

Where is China in World Christianity?

DOROTTYA NAGY

(Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and
Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen)

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed an articulated attention given to 'China' as a rising economic power. Parallel to this economic perspective, a renewed attention to the relationship between China and Christianity has also started to become verbalised in speeches of such prominent persons as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope and the general secretary of the World Council of Churches. China is accentuated on the agenda of missionary organizations. Where do fascination and passion for China come from? How does this China-fever influence certain processes within contemporary World Christianity? Where is China in World Christianity today? The present article aims to contest the oversimplifications exercised in the China question and maps the complexity of trajectories involved in the question of the China-World Christianity nexus. Looking at certain examples of global-local dynamics, the article aims to localise 'China' in its relation to World Christianity and vice versa. In doing so, the article focuses on issues such as transnational communities, ecumenical understanding, contextualisation and theological pluralism. The present contribution argues that the 'where' question in this case poses the challenge of moving beyond the geographical and numerical mappings. In order to understand the multiple theological connotations of the 'where' questions, the article proposes a new missiological-ecumenical approach which perceives 'super-diversity' as a guiding principle for the integrity of World Christianity.

The media rhetoric regarding 'China's century' and 'China's rise' of the first decade of the twenty-first century has found its way into both popular and academic theological language. Recent speeches of prominent personalities belonging to Christian organisations or churches support the argument that China is a major topic of consideration within the discourse on contemporary Christianity. In March 2009 the Vatican launched a Mandarin-language version of its official website. Prior to that, in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI had issued the letter 'To the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and

Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China', which stresses once again the importance given to China and especially the official connection to the Vatican of Roman Catholic believers.¹

Similarly, official contacts between the Church of England and the Three Self Patriotic Church in China have been intensified. The

¹ The Pope declared May 24, the Feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians, as an annual 'day of prayer for the Church in China', http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_benxvi_let_20070527_china_en.html, accessed on 30 May 2010.

World Council of Churches, especially during the time of Dr Samuel Kobia² as its general secretary, has started to pay more and more attention to the China issue through seeking contacts on different levels with Christian communities in China, through theological, social and diaconal projects. Next to these a booming business of missionary involvement is mushrooming for the study field of missiology. From the so-called tent-makers to pseudonymous missionaries, the variety of missionary activities within China is too large to be caught in a few sentences. What is so phenomenal about the missionary engagement with the China question is that missionaries arrive in China from all parts of the world, while in their turn missionaries born in China go all over the world.

Parallel to and intermingling with the China fever of Christians (both from Chinese and non-Chinese parties), is a remarkable celebration of what is called Chinese Christianity both in academic and popular theological/missiological writings. It is not only the rise of China and the believed rise of Christianity within China that is being celebrated, but Chinese Christianity itself. One of the most prominent paradigms in this celebration is that referring to the Nestorian roots of Chinese Christianity (Christianity as a good, old religion), thus demonstrating the continuity of Christian presence among the Chinese all through the ages. The paradigm reaches its climax when it argues that Chinese Christianity, or Christianity in China, has become and is becoming more and more Chinese. The paradigm is grandiosely shaped in such a way that it fits the Jenkinsian idea of the next Christendom (Jenkins 2002), and goes even beyond that, predicting the future of worldwide Christianity as one dominated by

or centred around so-called sino-theology³, which would mean that the main discourses and subjects of priority on the agenda of world Christianity will be set by Chinese people and according to Chinese logic.

The above section clearly demonstrates China fever. Looked at from a Christian point of view, this is accompanied by a number of conceptual problems. One can see how easily 'the China question' and 'the Chinese issue' tend to be lumped together and that there is little or no awareness that 'China' and 'Chinese' might mean different things for different people. The Christian China-fever and the celebration of Chinese Christianity consciously or unconsciously propagate demagogic theological views and oversimplifications of the question at stake. It is this tendency to oversimplify against which the present article brings arguments and builds up a possible alternative, a more realistic view, allowing the China-Chinese—World Christianity nexus to be looked at, reflected on and taken as a starting point to build further conceptual frameworks, which could in turn contribute to the improvement of practical, concrete, person-to-person projects.

