

Nanlai Cao

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

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Wenzhou has always been known for its idiosyncratic characteristics. As Nanlai Cao recalls in his book, geographical sort of isolation, specific dialect and past experience of commercialism has made of the place something special. Again, this is the case today when the so-called Wenzhou economic model flourish and the extended net-work of Wenzhou people in the country and internationally brings dividends. The author shows that the blooming Christianity there appears as another triumphant specificity. The title of the book may be catching, but a little mysterious: Jerusalem, a biblical symbol not easy to capture in the present world. The research does not conclude that Wenzhou Christians ambition to make of the city a focus of all attention for a convergence of practice and doctrine. Christianity there is really denominational. But that is not the main point of the research, which is better described by the heading of Ch.1 “Introduction: Putting Christianity and Capitalism in their place”, a theme developped by Nanlai Cao in his good book, full of vivid examples, lively portraits, and extracts of conversations with members of Christian communities.

The first important fact appears to be the shift of influential power in local churches: from the ordinary workers or farmers to the successful entrepreneurs (see Ch.2). Of course it follows disputed issues clearly exposed at the beginning of the reform and openness policy. The leadership of the masses has given way to the admiration of the business men and women. Perhaps some parallel could be drawn of the effective relationship between well established Christian bosses and government officials, and other bosses from different religions or philosophical belongings to the same officials. It is said here and there in China that Buddhist spend big amount of money to construct according to their belief. For other, publicized donations are yet another way to abate jealousy and affirm social status. Success in the line decided by central authorities is useful for the country and accepted as a sign of whatever you want as long as it is beneficial.

Ch.3 on manners, morals and modernity first reminds the reader that Wenzhou is obviously an economic success, following hard work, business acumen, and, declare many Christians, the blessing of God. It is also said, in conclusion, that Christianity is

an integral part of Wenzhou's original culture. Unfortunately no figure or number are given in a systematic way in the book, as is often the case with the method, deliberately "ethnographic" and qualitative, used by the researcher. That gives many insights and a fair description of what is observed. Economic success relies very firmly on international connection among Wenzhou people around the world. A link obviously exists between such a positive reality and the proclamation of the very "western" origins of Christianity. Origin not so much in a biblical sense of course, but in historical perspective to be accepted as such by Wenzhou people, not at all ashamed to say so and to laud western style. It is glorious to go cosmopolitan; that is the best way to remain proud of belonging to Wenzhou.

Life in and organization of Christian churches (ch. 5 and 6) in Wenzhou show signs of a model at the same time quite conservative and on the move. Male and female roles and expectations in public and private life fall into stereotypes which function well as long as business proved that it is rewarding. Females are supposed to be more sentimental, inner oriented, supportive, in brief "house-wife". And the house is their family and the Church. Leadership positions are rarely devolved to them, which does not mean that they don't influence the running of the show, but serious matters are the concern of males, who are more "rational". Faith offers stability which allows and even encourages ventures. Upward mobility follows; sign of distinction appears; social groups work together. All this, again, with stability and ambition. Migrant workers are taken care of, but in the frame of social boundaries. To be brothers and sisters does not end up being equal in social terms. Competition does exist among Christians even in the field of their religious affiliation. But it would be unjust to state that their faith and proselytizing can be reduced to tool for acquiring more power and prestige.

Extended conversations by the authors with influential Christian Bosses, many "Sisters", rank and file participants to Church various more religious or more social activities (the two being seldom completely distinct) expose remaining unsolved issues, but also the vitality of Christianity in and from Wenzhou. To ask how long such a wind will support the wave would go beyond the scope of the book which, reasonably, describe today's situation, indicating here and there some fragilities. The research of Nanlai Cao sustains the argument presented in the first pages of the book, that Christianity in Wenzhou produces "a moral discourse of morality (that) tends to...legitimize a new socio-economic order in the making." (p.12) The book happily is not another narrative of Christian revival in China, but a research by a social-scientist. A research too rare, yet so stimulating to understand the process of new "makings" in Chinese society. It is there affirmed that Christianity, in this case with Wenzhou characteristics, is among the actors of China's social construction.