am the problem, and the government is doing just fine if people like me would stop making a mess of Hong Kong. If I have to live with her any longer, I think I will snap. I am sad and distressed to think that I need to leave my home permanently. I love this land. How can I still be a meaningful part of this venture when I must flee for my own safety? I feel disillusioned and confused.

16. 和理非: this is an abbreviation of “和平” (peaceful), “理性” (rational), and “非暴力” (non-violence). It refers to protestors who embrace these principles. It first appeared as a pejorative term during the 2014 Umbrella Movement as an insult to peaceful protestors. It has now become a more neutral term as each group of protestors are recognized for playing specific roles in the movement. See *ibid.*

17. 黃色經濟圈: The Yellow Economic Circle. It refers to a consumer campaign calling for pro-movement citizens to purchase goods and services from businesses whose owners support the movement and to boycott those whose owners are against it. Numerous social media sites and mobile phone applications have been developed to help people identify businesses supporting or opposing the movement. See *ibid.*

Exploring Lived Theologies

The two narrative portraits illustrate the two composite figures' lived theologies. Both see themselves as being faithful to God, and both feel like they are victims in this situation. This PEC character sees herself as wanting political stability where freedom and rights can be exercised and essential pastoral and almsgiving work can happen, trusting in the slow work of God. In contrast, this PDC character views the current non-democratic system as so unjust that fundamental changes are required before people can exercise any freedom, since Christians need to speak up for those who are unable to do so. In each group, political and theological convictions are intertwined, which leads to a hardening of perspective, since each views the other as not grounded in biblical teaching or as not a "real" follower of Jesus. Eyal Rabinovitch observes that "We're in this moment when there's a lot of seeing our political others as incomprehensible or worse, and saying, 'screw them.'" As such, he proposes that when one is "thinking about the needs, the history and the personal life story and the views and argument" of their political others, whatever solutions they advocate, they should make sure the world they build has room for these political others too.¹⁸ For PEC and PDC, what they both want is being heard as they intend and for their fellow churchgoers to support, or at least understand, their theology.

Pro-Establishment Christians

PEC emphasize their critical thinking, precisely because they are often considered ignorant and accused of blindly following the government's talking points. Their convictions need to be respected. Hong Kong Christianity coincided with the efforts of the colonial government in bringing aid, education, and opportunities, and so not surprisingly, those who committed to Christianity at that time may associate their faith with upward social mobility, which shapes their theology. It is not exactly the "prosperity gospel," but in their conceptualization at least it means that God blesses his followers and Christians should work hard to give back to the church. Their attitude towards the SAR government have been exposed to a different China than PDC, and their experience of Hong Kong differs from PDC.

As to why PEC and their churches could seem inward-looking, throughout the history of Hong Kong Christianity, as a mission field at first, the focus was always on evangelism and pragmatism. Neither the British colonial government nor the Chinese SAR government have ever given Christian organizations the chance to promote radical social action. Their 'inward-looking' focus should not be confused with inaction. It is their experience of what works and does not, given their goals. We find that it is not that PEC are actively turning a blind eye to the injustice surrounding them but, rather, they genuinely believe that Christians should look forward to an otherworldly salvation, and that hope should lie in the future when the Kingdom comes, rather than working to bring this world to God's standard of justice.

18. Resetting the Table, *Purple: America, We Need to Talk*, https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2540/purple_discussion_guide.pdf (accessed April 24, 2021).

For Hong Kong Christians who are middle class or aspiring to be, they channel their efforts towards promoting workplace theology, such as that of R. Paul Stevens, many of whose works have been translated into Chinese. Moreover, there are several seminaries focusing on workplace theology, such as the Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation in Bethel Bible Seminary¹⁹ and the China Graduate School of Theology, which offers a Master of Christian Studies in Marketplace Theology.²⁰ Hong Kong is notorious for long working hours, and the strategy of focusing on workplace ministry should not be seen as an escape from not participating in social action. Rather, the workplace is where a Baby Boomer or Generation X would potentially spend most of their time, so it makes sense to them for taking a pragmatic approach and they devote most of their time to workplace ministry, rather than advocating for institutional changes.²¹

PDC will make the same critique that Reinhold Niebuhr once did, who critiqued churches' inability to grasp the real problems of modern-day work:

The church is undoubtedly cultivating graces and preserving spiritual amenities in the more protected areas of society. But it isn't changing the essential facts of modern industrial civilization by a hair's breadth. It isn't even thinking about them. The morality of the church is anachronistic. Will it ever develop a moral insight and courage sufficient to cope with the real problems of modern society? If it does it will require generations of effort and not a few martyrdoms. We ministers maintain our pride and self-respect and our sense of importance only through a vast and inclusive ignorance. If we knew the world in which we live a little better we would perish in shame or be overcome by a sense of futility.²²

Here, Niebuhr emphasized that the church is concerned with being respectable at the cost of grasping the injustices happening in society. PEC would respond that to be a daily witness in their workplace and evangelize their co-workers *is* precisely *understanding what is happening in society*, rather than striving for abstract ideas like democracy and rights, which are not biblical concepts anyway.