The major argument of this article is that the China-Chinese—World Christianity⁴ nexus cannot be essentialised; in order to avoid any essentialisation and essentialism, the article introduces the principle of 'super-diversity' as a productive and useful tool to study the

² An example of how Kobia's first attempts to initiate contact have been evaluated by the WCC's Chinese counterpart can be seen at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/photo/189736.htm> (accessed 25 April 2010).

³ The term should not be confused with the homonymous term adopted by a circle of scholars of

Christianity in the PRC during the last two and a half decades (see Lai 2006).

⁴ The concept of 'World Christianity' within this nexus also requires a thorough revisiting, yet such an exercise goes beyond the primary scope of this article. It is beyond the aim of this article to elaborate on the concept of 'World Community' as evoked by the concept of 'World Christianity'. See e.g. Baudot 2001, where mutual learning was one of the accentuated attitudes towards diversity. On the earliest conceptualisations of world community, see Meister 1964.

question at stake. As the actual parameters of the present article require compact formulations, it will remain the task of many 'to be written' articles to elaborate more on certain issues and arguments raised within these pages.

Where is China?

The basic and most crucial conceptual problem for the China-Chinese—World Christianity nexus is the so-called China puzzle. There is an ever-growing scholarship trying to settle the issue and trying to find out which are the exact elements which allow a conceptualisation of these terms. What is China? What is Chinese? How do these two basic questions relate to each other and what are the consequences and configurations resulting from their interrelatedness? How far can one force the contents and limits of these concepts? Is it at all possible for scholars to settle the issue when discourses at grass-roots level surprise one with ever newer spellings of China and Chinese? Is there any final authority which can reveal a final thought on these questions? Parallel to this fundamental issue is the problem of translatability, and the transposability of concepts produced within the Chinese languages to English as the lingua franca of scholarship.

This article argues that, although the China-Chinese question might look like a Sisyphean challenge, it is to scholars engaged in the task more than merely the perpetual motion of moving the same stone and getting nowhere. Explorations of the China-Chinese question do lead scholarship - and therefore also practical engagements with the questions - further. The most important step, which is still too often skipped in reflections on the China-Chinese—World Christianity nexus, is indeed the awareness of the huge complexity present within it.⁵ The interval between China and

Chinese behaves like the interval between 0 and 1; it contains endless elements and components,⁶ yet it is useful and productive. Every time one touches this interval, one must be aware that there are only some components which can be given immediate attention while all the others remain unaddressed.

The present article has chosen to approach the China-Chinese interval with an initial question:

Where is China? The question implies a specific type of localisation. China goes far beyond merely a certain geo-political entity, but it always remains connected to it, whether or not it has been or will be called by that name at certain times in history. The question can be answered on multiple levels, and it is exactly this plurality of possible answers which already initiates the complexity of the subject matter. Beyond the 'made in China' experience which accompanies every segment of daily life, China is present outside the People's Republic of China (PRC) through the most diverse forms of past and present migrations: international students, migrant workers, business (wo)men, high professionals and small traders holding a PRC passport, to name but a few. But China is, even more importantly, present in and through the people of older and newer generations of political refugees and emigrants who are actively engaged in forming an image of China for non-Chinese through the lens of their life experiences. China becomes real or imagined through different sets of experiences, and these experiences predict actual reactions to China. In this way the answers given to the 'Where is China?' question bring with them the questions of 'When is China?' and 'Who is China?' as well.⁷

aims to illustrate the huge size of the question in geographical terms. The statement could be extended to the conceptual maximum of the China-Chinese question.

⁶ The non-Chinese are also part of the interval.

⁷ The author is thankful to William A. Callahan, who through his book, although within a

⁵ It is common among Chinese scholars to start their talks on the subject with sentences such as: 'Everything you say about China is true, and its opposite is true as well.' Often this statement

Chineseness

The question of 'Chineseness' is another complex concept evoked by the interval. Chineseness is experienced, constructed, nurtured and envisioned by different groups, in different places and with different purposes. Once again, the vagueness of the term should not make one think that it is an empty one. Chineseness, or being Chinese, is a major identity marker for many people around the world. How this identity marker is spelled out in lifestyles, world views, individual, communal and corporal practices, in social, political, and economic arenas, remains to be investigated.

