Article

Where the Research Interests of Graduate Students in China's Christian Universities Lie

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Abstract: Focusing on the research landscape for graduate students of China's Christian universities is of great significance for making sense of the path along which the theological and practical studies are conducted by contemporary China's Christian universities and for promoting the dialogue and understanding between Chinese and foreign seminaries. In this research, thesis topics selected by graduate students majoring in theology are classified into four categories: universal theoretical research, universal practical research, theoretical research of Chinese Christianity, and practical research of Chinese Christianity. Results of coded categorical data analysis and case study show that graduate students mainly focus on universal theories without giving adequate attention to the topic of the "Sinification" of Christianity. In their universal theoretical research, graduate students examine classic Christian works and theological thoughts of important figures in a detailed and in-depth way. Universal practical studies are skewed to practices of religious reforms and teaching improvements from a multidisciplinary perspective. In the theoretical research of Sinified Christianity, researchers build upon the commensurability between traditional Chinese culture and Christian theology, including the theological thoughts of important Christian figures in China, to explore the fulfillment of cultural, national, and social identities. In the practical research of Christianity in China, empirical methodologies are widely applied, centering on the "localization" process and forms of practices taking place in churches of China. The *coincidentia oppositorum* between universality and particularity dictates that much tension exists with respect to the development of Christianity in China. Focusing on the accommodative process between universality and particularity is important to produce further implications for research to be conducted by China's Christian universities.

Keywords: China's Christian universities; Christianity; universality; Sinification

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1. Introduction

Since the era of Francis Bacon, the fact that group loyalty has a negative impact on the capacity of understanding the entire human society has been a scholarly consensus (Merton 2003). Researchers' value positions have affected the choices that researchers make with respect to topics to be studied (Hou 1995). According to Merton's insider and outsider theory, insiders are members of a specific group and class who belong to the same cultural group as the researched subjects and share the social experience within the group; outsiders are non-members of a group who usually take huge risks at great costs even if they can obtain knowledge on their own (Merton 2003). China's Christian Universities are higher education institutions established by Western churches in modern China, and they play important "insider" roles in spreading the gospel. From 1902 to 1916, as many as 13 (Sun 2014) colleges were established or jointly established by the U.S. Christian churches in China, making them a pioneer of contemporary knowledge and disciplines (Li 2017). China's Christian universities have faced different situations compared with their western counterparts. In 1952, the state readjusted all departments of higher education institutions throughout the country, canceling the original names of all Christian universities and

restructuring them into new institutions. In the same year, [Jinling Union Theological Seminary \(2016\)](#) was established, which was the only theological seminary at the time that enrolled new students nationwide. The specific regionality has endowed researchers from these universities with a special research sphere. Hence, unlike their counterparts in foreign universities, graduate students in China's Christian universities are "outsiders" on the inside. The socioeconomic background and regional difference in relation to individual researchers cause researchers to focus on different topics.

Specifically, the research conducted by scholars in Christian Universities in China includes not only universal issues, but also the "Sinification" topics. Back in the first half of the 20th century, research conducted by Christian universities had attained extensive development with scholarly attention focused on indigenous churches, the development of Christianity in China, and translations of the Bible ([Xin 2019](#)). The emergence of self-styled new geographies of religion have witnessed growing consideration of the expressions and workings of religion. They have also started to explore the embodied experience of religion in and through different spaces ([Orlando Woods 2020](#)). Graduate students, supervised by Ding Guangxun, Chen Zemin, and other instructors from Jinling Union Theological Seminary, have conducted a multitude of research on "Sino-theology". For example, starting with the history of practices of China's churches, An Jingxia posited that contextualization also represents an unavoidable requirement of, including a path toward, theological research in China. Theology in China must be deliberated by Chinese researchers themselves on the basis of the teachings of the Bible and from the perspective of church traditions, the vast abundance of Chinese national culture, and its realistic context to construct a real sense of Sino-theology ([An 2007](#)). From the perspectives of the evolvement of churches' thoughts, hermeneutics, church traditions, Chinese churches, the needs of the Chinese society, and challenges faced by ecumenical churches, Jin Chunze provided a theoretical reflection over the theological beliefs of Chinese churches and thus demonstrated the necessity of the construction of Chinese theological thoughts.