Furthermore, PEC tend to see verbal debates as 'civilized' and social actions, such as the illegal protests supported by PDC, as a disturbance. The reason they came to this understanding is largely due to how Christianity was first introduced to Hong Kong as an aid-provider. Christian organizations would not have been tolerated by the government, British or Chinese, if they affected the state adversely and rocked the boat. Working toward systemic changes, like large-scale electoral reform, is perceived as a pointless

19. "Introduction," Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation, Bethel Bible Seminary, 2021, https://rbc.bethelhk.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=96&Itemid=374&lang=en (accessed July 5, 2021).

20. "Master of Christian Studies (Marketplace Theology)," China Graduate School of Theology, 2021, https://www.cgst.edu/au/eng/grad_mcs_mt (accessed July 5, 2021).

21. While there are contextual particularities, in general, Hong Kong also thinks of its population with the same labels as the Western world, such as baby boomers, gen x, gen y, gen z (millennials), and so on. See Tai-lok Lui, 四代香港人. (Four Generations of Hong Kongers) (Hong Kong: Step Forward Multimedia, 2007).

22. Reinhold Niebuhr, "1925," in *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Library of America, 2015).

endeavor. This, in turn, explains another site of contention between different visions of Christian faithfulness in Hong Kong churches: what does ‘democracy’ even mean?

Defining abstract concepts such as democracy is fraught for *both* parties, but for different reasons. PEC would be quick to point out that China is, in its own way, democratic (民主), as stated in the Core Socialist Values.²³ Xi Jin-ping even proclaimed that, “After its return to the motherland, Hong Kong compatriots became masters of their own affairs, Hong Kong people administered Hong Kong with a high degree of autonomy, and that was the beginning of true *democracy* in Hong Kong.”²⁴ Democracy in China is commonly thought of as simply “people have the power to decide for themselves” (人民當家作主). If someone responds, “Oh no, China isn’t a real democracy,” their opponents will respond as our portrait PEC responded above: “And you think that the USA is?” What is lost in all this is specifying whether we mean Athenian democracy, American liberal democracy, Scandinavian social democracy, or something else entirely. That much could be said about the Hong Kong political spectrum, in general, Christians or not. Our contention is that Christians in Hong Kong are especially likely to have problems with defining abstract concepts because they attribute their convictions to biblical teachings.

Pro-Democracy Christians

There are some understandable reasons for the political divides between Christians in Hong Kong. One clear dividing line is age: PEC tend to be from the baby boomer generation, and as such, they experienced Deng Xiao-ping’s China during its open and reform policy stage, when China was relatively lax on restrictions, while PDC are generally millennials, and as such, they experienced Xi Jin-ping’s China, which is more authoritarian in comparison. We find that those whose working life began in Deng’s China generally hold a more optimistic view of China, identifying as Chinese and seeing their actions as a key to changing China for the better. Meanwhile, those who began their working life in Xi’s China generally hold a more pessimistic view, not identifying as Chinese and seeing their reform efforts as futile.

It is not that PDC are ignorant of contemporary Chinese history but, rather, we find that they struggle to see from the perspective of the “other.” Rey Chow, a Hong Kong-born cultural critic, presents a reason why that might be the case:

This structure of cross-cultural, cross-racial representation aimed at producing “China” as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by

23. The Core Socialist Values is a set of new official interpretations of Chinese socialism promoted at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. See Jintao Hu, “Firmly March on the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Complete the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects: Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on November 8, 2012,” <http://is.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/1ncoc/t997655.htm> (accessed August 7, 2021).

24. Nectar Gan, Simone McCarthy, and Kathleen Magamo, “Xi Jinping crushed Hong Kong’s position. Now he claims handover to China marked ‘beginning of true democracy,’” *CNN*, July 1, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/01/asia/hong-kong-china-anniversary-day-intl-hnk/index.html>.

outsiders. It is important to remember that although many countries lack “democracy” and “liberty,” it is China that, simply because it is not the United States’ ideological ally, regularly bears the brunt of this process of palpable demonization.²⁵

Though talking about Western media, Chow’s illustration is also representative of PDC in Hong Kong. PDC understand the cultural difference between a liberal, capitalist country like America and a collectivist country like China, but how they sometimes speak about the Chinese government or the SAR government, and to some extent, the mainland Chinese people, is that whatever they do is inherently evil. Why? Two reasons occur to us. First, China sees itself as being perceived as weak, and so it feels like it must maintain a strong stance in reaction to the West. Their strong stance, in turn, is perceived by PDC as authoritarian or autocratic. Second, those PDC who are gen Z tend to harbor resentment against older generations. For example, a Hong Kong legislator, Kin-por Chan, once said that the Baby Boomers have reached a deserving ‘harvest season,’ and the younger generation risks spoiling the crop, that is, Hong Kong’s wealth and stability. Hong Kong Gen Z rapper, Luna is a Bep, responded to Chan on behalf of her generation:

You’re on the shore, leave the table when you’re on a roll,

You only pretend to listen to the common people’s appeals, ...

