

The Significance of Empirical Study from the Perspective of the Construction of Sino-Feminist Theology

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Like theology in other languages, the content of Sino-Christian theology should not only include traditional dimensions such as systematic theology, biblical theology, ecclesiastical theology, spiritual theology and so on, but also cultural theology, political theology, public theology, etc., and feminist theology should be in the list. It has only been ten years since the concept of Sino-Christian theology in the Chinese academia was first proposed. In this initial period, the main endeavor of Sino-Christian theology is invested in translating theological works from the West; and the fruitful outcome can easily be observed. Following this necessary initial stage, it is possible for Sino-Christian theology to develop in other fields. This is also a precondition for us to begin with Sino-feminist theology.

The absence of Sino-feminist theology in 20th century was directly related to the low degree of feminine self-consciousness in the Chinese society. The fact that women have been oppressed for a long time with their status lower than that of men is the fundamental reason for the rise of feminist movement. However, women's self-recognition of their own situation is closely related to the economic, political and cultural situation of the society. Modern feminist movement began with the rise of western woman movements in 19th century, which struggled for their property right, the right to vote and the right to be educated. However, in China, there have only been a few educated women who continually call for the "liberating of the female" since the beginning of the 20th century, and there have only been a few people in and out of the church being concerned with this phenomenon. Most women in China have not yet realized that if they are to change their own situation, they first have to change the social structure and the structure of consciousness which form their living situation. Moreover, the negative influence of the traditional culture upon women

causes the majority of them being lacking in self-consciousness of their own identity.

However, women make up the majority of the religious communities in the contemporary China, and this is especially true for Christianity, although most of them belong to the live lowest social class, and have no deep and clear self-consciousness due to the absence of required conditions at present. But it is expected that there will be healthy development of the religious life in China and religious studies as well. Theologians should take the living situation of Chinese women into consideration, especially female Christians, and need to understand their religious experience and their values in life. All these are prerequisites for the construction of Sino-feminist theology.

So far as we all know, feminist theology is initiated and developed by female Christians in western countries. Therefore it reflects the life and religious experience of western women and takes it as its basis. On the one hand, feminist theology has a certain degree of universality, i.e. women all over the world share a common feature: compared to men, even today, the majority of women have a lower social status. Therefore, the substance of feminist theology, constituted by criticism, exploration and reinterpretation, could also apply to women, especially female Christians in various nations and cultural contexts. On the other hand, because of their different living backgrounds and cultures, their life experiences also have their respective unique features in different places. Because of this, the construction of Sino-feminist theology is meaningful in each place or context. In other words, the substance of Sino-feminist theology should be the feminist criticism, exploration and interpretation of the people speaking the Chinese language. For the situation of Mainland China, invoking the words of a feminist theologian Valerie Saiving,¹ one task of Chinese feminist theologians is to awaken Chinese theologians and to make them aware of the fact that though the situation of Chinese women today seems to be similar to that of men...they are in fact totally different. Therefore, the starting point to consider and practice Sino-feminist theology is as follows: do theological thinking which is based on the social status and life experience of Chinese women; disclose the relationship between their faith to God and their life experience; discuss how God's revelation is expressed through them and how does it enable them to explore in a brand new way the reality that women are being rejected by the society, the church and in theology. For this reason, we may say that Sino-feminist theology should also be a contextual theology— a theology rooted in the situation of Chinese

women, firstly female Christians. It should conform to their experience and reflect their reality. In other words, to understand the social and religious status and experience of female Chinese Christians is a necessary basis and condition for the construction of Sino-feminist theology.

The issues of Sino-feminist theology may not be radically different from that of the West. But since the life experience of Chinese women, their conception and concern of God, Jesus, the Bible and so on may be quite different, some elements of the Chinese tradition may be added in. For example, the shape of western feminist theology inclines to emphasize on the woman herself. But in the situation of China, I am inclined to think that if Sino-feminist theology is constructed, there may be an element of sharing with the man. The basis of this sharing also comes from the tradition of Chinese women. Needless to say, this important element requires further discussion.

It is impossible to discuss in detail how to construct a Sinofeminist theology in a brief article. But we must point out that Sino-feminist theology would only engage in idle theorizing if we do not understand the living status, religious experience and life of Chinese women, especially female Chinese Christians. If Sino-Christian theology is a theology which takes the living situation and cultural resource in the Chinese language seriously, and if its main purpose is to serve the Chinese people, then Sino-Christian theology must have close connection with the Chinese society and believers. This connection requires Sino-Christian theology to go out of the ivory tower and walk into real life, and it also requires Sino-Christian theologians to investigate not only theory, but also the reality.

Alongside with the secularization of European countries, theological study in the European region is being transformed. Many theology departments and colleges have been changed into departments and colleges of theology and religious studies. Some scholars even declare that the prospect of theological study in 21st century lies in its combination with the social sciences.ⁱⁱ However, in Mainland China, the situation is quite contrary to that of Europe. The development of religion, especially Christianity, is still going uphill. The study of Sino-Christian theology is not only far behind but in lack of deep understanding of this upward trend. Its reflection and exploration of the real living situation of Chinese people fall short of requirement. As I have mentioned before, Sino-Christian theology should go out of the ivory tower to fulfill its own purpose, just like the construction of Sino-feminist theology should be closely related to reality. As a discipline,

the vitality of theology lies in its capability of explaining the meaning of life, which is subject to change with the development of society. If we are to understand this change, we should turn our eyes to the real life. Theology without tradition is groundless; theology without paying attention to the social changes will lose its audience, which will eventually lose its relevance and vitality.

The current empirical study of religion in the Chinese academia mostly still lacks serious planning, but the development should not be neglected, as the pooling of resources together could help to make great accomplishment. Moreover, as a fundamental methodology of sociology of religion, the results of empirical study are not only a part of this disciplines, but can and should supply other academic disciplines, including theological study, with valuable resources: But in the present stage the results of empirical study of sociology of religion are not yet adequately valued by religious study, let alone by theology. In conclusion, Sino-Christian theology should not neglect empirical study. We may even say that the development of Sino-Christian theology should take empirical study as one of its basic constituents. The need of the combination is increasingly apparent, but perhaps we have just begun to have this awareness. From this point of view, we can say that the ten-year development of Sino-Christian theology is just an uneasy beginning. We have a long and tough way to go, and would therefore require Chinese theologians' greater endeavor.

ⁱ See Valerie Salving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View", in D. W. Ferm eds., *Contemporary American Theologies* (Sichuan: Chengdu People Press), 114.

ⁱⁱ Christopher Lamb & Dan Cohn-Sherbok eds., *The Future of Religion: Postmodern Perspectives* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1999), pp. 174-184.