However, as noted by Merton, universalism, communism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism constitute the spiritual traits of modern science; accepting or declining the entry of certain teachings into the scientific system is irrelevant to the personal or social attributes of the advocate ([Merton 2015](#)). That is, scholars have gradually realized that rather than focusing on whether insiders or outsiders have monopolized or occupied a favorable position to obtain social knowledge, concentrating on the different roles that they play and on the interactions among them, is better in exploring the truth ([Merton 2003](#)). Both insiders and outsiders, theologians have recognized the value of practice. There's a need, for a genuine distinction between theory and practice, as the scholastics used to say, but not for separation ([Burrows 1995](#)). Meanwhile, theological reflection on the practices has failed to mine the richness of its own epistemological and methodological critiques and has thus stifled its own liberative potential ([Daniels 2019](#)). Graduate students of theology often assume concurrently a pastoral role, which has a direct impact on the theoretical and practical development of Christianity in China. Thus, examining research topics selected by graduate students of Jinling Union Theological Seminary is of great significance for clarifying the development path of theoretical and practical theological studies conducted by China's Christian universities.

As previously discussed, studies conducted by China's Christian universities cover not only universal topics relating to Christianity but also the "Sinicized" Christianity, including its special characteristics. Graduate students of theology often assume concurrently a pastoral role, which has a direct impact on the theoretical and practical development of Christianity in China. Thus, examining research topics selected by graduate students of Jinling Union Theological Seminary is of great significance for clarifying the development path of theoretical and practical theological studies conducted by China's Christian universities. However, literature documenting systematic analyses of the specific areas and contents of research conducted by China's Christian universities is limited. Only a few studies have addressed research areas explored by graduate students of China's Christian

universities from the lens of how Christianity has developed in China (Zhao 2018), where further improvements in terms of methodology and the depth of theoretical analysis are needed. Based on a regional classification criterion, what kinds of research are mainly conducted by graduate students of China's Christian universities? Another distinction can be made between theoretical research and practical research. In this case, what theories are used by postgraduates in Chinese Christian Universities that help us see what we might not otherwise see? Which application scenarios are focused on by postgraduates to understand Christianity in terms of its practices, not just in terms of its symbols and doctrines? The above questions will be addressed as a key concern of this research, which aims to reveal how graduate students of China's Christian universities have advanced the epistemological integration among Christianity, religion, and culture in China since the 21st century and thus to construct a research sphere of China's Christian universities.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this research, a theoretical analysis framework is constructed mainly from two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the classification of the scope of researched topics. Similar to how Wang Chuanyi et al. classified studies conducted by researchers from higher education institutions in western China into those on universal topics and those on regional topics (Wang and Gu 2021), Christianity-related research is categorized in the present study into those dealing with universal topics and those concerning the characterization of Christianity in China. Universal topics emphasize on the concepts that are commonly recognized by Christians, essential and abstract, or the rules of development in the practical activities (Orlando Woods 2020). They deal with the interpretation of theological thoughts of classic books and important figures in Christianity, including broad topics concerning the development history of Christianity in the world. At the same time, geographies of religion do not exist in isolation, but in conversation with the academic and social worlds within which they are embedded (Akram 2021). The descriptive study of religions other than one's own is not necessarily a modern Western phenomenon. It can take root in multiple cultural settings. Thus, China-specific Christian topics require graduate students to anchor their studies to the "Sinification" process of Christianity and to combine their research with the practical reforms and theoretical development aiming to facilitate the adaptation of Christianity to the settings of the Chinese society and culture. Doing so allows them to explore the topics truly reflecting the characteristics of the construction of Chinese theological thoughts.

The second dimension concerns the classification of research attributes. Drawing on how Merton classified relevant research on regionally and internationally influential figures into theoretical and practical studies in his work *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Merton 2015), this study categorizes Christianity-related studies into theoretical and practical research. Practical theologians also use theory and practice to differentiate two sources and styles of knowledge. This binary division does not polarize research to form theoretical and practical strands, but promotes the coordinated development of the two by clarifying the different focuses of the two types of work. As Bonnie Miller-McLemore said, theology faculty have been relatively unsuccessful in helping people employ in practice the theological knowledge they gain in school and, inversely, in helping them detect the theology already latent and operative in practice. This is because, on the one hand, the graduates as future theologians neglect the practical significance of theological theory when they carry out theological theory research, unaware of the fact that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory". On the other hand, as future priests, they do not fully understand that "practice takes theory into itself and transformations or surpasses it". Therefore, this study outlines the research content and directions of postgraduate students from the theoretical and practical aspects, which may help young scholars to explore the possible pathways to the connection between theoretical and practical research.