The peculiarity of the nation lies in the fact that it does invite essentialism. Chineseness is something which should be detectable and identifiable; Chineseness should be the force which creates unity within diversity. 'Global Chinese themselves seem to feel an obligation to find Chineseness themselves and translate it to their children' (Wickberg 2007: 178). The need to capture Chineseness seems to be strongest within migration processes, where next to the migration experience itself as an identity maker, forceful identity markers are also needed for the maintenance of human integrity, both individual and communal. Following this logic, the main differentiation for constructing Chineseness, connected to life-experiences, would be the presence or lack of migration within the process. Here again, one has to distinguish among several factors, such as internal migration processes within the PRC itself, migrations from Chinese-dominated language settings to other Chinese-dominated language settings, and migration from Chinese-dominated language settings to non-Chinese-dominated language settings. These distinctions to a certain extent suggest the role of languages in finding the essence of being Chinese. Yet, one has to bear in mind that several different Sino-Tibetan languages are involved in these processes. Due to the

different context, stimulated this new way of looking at China (see Callahan 2010).

accelerated migration processes emerging from the PRC⁸, it can be observed that Mandarin has become a dominating tool to negotiate Chineseness on a global scale, yet the Mandarin language is not and probably never will be seen as the essential element of Chineseness.

Chineseness as an adopted identity marker creates power of a different sort; it creates the sense of a powerful community moving on the global stage, a community which exercises power at different levels and to which power others react, either positively or negatively. Through such reactions, the China-Chinese—World Christianity Nexus emerges.

The Nexus

The China-Chinese—World Christianity nexus is a theoretical one, since metaphorically what is called World Christianity includes and is also built up by China (as defined here), and it also contains the challenges which go together with Chineseness. Yet, on the theoretical level it is appropriate to talk about a nexus, since in contemporary theological/missiological discourses there is a tendency to segregate and talk about the relationship between certain continents, states, ethnic groups and nationalities and World Christianity (e.g. Bays 1996: Viii; Buswell and Lee 2007; Koschorke and Schjorring 2006). Such talks still evoke some remnants of Western-centric theologizing/missionising and the conceptual tools inherited from this. Even when it is functional to adopt this rhetoric, one has to be cautious to what extent this nexus becomes more than theoretical. The danger of essentialisation is present also within this context.⁹

⁸ And within missionary involvements, the power position of Taiwanese missionary agencies is also a significant and connected phenomenon.

⁹ One good example of how essentialisation can take place is the recently published book by Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008). An outstanding material for educational purposes, yet through the very structure adopted, the book

One of the most valuable contributions of the concept of 'World Christianity' and related concepts is that its terminology points to the world as the context for theology and/or missiology. This implies that, similar to ethnographic methodological problems, theological/missiological studies (also carried out with ethnographic methods), should consider the question of how the area being studied (theoretically hermetically sealed) relates to the whole, to the rest of what there is.

The present article argues that the theoretically proposed nexus calls attention to the complexity of trajectories, connections, networks and contexts of interrelatedness. Because of the limitations of the present article, in the following the enquiry will be into phenomena, dynamics and issues strictly related to the PRC.¹⁰ Attention given to migration processes within these dynamics is one way to work with the nexus in a proper way. By focusing on migration processes internal to the nexus, it will become clear that within the nexus a huge variety of actors, interests, theologies, missionary ideas and practices are present. Then, through the lens of migration, the article will consider two other perspectives which are crucial in dealing with the nexus. The first one is the set comprised of culture, ethnicity, nationality, nationalism and patriotism, the second one is the issue of post-denominationalism.

Migration

As elaborated earlier, both international and internal migrations play a significant role in

chooses to localise World Christianity according to the geographical territorial divisions of continents. This reinforces the danger of developing continental narrowness, whereas World Christianity studies within the contemporary framework of globalisation is precisely about ties, networks and trajectories which go beyond any territorial essentialism.

