Negotiating Tensions between Christian Faith and Chinese National Identity: Theological representatives of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Independent House Church Movement

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Chinese Christians negotiate the tensions between their Christian faith and the construction of a Chinese national identity by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Communist China, with particular reference to two major Christian streams: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the Independent House Church Movement (IHCM). When Christianity encountered the modern nation-state, the clash between these two entities demanded that Christians negotiate the tensions between their Christian identity and a national identity. These tensions are not only political but also cultural.

The thesis examines the theology of culture of Epaphras Wu, a representative of the IHCM, focusing on his tendency to emphasize a total separation from the world, as a response to the totalising vision of CCP ideology. The second major figure studied is Ding Guangxun, chosen as a representative theologian of the TSPM. The thesis explores his accommodation to the Chinese cultural context and theological stance of working together with the CCP. Through constructing a theological dialogue between the IHCM and the TSPM, this thesis reveals the theological understandings at the root of the different attitudes of the two different wings of the church towards the construction of Chinese national identity. The thesis shows how Epaphras Wu believes fighting against the world and being loyal to the Lord are the key principles of a theology of culture, while Ding believes that emphasising love and humanity should be the major concern of theological construction. This thesis studies Ding Guangxun and Epaphras Wu’s understandings of Christ, and explores the images of Christ revealed through their theologies of culture. The thesis demonstrates how the TSPM accepted the Chinese national identity imposed by the Chinese Communist Party whereas the IHCM forged a different way of being Chinese. The plurality of Chinese Christian identities in China reveals the complexity and multidimensional characteristics of the tensions between Christianity and Chinese culture.