Theoretical research mainly comprises explorations of the religious knowledge of Christianity at the theoretical level. Such research plays a crucial role in clarifying the

origins of the development of Christianity in different countries and provides theoretical support for other studies. Comparatively, practical research highlights the reform process where Christianity and socioeconomic development in different countries are mutually adapted to each other. This line of research stresses that Christianity should be adapted to different cultures, and localization practices should be implemented to advance the development of the religion in different countries. In this regard, graduate students of China's Christian universities can also expand the breadth and depth of their research from these two perspectives: First, attention should be paid to interpreting theological thoughts in Christian classics as a way to deepen the understanding of the theoretical system of Christian religion; second, efforts should be put in advancing the "Sinification" reform of Christianity to provide necessary theoretical and practical support to facilitate Christianity to adapt itself to and serve the Chinese society.

The interacting mechanisms of universal topics and the topics specific to China, or theoretical research and practical research, are very complex (Miller-McLemore 2016). The analytical framework proposed in this study is not to set the four research types against each other, but to explore the future direction to integrate different research orientations by revealing distinct aspects of research by postgraduates in China's Christian Universities. With that in mind, this study classifies Christianity-related research into four categories on the basis of Christian theories and practices bearing universal or China-specific characteristics: universal theoretical research, universal practical research, regional theoretical research, and regional practical research. Connotations of various research topics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. A classification framework for Christian research.

Topic Classification	Theoretical Research	Practical Research
Universal	Exploring the essential questions and theological theories in Christian classics. This kind of research mainly focuses on concepts and abstract ideas, which provides explanatory for Christian activities.	Focusing on broad practices (reforms) and development agendas in Christianity. This type attaches importance to the reality of the development of Christianity, and can provide practical knowledge for Christian church staff, believers, and ministers.
Regional	Constructing specialized theories on the basis of the Chinese Christian sphere and traditional Chinese culture. This kind of research focuses on abstracting the concepts and laws from the practice actives of China's Christianity, so as to develop China's Christianity.	Focusing on the development of Christianity in China to support practical studies of theological reforms over the "Sinification" of Christianity. This kind of research focuses on the interaction between Chinese Christian Church, believers, and ministers, so as to present the development experience of China's Christianity.

3. Data, Descriptive Statistics, and Methods

3.1. Data Source and Processing

Analytical data for this research were derived from the titles of master's theses in theology published by Jinling Union Theological Seminary on Nanjing Theological Review. A total of 205 data entries were obtained. After the screening process, it was found that sample data mainly spanned from 2003 to 2019, and the data spanning from 2014 to 2014 only contained the list of graduates. As a result, a total of 170 valid samples were obtained. In the meantime, the title information of the above theses was coded to explore the directions and areas focused on by graduate students of China's Christian universities.

3.2. Distribution of Sample Data

3.2.1. Temporal Distribution of Theses

From 2003 to 2019, the master's theses written by students of Jinling Union Theological Seminary can be divided into three stages: the years from 2003 to 2006 had seen a fluctuating upward trend in terms of the number of master's theses, which peaked at 15 in 2006; the years from 2006 to 2010 exhibited a slightly declining trend with the number of theses reaching the lowest point in 2010; between 2010 and 2019, the number of master's theses presented a fluctuating upward trend again, with total annual numbers exceeding 10 for years in a row since 2012 and a particularly evident growth rate in 2014 and 2015 (Figure 1). The upward trend was attributed to two policies promulgated, namely, the State Administration for Religious Affairs in October 2012: Interim Measures for Qualification, Accreditation, and Appointment of Teachers in Religious Schools and Interim Measures for the Conferment of Degrees by Religious Institutions. Officially came into force in 2013, these two policies provided favorable conditions for improving the cultivation of specialized religious practitioners and the educational and teaching quality of China's Christian universities.

Figure 1. Annual distribution of the numbers of master's theses in theology.

3.2.2. Distribution of the Types of Theses

Based on the classification framework in Table 1, this study further classified the topics of the above master's theses in theology and ran the statistics, finding that graduate students prevalently focused on universal topics related to Christianity (accounting for 76.47% in total), with a percentage far higher than that of students focusing on the characterization of Christianity in China. Specifically, the percentage of theoretical studies addressing universal Christian topics was as high as 63.53%, whereas the percentage of practical research achievements relating to universal topics was 12.94%. With respect to Christian research in China, practical studies focusing on the characterization of Christianity in China accounted for 16.47%, slightly higher than theoretical studies focusing on the same genre (Table 2). Because theoretical research and practical research are not completely opposite, some topics belong to the above two categories at the same time, and the total proportion of the four categories is more than 1.