¹⁰ This is done with the awareness that the PRC is just one, though a significant, component of the China-Chinese interval.

shaping the nexus. While more and more attention is being given to the phenomenon of international PRC migrants, theologically speaking little attention has been given to the PRC's internal migrants and their role in shaping different forms of Christianity within the PRC. According to some estimates the number of internal/domestic migrants in China rivals the total number of international migrants worldwide. China's population is increasingly mobile¹¹, and this migration lifestyle significantly influences the formation of Christian communities, conversion processes and narratives as well as the development of theologisation/missionization. At the basis of migration is the search for a better life, the aspiration for that which could not yet be reached. Therefore, these aspirations and desires are fundamental in constructing theologies under the conditions of migration. Theologies are connected to lifestyle goals, which emerge from unique and individual life (hi)stories, from specific historical and material conditions and are always connected to global social transformations and changing circumstances (Castles 2008). Internal and international migrations are connected. Countless migrants have both internal and international migration experiences. This is the case for students, labourers, professionals and others.

Increasing attention is being given to the international migrations positioning the PRC within World Christianity. This is also because of the countless missionary organisations situated outside the PRC which aim to Christianise China. The process has been spectacularly intensified in the last decades. International migration then implies a two-way

¹¹ Between 1995 and 2005 the proportion of the population on the move in China doubled, and according to some estimates it increases by five million every year (see Fan 2008, especially pp. 162-79). Within this process the category of peasant migrant plays an important role. The importance of peasant migrants forming theological discourses should not be underestimated either.

movement: from the PRC elsewhere and from elsewhere into the PRC. Within these dynamics, PRC students studying abroad are one of the major vectors for transmitting and transporting Christianity not only to the PRC but around the world.

The idea that Chinese overseas students can be used in the larger missionization plan of China has been in existence for a long time.¹² There is a peculiar parallel between the arguments used in missionisation rhetoric in the early decades of the twentieth century and that of the contemporary era. Arguments about the collapse of so-called traditional Chinese culture (whatever that may be), modernisation, and the exceptionalism of Christianity as a highly developed religion were then and still are popular (Hall 2006), and these go hand in hand with the conviction that Chinese international students - China's future intellectuals - are the best candidates to solve the spiritual crisis. Missionary involvement among Chinese international students worldwide is very diverse and is rooted in several different theologies. The argument about China's spiritual vacuum (see Spence 1991; Yang 1998), etc., can be only partially sustained, and the usage of the argument to demonstrate the growth of Christianity in China should be applied with even more caution. The Christianity which travels through the channel of the international student is a very diverse one, sometimes even unrecognisable by some Christians as being Christian at all. Every process of conversion is individual and unique, yet it is 'produced by many stages of transmission, in the context of particular societies and their tradition' (Morrison 1992: 5), and beyond that within

diverse contexts of subgroups, and forms of Christian tradition and spirituality.

Diversification is natural and unavoidable but it does not fit into the paradigm of 'Chinese Christianity'. Yet, that paradigm is still artificially sustained and nurtured both by Chinese and non-Chinese. It seems that the burned-out part of World Christianity needs Chinese Christianity in all her size, power and triumph in order to imagine the dominance of Christianity on the planet called Earth. In this sense there is indeed a new Christendom under construction – a Christianity which celebrates numbers, achievements, and aspires to a certain power.

Migration within the nexus helps one grasp the complexities of the paradigm of 'Chinese Christianity' within the whole of World Christianity. An essentialised China and Chinese are needed in order to show triumph and victory on the global stage.

A surplus set: culture, ethnicity, nationality, patriotism, nationalism

Naming these terms in a row is playing with (academic) fire. It is obvious that these concepts can never be handled at once in just a few sentences. Yet bearing in mind the awareness-raising ambition of the present article, these concepts are placed next to each other in order to capture the major pillars of the obsession with Chineseness and to avoid essentialism. 'In the habitual obsession with "Chineseness", what we often encounter is a kind of cultural essentialism – in this case, syncretism – that draws an imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world' (Chow 1998).