You say this is your harvest season, but

You’re hogging the land you’ve been farming for decades.

Are you willing to give it back to me yet?²⁶

Given this degree of resentment, it is more understandable that the younger generations are not so inclined to empathize with SAR authorities, or with Christians they see as in alliance with the mainland government.

Yet even if all this resentment was overcome, there is still at least one other source of ongoing confusion between PDC and PEC, one which explains the quote in the title of this article. It is taken from Tin-yau Yuen, a retired senior pastor of the Methodist church, Hong Kong:

I once presented a talk together with a Christian legislative councilor. She pointed out that today in mainland China there are many opportunities to spread the gospel, and if we criticize the mainland’s governance too much, we will lose this opportunity. But my response is: “If the gospel we preach disregards human rights, I would rather we do not preach this gospel.” The gospel gives

25. Rey Chow, “King Kong in Hong Kong Watching the ‘Handover’ from the U.S.A.,” *Social Text*, Intellectual Politics in Post-Tiananmen China, no. 55 (1998): 93–108.

26. Luna is a Bep, “收成期” (Harvest Season), our translation, June 26, 2019, <https://youtu.be/M36-cIjX1D8> (accessed August 7, 2021).

life, but this life is not just an otherworldly life ... The gospel also liberates those who are oppressed by sins ... Just emphasizing eternal life but ignoring repentance, ignoring the oppression of others because of my own sins, that is not the gospel. That is just almost the gospel.²⁷

Yuen critiques the Christian legislative councilor for, as he sees it, prioritizing an otherworldly salvation over this-worldly needs. But the way he puts this point causes problems. Instead of saying “needs” or even a more biblical phrase like Isaiah’s “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan” (1:17, NRSV), Yuen equates the gospel with human rights. This is common among PDC, where rights are seen as tantamount to Christian doctrine. Problematically, some looser translations of Isaiah even render the English as, “Defend the *rights* of the widow” (New English Translation). But can the gospel be so simplistically equated with it? Perhaps *some* of the values protected by the human rights tradition are also principles promoted by Christian ethics?

At the same time—and this is where the confusion begins—we are *not* siding with the otherworldly salvation of the legislative councilor. There are obvious problems with believing that God saves your soul in the next life and does not care about your body in this one. However, there are equally many problems, albeit less obvious ones, with believing that the gospel teaches the Western doctrine of human rights.²⁸ This is but one example of what we tried to demonstrate above: the two sides are obstructed from understanding one another by the Western Enlightenment roots of some of the key terms. The issue is not necessarily with the use of these terms but, rather, that these terms have taken up unspoken Hong Kong implications that do not acknowledge their contingent historical and theological lineage, which makes honest dialogue difficult. We hope that by having a better understanding of what these terms do and do not mean, Hong Kong Christian communities can explore a way forward from the captivity of Western Enlightenment in their public discourse, which seems to trap them in misunderstanding and mistrust.

Implications

Our research methods stem from the conviction that lived theology should inform written theology. How the Hong Kong Christians live out their daily lives, with all its messiness and occasional contradictions, should be a theological source for us. The “average Jane” may not write theological monographs, but she has theological convictions and ideals, too, hopefully formed in reflection and prayer. Studying her disconnected, and perhaps ineloquent, thoughts may be part of how God speaks to us, that is, through the church community in praxis. Through narrative portraiture, we have explored how our participants make sense of their experiences, their lived theology.²⁹ The point of conducting

27. Tin-yau Yuen, *走進時代的信仰* (A Faith That Walks into the Era), our translation, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Enlighten & Fish, 2017), 37–41.

28. This has been a subject in much Anglo-American theology, perhaps most notably in the work of Stanley Hauerwas. See Ann Gillian Chu, “An Analysis of the Understanding of and Engagement with Stanley Hauerwas’ Theological Convictions among Selected Hong Kong Theologians in the Occupy Central and Umbrella Movements” (Master of Divinity, Regent College, 2017).


29. Rodriguez-Dorans and Jacobs, “Making Narrative Portraits.”

qualitative research is not to iron out inconsistencies but, rather, to find God's revelation precisely within the inconsistencies.

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