Table 2. Distribution of topics of master's theses written by graduate students of China's Christian universities.

Topic Classification	Number of Master's Theses in Theology	Percentage (%)
Theoretical research focusing on universal topics	108	63.53
Practical research focusing on universal topics	22	12.94
Theoretical research focusing on the characterization of Christianity in China	25	14.71
Practical research focusing on the characterization of Christianity in China	28	16.47

3.3. Methods

The title of an academic paper gives a glance at the essence of the research and can reflect the core content of the article. Therefore, based on the classification framework shown in Table 1, the two researchers classified and coded the papers thematically according to their titles. The coding results of the two researchers were verified for consistency to ensure the accuracy of the classification. For example, “Jesus’ Teachings on Social Care: Discussion on Luke Chapter 4 Sections 18–19” is classified as theoretical research on universal issues, “The application of the Sola Scriptura principle in the Martin Luther Reformation” belongs to practical research on universal issues, “On the Christian Gentleman: A Preliminary Study of Zia Nai-Zing [Xie Fuya]’s Theological Thoughts” is grouped to theoretical research on Christian theories with Chinese characteristics, and “A study on the pastoral care of the elderly believers in the church: a case study of the church in Nanjing” is categorized as practical research on Christian theories with Chinese characteristics. Moreover, “On the Worldly Ethical Life of Christians: From the Perspective of Protestant Theological Ethics” belongs to theoretical and practical research on universal issues at the same time, and “Exploring the construction of theological thoughts from the development of the church in China” is both theoretical and practical research on Christian theories with Chinese characteristics.

After all the papers were categorized, keywords in the title of each article that can represent its core points were extracted. Specifically, it included two major steps. The first step is to use “jieba”, a Chinese word segmentation tool, to cut out phrases from the title (English words can be segmented naturally by spaces, whereas in Chinese words and phrases need to be cut out from the title manually). In the second step, the researchers extracted keywords from the words segmented in the first step, and combined words with similar meanings. For example, “contextualized theology” and “theology contextualization” were unified into “contextualized theology”; “public welfare enterprise” and “public welfare concept” were put under an upper notion of “public welfare”.

Finally, after calculating the frequency of the keywords in each of the four thematic categories, facilitated by the information provided in the paper abstract, the researchers gave a comprehensive description of the research areas in which the graduate students of Chinese Christian Universities were interested. In addition, the social network analysis toolkit NetworkX was used to build a keyword co-occurrence network, which allowed us to understand the popular research topics of postgraduates of Chinese Christian universities through keyword centrality metrics. In doing so, the study will offer possible solutions to strengthening the Christian research both on universal issues and with Chinese characteristics, and will provide implications for future integration of theoretical and practical research.

4. Research Hotspots Focused and Analysis of Typical Cases

4.1. Hot Research Topics of Postgraduates in Theology

(1) Studies of Christian theology have gained high-level details and depth

In the theoretical studies of universal Christian topics, graduate students have mainly paid attention to the interpretation of biblical scriptures, biblical theology, biblical history, biblical literature, Bible versions, and approaches to Bible reading, laying a foundation for the universal masses to understand and learn the classic theological thoughts of Christianity. Precedent biblical studies conducted in China are mainly based on various translations due to language barriers. Some monographic works on biblical literature, interpretations of individual scriptures, and biblical history have also been produced. Specifically, studies centering on the Bible, including the comparative analyses of academic classics, also constitute important contents in this line of research. For example, biblical research achievements published in 2014 covered scripture interpretations (the Epistle to the Romans, the Book of Judges, and the Genesis), biblical literature, and approaches to Bible reading. The statistical results of the coded keywords reveal that the scale of keywords relating to universal theoretical studies is 232, mainly including (the frequency of appearance of a