The events of 1949 have been often interpreted in recent history as the moment when the world, and the Christian world (whatever that might be) in particular, 'lost' China. A continuously developing discourse on the loss of China intensified during the Cold War period and inquired within economic, political, cultural and theological studies as to who was responsible for the loss of China (to

¹² One of the earliest examples of realising this idea is the programme initiated in 1911 by John R. Mott and called Committee of Friendly Relations among Foreign Students, which aimed to introduce Christians and influence society through their Christian identity (see Wheeler et al. 1925).

the Communists) and how China could ever become an equal member of 'our' common humanity and, more specifically, a player on the stage of World Christianity. With overlaps, since the late seventies, China's opening up and the massive societal and economic transformation within the PRC, with consequences for the rest of the world, have fueled a sense of 'China re-found'.¹³

Since the late seventies the concept of 'greater China' (*dazhonghua*) has also been introduced in popular discourses (newspapers, magazines) as well as in economic discourse (Harding 1993). As is often the case, the meaning of the concept is not clear; one has to pay attention to the actual networks to which the concept might refer. Parallel to the economic ties and networks, missionary networks were also activated and created in order to spread the Gospel among 'Chinese' people. In this re-discovery of China, 'even those who have devoted lifetimes to the study of that country are not immune to fantasizing or peddling their fantasies to the public at large, and there are always Chinese witnesses who, for reasons of their own, are anxious to authenticate such fantasies.' The celebration of China in these terms is also connected to the fact that intellectuals in diaspora are rewarded and praised for their work on minority cultures and they are important in disrupting the nature of knowledge production in the 'West' about the 'East', in this case China.

This article speaks of a 'surplus set', since these concepts in theologising and missionising practices are constantly interwoven and it is impossible to draw their boundaries. Where does patriotism end and nationalism start? How do nationality and ethnicity differ? The academic literature on the surplus set is abundant in providing all kinds of theories and arguments.

At this stage, this article confines itself to some examples, some vignettes, and

statements which might illustrate the argument of complexity.

The rhetoric on China's minorities, ethnic groups and the importance of their Christianisation is shared by many groups. The China Christian Council (CCC) acknowledges the need for ethnic/minority church leaders who minister among their own people, and therefore is engaged in specific training programmes for them. The CCC has published the Bible and Hymnal in the languages of seven minority groups. The following example fittingly illustrates the type of rhetoric to be found here:

China is a unified, multi-ethnic country, with fifty-six nationalities. The Han people account for ninety-two percent of the total population of the country, leaving eight percent for the other fifty-five ethnic nationalities. The principle that guides relationships among ethnic nationalities is equality, unity and common prosperity. The law prohibits discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic nationality in China (Wu 2000).

Taking another example from a different context is the organisation called Asia Harvest. The Asia Harvest operates with a missionary vision which accentuates the importance of reaching ethnic groups, minority groups, tribes, in short smaller groups within Asia's nation states.¹⁴ Hattaway's article (2009) "The

¹⁴ The organisation describes itself as being 'an inter-denominational Christian ministry working in China and other nations of Asia, helping with strategic and life-changing projects, and seeing God perform exciting and extraordinary things. We work alongside Asian church leaders, including house church leaders in China, helping and equipping them to focus on reaching the lost. Our main focus is China, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Bhutan and northern India. Within these seven countries are approximately 1,000 unreached tribes and ethnic groups', see <http://www.asiaharvest.org/index.php>, accessed on 29 April 2010. One of the peculiarities of the program, however, is that it also propagates the printing of Bibles in the Mandarin language. This observation needs further investigation.

¹³ The association with the story of the Prodigal Son should not be taken too far.

Father's Heart Reaching Tribes in Remote Asia" provides a good example of how this missionary theology is being verbalised. Here once again, diversity is created and maintained primarily through ethnic boundaries defined in hermetic and static identity components (culture, language, history, history of earlier missionisation, etc.). This missionary strategy uses Matthew 24:14 as one of its core texts where in this reading Christ's return only happens when all the nations and tribes have heard the Gospel.¹⁵

A third example can be taken from the scene of the international migratory setting in the USA. A recent study demonstrates that establishing groups for PRC students at university and college campuses has additional side-effects, one of which is that they attract young people labelled as 'Chinese American'. The study concludes by stating that 'the desire for ethnic seekership leads many Chinese American young people to join Chinese Christian student groups on campus. The young people are not interested in Christian religion, per se, but because they want to make friends with people of similar ethnicity, many find the Chinese aspect of such groups appealing' (Hall 2006: 145).