keyword is indicated in brackets) “ethics” (8), “Paul” (6), “Old Testament” (6), “Romans” (5), “Christians” (4), “Corinthians” (4), “the Gospel of Luke” (4), “theology” (4), “feminism” (4), “grace” (4), “Martin Luther” (4), “fellowship” (3), “Jesus” (3), “Martin Luther” (3), “worship” (2), “care” (2), “Bible” (2), “theological ethics” (2), “preach” (2), “Matthew” (2). Most of the graduate students investigate the theological thoughts of such themes as ethical implications of view of prayer, view of disciples, view of weal and woe as well as biblical view of rest, Christianity and ecological ethics as well as Jesus’ teaching of social care based on “the Gospel of Mark”, “Luke”, and “Gospel Of John” in the New Testament, and expound specifically the theological thoughts of famous figures in Christian history, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg’s thought in theology and human science, view of hope in Jurgen Moltmann’s theological thought, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s grace theory, John Stord’s evangelical theology, Hans Küng’s universal theological thought, McGrath’s theological methodology, and Calvin’s finite redemption theory.

In terms of typical research paradigms, Zheng Liqin discussed, in his master’s thesis, Jesus’ teachings on social care in the context of rapid socioeconomic development based on paragraphs 18 and 19 in Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke (Zheng 2007). By analyzing the theological thoughts of social care in the Gospel of Luke, the author reflected on the role that Christian churches have played in the progress of current social development and discussed how Christians pass God’s care to men by actively transcending “themselves”, calling for the vast number of people to actively engage in and care for the society and actively assume social responsibilities. Obviously, China’s Christian universities constitute an important part of the world’s missionary universities. Studies focusing on the universal theories of Christianity are helpful for obtaining a broad understanding and support from the Christian community in the world, improving the research capacity of Chinese missionary universities, and providing a primal driving force of the development of Christianity in China.

(2) Religious reforms and teaching improvements from a multidisciplinary perspective

Practical research dealing with universal topics of Christianity mainly addresses significant reforms in the history of Christianity, clerics’ actions to practice Christian principles, and practically theological traditions implemented by churches in their operations, such as the communion and fellowship. Graduate students of China’s Christian universities usually draw from multiple disciplines ranging from sociology, historiography, and politics to trace the origin of historic practices of Christian churches and provide basic references for the development of Christianity in China. As can be seen from the statistics of coded keywords, the scale of keywords relating to universal practical research is 54, mainly involving keywords such as “fellowship” (3), “Israel” (3), “ethics” (2), “Christians” (2), “marriage” (2), “holy communion” (2), “reformation” (2), “ministry” (2). These keywords reflect not only major reform practices in the history of Christianity, such as the Reformation, but also the basic requirement of the clerics to improve educational administration relating to fellowship and ministry based on the history of Christianity.

In the history of Christianity, Martin Luther found the “righteousness of God” and the necessity to retain and advocate the teaching of the “justification by faith” from a large number of biblical interpretation practices. These findings represented a breakthrough compared with the “justification” theology that was popular by the end of the Middle Ages, helped established a theoretical foundation for the Reformation movement (Zhang 2014), facilitated the secularization of the western world, and redefined the functions and responsibilities of the Christian clerics. A clear understanding of the economic, political, and social causes behind many reform events in Christianity can help the religion to be well adapted to the development course of China’s socioeconomic factors and offer spiritual and psychological support for the vast number of Christians. In that regard, some graduate students adopted a historical-comparative approach to explore how Martin Luther applied the teaching of “scripture alone” across the Reformation on the basis of a diversified concept of history. Against the background of a corrupted and degenerated Catholicism, the principle of “scripture alone” played a role in clarifying the basics and restoring faith

(Deng 2018). In the meantime, instead of simply opposing the tradition or advocating the notion of “Bible alone”, Martin Luther attempted to “return to the source”, emphasize the authoritativeness of the Bible, reform the educational work in churches, and break the privileged position of the Roman Catholic Church by promoting the notion of “scripture alone”. (Yang 2018)

- (3) Focusing on the commensurability between traditional Chinese culture and Christian theology to fulfill cultural, national, and social identification

Theoretical studies on Chinese Christianity mainly address the interpretation of theological thoughts of important figures in the history of Chinese Christianity and how these thoughts are integrated with the traditional Chinese culture. Christianity is a religion that is widely accepted in developed regions, such as Europe and the U.S.; traditional Christian scriptures are written in languages such as Greek, Latin, English, and German. All these factors add to the difficulty in interpreting and understanding Christian theology in China. According to Philip G. Altbach’s “center-margin” theory for higher education (Xue and Yu 2009), China’s Christian universities are also at a marginal position in Christianity, and learning and drawing on Christian theological thoughts of the west represents a basic strategy for Chinese churches to establish their theological system. Under the guidance of the Bible, graduate students have endeavored to adapt the theological teachings, rituals, organizational structures, and missionaries to the specific situations of China in terms of the state itself and the universal masses, thereby achieving a broad identification among the masses and within the society and ultimately promoting the prosperity of Christianity. This situation provoked dialogues centering on the relationship between God and man versus the integration between heaven and man, including benevolence versus the love of God. The statistics of coded keywords show that the scale of keywords relating to theoretical research of Chinese Christianity is 60, which mainly involves “ethics” (5), “theological thoughts” (3), “Chinese churches” (3), “Ding Guangxun” (3), “Zhao Zichen” (3), “love” (2), “human” (2), “Wu Yaozong” (2), “Wang Weifan” (2), “the theory of God” (2), “Xie Fuya” (2). As presented by the statistics of this part, keywords pertaining to prominent Chinese theologians, such as Ding Guangxun and Zhao Zichen, including those reflecting Christian theological thoughts and traditional Chinese culture, such as “Christian–Confucian dialogue” and “Zhouyi theology”, have appeared in relevant theses. Such an interaction of different thoughts facilitates the exploration of how holiness and God–man relationship are understood in different cultural situations and different language expressions on the classic theological dimension. Such an understanding and interaction also provide a possible path toward discussing the Sinification of Christian thoughts.

However, instead of adhering to their preconditions, early missionaries to China actively adjusted Christian theology to make Catholic ideas adapted to traditional Chinese culture. Matteo Ricci, a missionary to China during the Ming Dynasty, adopted a strategy of “integrating, complementing, and surpassing Confucianism”. In his work *Catechism, the Four Books* (The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, Confucian Analects, and The Works of Mencius) and wordings in the *Book of History*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Lao Zi, and Zhuang Zhi were widely quoted, and Confucian concepts and terms were used to interpret Catholic thoughts (Zhu 2020). Such a tradition had since been carried forward by later Jesuits.

Actually, the process of the earliest generation of Christian missionaries contacting with China was also a cultural exploration process. When most missionaries first focused their attention on “term question” in the field of religion, they also encountered “term question” in the field of secular cultural exchanges between China and the West. In this process, the missionaries “views on Chinese and Bible translation practice actively adapted to the Christian theological thoughts in order to adapt the Christian thoughts to China’s cultural tradition. The trend also provoked several Chinese theologians to actively promote the adaptation of Christian theological thoughts to traditional Chinese culture, which gave rise to highly influential strains of Christian theological thoughts in China that are of great value for researching the current development of Christianity. For example, some

graduate students examined the view of God of Ding Guangxun, a patriotic religious leader (Peng 2007). The result revealed that the notion that “God is love” held by Bishop Ding Guangxun had been greatly influenced by “benevolence”, a traditional Confucian thought, and his family education. In the meantime, Ding Guangxun also incorporated the notion of “God’s love” derived from Teilhard de Chardin’s process theology into his theological thought; with an intense awareness of contextualization, he emphasized the greatest attribute of God (love) to expand the space for the development of Christian theology in China.

- (4) Focusing on the “localization” process and forms of practices of Chinese churches on the basis of empirical methodologies

Practical research of Chinese Christianity mainly comprises thematic studies of the “Sinification” of Christianity, the majority of which adopt questionnaire-based surveys and field study approaches to explore the development of churches in China. The forms of theological practices are open-ended and may require different social realistic dialogues under different social backgrounds. As can be known from the statistics of coded keywords, the scale of keywords relating to theoretical studies of Chinese Christianity is 77, which mainly involve “Chinese churches” (6), “ethics” (4), “worship” (2), “church management” (2), “Sinification” (2), “contextual theology” (2), “public welfare” (2). As can be seen from the statistics of keywords, graduate students have explored internal management models of churches by focusing on the folk belief characteristic of Christianity and regional differences in China’s rural areas and by emphasizing the forms of practices where churches provide ethic care for Christians and the masses while participating in social welfare activities in China and the religious implications of these practices.