The surplus also appears outside theological/missiological writings. David Aikman's (2003) book is a perfect illustration of how simplification goes on to create theological/missiological dangers. Aikman maintains that China is in the process of becoming Christianised and suggests the idea that within a predictable period of time the Christian worldview will dominate China's political and cultural establishment. Christianisation and China's becoming a global power go hand in hand. Aikman goes so far as to suggest that there will be a time when the

Chinese state will use power in the same responsible way as the United States (governed according to Christian principles) (Aikman 2003).

China's moment of its greatest achievement - and of the most benefit to the rest of the world - may lie just ahead. That moment may occur when the Chinese dragon is tamed by the power of the Christian Lamb. The process may have already started in the hopes and works of China's house church leaders (Aikman 2003: 292).

The above examples demonstrate the interwoven nature of the surplus set. The observation developed through looking at the surplus set shows that cultural, ethnic and national essentialisation lies at the heart of the phenomenon. Essentialism and essentialist generalisations concerning the China-Chinese (world) Christianity nexus result in theoretical perspectives, political and theological/missiological agendas that efface the real problems and challenges of this nexus.

It is within these essentialisations that the paradigm of Chinese Christianity is cherished. The danger of the paradigm is that it makes the ethnic, cultural, and national essentials the major definer of Christian identity. In this sense the patriotic propaganda within the PRC and the nationalist rhetoric including but going beyond the PRC build up the same kind of Christianity: an essentialised one, which easily leads to what can be called nationalistic Christianity or Christian nationalism. The patriotic propaganda (Kung 2002) so concerned with building a real and single Chinese church and the different missionary movements underlining the rise of Chinese Christianity and its prophetic vocation for the contemporary global situation all share traces of this sort of nationalistic Christianity.¹⁶

¹⁵ Paul explains that the New Testament's word is intended for nations. Ethne refers to ethnic groups and not political countries: 'God's plan is for every ethnic and linguistic representation of mankind to be present in heaven' (Hattaway 2009: 6).

¹⁶ One of the best examples of nationalism defining a missionary agenda is the development of the Back to Jerusalem movement. Similar types of nationalistic Christianities can be seen in the African context and in other Asian contexts

The paradigm of Chinese Christianity draws a sharp boundary between Chinese and non-Chinese Christianity. The construction of such a boundary helps adherents of both sides to construct and nourish certain types of identities, self-awareness and subjectivities of different groups and subgroups of the 'authorised' categories. In these discourses, the notion of 'difference' gains much attention, in the concrete case 'the Chinese as the other, the different one'. The otherness, the Chineseness is seen as a pre-given, real and unquestionable category or identity marker, which consequently only produces and reproduces the Other as such.

It remains a question for further study to thoroughly examine how Chinese Christian nationalisms created in different times and by different groups relate to each other. The surplus set makes theologians/ missiologists aware of the dangers of essentialism in regard to nationalism. This is an obvious lesson of the nexus, but it is a lesson to be learned for other contexts as well.

Post-denominationalism

The question of post-denominationalism is the third and last question the present article highlights while focusing on the China-Chinese—World Christianity nexus. Similarly to the previous section, here too one encounters essentialisation. Post-denominationalism is an essentialist notion present within theological/ missiological discourses, and even more within the field of ecumenicism. Parallel to essentialist definitions of culture, ethnicity and nation, the post-denominational label detracts many groups and members of the Christian community. The present article argues that denominationalism as a phenomenon exists in China and that there are countless PRC citizens living outside China who do belong to confessional churches.¹⁷ Therefore, this article argues, the

as well (Korea being another significant example of this).

¹⁷ The limitations of the present article do not allow detailed discussion on the concepts of

so called post-denominational church as related to China matters is a myth, artificially constructed and sustained by both theologians and church leaders within China, by Chinese theologians outside China and by non-Chinese theologians and church leaders as well.