Whether from a perspective of history or the current reality of Christianity in China, the practices of developing Christianity in China have been, indeed, a “Sinification” process. Scholarly analysis of data of China Family Panel Studies indicates that the population of Christians in China was approximately 39.97 million in 2016 (Lu et al. 2019). In the face of such a massive Christian group, more effective management models that are highly relevant to the reality of Chinese society should be provided for churches. In their analysis of data collected from interviews with prominent figures in 16 city- and district-level churches in 10 cities of Liaoning Province and from more than 1000 questionnaires, graduate students analyzed the conditions of and problems with choirs and “praise and worship” in churches. First, their studies presented an array of problems relating to church choirs, such as a low percentage of male participants, a lack of music literacy, and chaotic internal management (Ge 2007a), arguing that these problems are fundamentally caused by a divergent understanding of theological connotations. Second, their research revealed a certain degradation trend in terms of the use of The Chinese New Hymnal among churches, arguing that the phenomenon is closely related to factors such as current social development, negative attitude held by churches toward its use, the popularity of “hymns”, and inadequate importance attached by pastoral staff toward music ministry (Ge 2007b). As such, their studies highlighted the basic conditions of how sacred music is practiced in Christian churches, providing evidence for improving the “praise and worship” practices.

4.2. The Relationship Among Hot Research Topics

In order to give a clear illustration of the relationship between the hot research topics of Chinese Christian university students, the keyword co-occurrence network was constructed (Figure 2). To present a clear network, Figure 2 only includes the keywords that appear more than twice. The bigger the node and word are, the larger the weight is. The line between two keywords represents that they have appeared together. The thicker the line is, the more co-occurrence they have. The node “Paul” has thicker lines with “Romans”, “Corinthians”. So young scholars concerned are not only about the traditional Paul and his theology, but also on the cultural, political, and social world in which Paul and the early Christians lived. These studies aim at helping readers today for a more informed understanding of the life situation of the early Christians and the theology arising from it.

Figure 2. Keywords co-occurrence network.

The centrality of nodes (betweenness centrality and closeness centrality) measure the position of keywords in the network. Betweenness centrality is the extent to which one keyword lies on paths between the other keywords in a network. It can measure importance the keyword as the bridge nodes in information fusion. The closeness centrality of a keyword is its adjacency to another keyword based on their distance. A keyword has a higher closeness score when the sum of its distances to all the other keywords in a network is lower. This means that the keyword with the highest closeness value has the shortest connection distances to all the other keywords in the network (Joo et al. 2021). It can be seen from Figure 2 that “ethics” (betweenness centrality score: 0.22; closeness centrality score: 0.24) is located at the center of the network and connect other keywords. This shows that Christian ethics research has three characteristics: the research based on translation and introduction (the links between “ethics” and “Christians” as well as “Bible”); the Chinization of research topics and academic horizons (the links between “ethics” and “Zhao Zichen”, “Wu Yaozong”, “Ding Guangxun”, etc.); the vitality of applied research (the links between “ethics” and “public welfare”, “love”, “Social care”, “ministry”, etc.).

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

- (1) Universal theoretical research is the center of attention in studies conducted by graduate students, but further research efforts should be directed toward issues related to Chinese Christianity.

On the basis of a two-dimensional theoretical analysis framework, this study adopts approaches of keyword coding and typical case analysis to classify and analyze the areas and contents of research conducted by graduate students in China’s Christian universities. Although China’s Christian University is at the “marginal” of Christian University, the research content is not focus on “remote”. The universal theoretical research is the important part of the postgraduates. But the research of Chinese Christian issues still needs to be strengthened. The results are as follows:

First, in studies of universal topics, particular emphasis is no longer placed on translations or introductions of relevant theories; instead, the religion itself and its development history have been increasingly investigated to forge a relatively independent discipline. Graduate students of China’s Christian universities prevalently focus their studies on Christian theories; starting with the essence of Christianity as a religion and particular carrier of historical culture, these studies have explored the teachings, prominent figures,

historical literature, and classic research of Christianity. The achievements of this line of research have already become important constituent parts for disciplines such as Christian historiography and Christian politics. In terms of temporal distribution, the number of master's theses in theology has presented a fluctuating upward trend. After graduation, these top-notch theological talents mainly work in important cleric positions at Christian churches and institutions across the nation, making them an important force driving the Sinification of Christianity. However, despite an increasing body of research on the characterization of Christianity in China, the overall number of this line of studies is still lower than that of universal topics.