One of the earliest and clearest formulations of the vision of the so-called post-denominational church in China was offered by Dr. C. Y. Cheng, a delegate from China at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference. 'Since the Chinese Christians long for more and look for yet greater things ...we hope to see in the near future a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions' (cited in Gairdner 1910: 184-5). Gu Mengfei, from the Chinese Christian Council, begins his essay (one of six winning essays written for the sixtieth anniversary of the WCC) by quoting Cheng and repeatedly stating that 'Chinese Christians enjoy united worship, and the churches have entered the post-denominational era' (Gu 2008: 271). Cheng continues, 'This [the lack of denominational distinctions] may seem somewhat peculiar to some of you, but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always a mysterious people to you', and '[s]peaking generally, denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but some times he suffers for it!' (*ibid.*: 285). Wing Kwong Lo, from the Lutheran Theological University in Hong Kong, prefers to speak about non-denominationalism as propagated by politics and so-called official church politics, rather than about post-denominationalism. He argues that because of the political situation, a

denomination, denominational, and denominationalism, yet it is important to bear in mind that a theological re-evaluation of the concepts would be useful to highlight the different connotations of these terms. The primary argument along these lines questions the 'denomination equals division' thesis and proposes viewing these concepts (which have become confusing and loaded) as identity markers instead.

whole generation of Christians grew up who did not have the experience of denominationalism in the sense in which denominations were present in China before 1949 (see Lo 2001).

The refusal to use the concept of denomination as an identity marker might be partially explained by the argument that, as with many other terms in religious and theological vocabulary, the concept of denomination is viewed and labelled by Chinese people as a Western concept. Similarly to the concept of religion, denomination is believed to be unrecognisable for Chinese people and therefore not functional within the Chinese context.¹⁸ Yet the question remains whether the phenomenon itself labelled as denominationalism is really so strange to the 'Chinese mind'. The accentuation in recent times of Pentecostal dominance in China might be one of the major arguments with which the post-denominational myth could be questioned.¹⁹

Yet, the myth is there and the myth is flourishing and it has much to do with the dynamics briefly described in the previous section on the surplus set. During his visit to China in 2006, Samuel Kobia, by that time general secretary of the WCC, stated among other things that, '[t]hough the Chinese

culture is renowned for its ancient history, now when we think about Chinese Christians, we think about the future, because more and more Christians are realizing that if we are to live the prayer of Jesus Christ that all should be one, then we need to be post-denominational in character' (WCC 2006).²⁰ But post-denominationalism is not the state of affairs in China. The above arguments and illustrations result in the conclusion that the aspiration towards the so-called one Chinese Church, as an identity marker, functions similarly or identically to the outworking of the concept of 'denomination'.

Super-diversity

Avoiding essentialism means avoiding both the artificial and imaginary construction of the Other and the imposition of Sameness in order to achieve harmony. Essentialist approaches to the China-Chinese – world Christianity nexus pose a particular danger for perceiving Christianity as a World Religion. A useful method for resisting oversimplification is the cultivation of a critical stance that continuously revisits the localities of the China-Chinese – world Christianity nexus, and those of Christianity and other identity markers more generally. This article is a call to speak up against any essentialism which makes one believe in a static picture of World Christianity, and, within that picture, in the static category and predictable nature of what is labelled Chinese Christianity. Revisiting history, observing and perceiving contemporary phenomena are useful tools in avoiding essentialism.

The present study proposes the adoption and conceptualisation of the term 'super-diversity' within theological/missiological discourses. The term was coined by migration scholar Steven Vertovec in the field of social sciences, and within that in the area of

¹⁸ The difficulty of such arguments lie not so much in the question of translatability but rather in the willingness to recognise and identify similar human phenomena, patterns of thinking, acting and feeling beyond the categories of Chineseness. (In the same way there is a set of Chinese concepts about which untranslatability is proclaimed; e.g. *guanxi*).

¹⁹ See Luke Wesley, *The Church in China: Persecuted, Pentecostal, and Powerful* (Baguio: AJPS Books, 2004). In the foreword of the book, Walter J. Hollenweger, former Professor of Mission at the University of Birmingham, writes that he became convinced that 'Chinese Pentecostalism is perhaps the most numerous and probably also the most important Pentecostalism of the world' [*italics his*], (Wesley 2004: X). The author himself does acknowledge both the complexity of the China question and that of Christianity within it.