Second, studies of Chinese characterization of Christianity mainly deal with how element in Christian culture adapted to social progress has facilitated its integration into the Chinese society and culture instead of assimilating or transforming Christian culture with Chinese culture. For example, although keywords in theoretical studies of universal topics invariably reflect that these studies deal with universal theological theories, researchers often specially discuss their significance for the development of Chinese theological thoughts. Researchers' attention to church practices, such as "religious reform", "fellowship", and "ministry", in practical studies of universal topics can do more to provide referenceable examples for the reform and development of Christianity in China. Although keywords reflecting the integration between Christian theological thoughts and the Chinese culture, such as "Christian–Confucian dialogue" and "Zhouyi theology", have appeared in theoretical studies of Chinese Christianity, an explanation in terms of localized theories remains lacking. To a great extent, this limitation is attributable to the nature of the religion and relevant disciplines of social sciences as "imported goods". A large body of research is limited to the scope of particular segments of the Chinese society and the religion without an awareness to consider the Chinese society and the religion as relatively independent entities (Fan and Chen 2020). That is, some backwardness still exists in the studies of Chinese Christianity at the theological level. Due to the incomplete integration between church practices and the Chinese culture, a theological thought system that reflects the Chinese style and characteristics or distinct characteristics of the current times has not been constructed (Chen 2020). Accordingly, keywords reflecting the realistic practices of the religion, such as "Sinification", "church management", "rural church", and "shepherding", have merged in the practical research of Chinese Christianity. Moreover, the number of this line of studies is slightly higher than that of theoretical studies, pointing to a certain laggardness of research on theological theories.

Third, graduate students of China's Christian universities have focused on a broad range of religious topics. Specifically, these studies have addressed the impact of Christianity on China, the development of Christianity in China, and Chinese Christianity; specifically, after a reclassification, studies focusing on the above three themes account for 8.70%, 32.61%, and 58.70%, respectively. Studies centering on "localized" theological thoughts in Christianity and their practical models take a dominant part, which helps provide theoretical and practical support for the current development of Christianity in China and thus facilitate the religion to be well adapted to the sociocultural background of the country.

- (2) The combination of the universality of question awareness and realistic values with "Sinification".

Future research should be premised on the combination of the universality of question awareness and realistic values with "Sinification". Universal studies of Christianity, and those of its "Sinification" are mutually complementary. An organic combination of these two categories of research can provide further scientific research for the development of Christianity in China.

First, empirical methodologies can be adopted to validate questions regarding the development of Christianity in China, starting with universal Christian theological theories. Due to historical reasons, the Evangelical and Fundamentalist schools in Chinese Christian churches have commanded substantial influences, and their understanding of "justification

by faith”, a Protestant theological notion, tends to be oversimplified and partialized, leading to the tension between believers and non-believers, pride in beliefs, judgment based on beliefs, and exculpation of sins in the name of faith (Zhang 2013). In this regard, on the basis of a thorough interpretation of the Bible, universal theological and doctrines should also be consulted to provide guidance for the healthy development of Christianity in China.

Second, universal experience distilled from practices of Christian theology can be drawn upon to examine the practical issues regarding Chinese Christianity on the basis of realistic values. The Reformation movement based on the doctrine of “justification by faith”, which took place in the 16th century, pointed out the direction for the development of Christianity. Using history as a mirror, researchers may seek, promote, and popularize effective experience from the reform of universal Christian theology.

Third, typical practices of Christianity Sinification can be distilled into theological theories with universal meanings. Given that particularities originating from local regions also carry with them the characteristics of universality, they can be further refined into universal theories by using scientific research paradigms. To some extent, the *coincidentia oppositorum* between universality and particularity dictates the tension of the development of Christianity in China. Ethic doctrines, such as “benevolence”, and modern notions, such as “community with a shared future for mankind”, in traditional Chinese culture, including social practices arising therefrom, share a high-level commensurability with Christian theological thoughts, providing a great potential to elevate them into universal theories.

Last, characteristic practices implemented by Chinese Christianity can be promoted into the realm of practices of universal Christian theology. With continuous advancement in constructing theological thoughts, theological practices in Chinese Christianity are in great conformity with fundamental Christian statues, such as the Bible, which have effectively advanced the progress of theological practices amid the “Sinification” of Christianity. In that regard, the theological practices and internal management cases of Chinese Christianity can be integrated to propose exemplar cases for practices. While ensuring foreign communications are conducted in a correct and reasonable way, active steps should also be taken to introduce the experience of Chinese Christianity at events organized by international Christian organizations.

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