²⁰ Statements such as 'As a post-denominational church, you are in a class of your own, and we want to learn more from you' were also formulated (WCC 2006).

migration studies; nevertheless the present study argues that the term may be adopted and productively used within the theological/missiological discourse and in ecumenics as well. Vertovec's elaboration of the term begins with a temporal parameter:

In the last decade the proliferation and mutually conditioning effects of additional variables shows that it is not enough to see diversity only in terms of ethnicity, as is regularly the case both in social science and the wider public sphere. Such additional variables include differential immigration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents. Rarely are these factors described side by side. The interplay of these factors is what is meant here, in summary fashion, by the notion of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007).

Super-diversity used in this sense continuously accentuates that diversity is more than the awareness of ethnic differences. Vertovec's super-diversity calls attention to the significant new variables which appear within the intense dynamics of contemporary globalisation.²¹ The super-diversity principle also appears in the multiple modernities paradigm (Eisenstadt et al. 2002).

Within the theology-missiology-ecumenics context, Vertovec's term recalls the pedigree of the unity in diversity principle, which is still a treasured and leading principle within interactions and policy-making aiming towards living, confessing and serving together.²² The

concept of diversity linked to Christian unity within the ecumenical debate is heavily loaded. This is especially the case with Christian discourses on the China-Chinese – World Christianity nexus, where the concept of diversity and the principle of unity in diversity has been linked to Confucian vocabulary, and respectively to the building of a harmonious society. Using diversity in this context makes one aware that it is desirable to talk about China's Christianity rather than about Chinese Christianity or the Chinese Church, yet it does not convincingly liberate the discourse from the dominance of a certain group or groups of Christians who set the tone and shape the framework of the discourse. 'We allow different theologies and liturgies, but do not permit to rehabilitate the denominational organizations. Our purpose is to establish a full Chinese church' (Chen 2005). From such statements the usage and purpose of the diversity concept can be interpreted as being a tool toward constructing the one and single Chinese church, within which many sorts of diversities might be celebrated except the diversity of what is Chinese.

The concept of super-diversity questions the legitimacy of aiming for the construction of any ethnicised/nationalised or possibly nationalist church. Because the image of such ethnicised/ nationalised church is in formation (this formation being done by Chinese and non-Chinese adherents) in the case of what is called China and/or Chinese, theologians/ missiologists are challenged to react to it.

The principle of super-diversity in this sense changes the steps of the logic. Whereas the concepts and principles of diversity or unity in diversity envision the unity of different theologies and liturgies based on a shared Chineseness, super-diversity goes beyond this and articulates the questionability of artificially constructed national, pan-racial, or pan-continental identities. Super-diversity does not necessarily connect to the idea of unity. Theologically and missiologically it does acknowledge the one invisible yet existent

²¹ For a thorough elaboration of the author's perception and conceptualisation of globalisation, see Nagy 2009: 17-74, where the author works with context-symbolism in order to underline that behind all globalisation dynamics the acknowledgement of active human agents is undeniable.

²² Super-diversity also recalls the pedigree of multicultural theologies.

Church, yet it does not pretend to become the tool to achieve actual visible organisational, church diplomatic and structural unity among Christians.

Super-diversity is a new concept which teaches one to look at World Christianity with new eyes, with a look which takes complexity into account and therefore does not come up with ready-made answers and easy solutions for complicated problems. Super-diversity calls attention to the fact that diversity is far more than ethnic or denominational diversity. Within the framework of globalisation and ecumenical approaches, super-diversity compels theologians/missiologists to reflect on the multiple layers of the specific contexts through which diversification can best be comprehended. It is through this approach that the experience of plural theologies will grow, and it is through this experience that diversity will be freed from the captivity of ethnicity, nationality, nationalism, race, denominations or denomination-like labels. In this way the China and China-related questions of this article also partially act as a case study which may after examination provide adaptable lessons for similarly-behaving paradigms (e.g. Korean Christianity, Filipino Christianity, or on a larger level African Christianity).

One can see that the paradigm of 'Chinese Christianity' is built on the one-sidedness of an imagined/adopted/constructed ethnicised/national category. But different manifestations of Christianity can also be perceived and looked at as cultures, in the way elaborated by Ulf Hannerz. Hannerz talks about three dimensions of culture: ideas and modes of thought, their forms of externalisation (public communication), and their social distribution (Hannerz 1992: 6).²³ The difficulty and the challenge lie exactly in the language of World

Christianity, which necessarily makes one take the world (the whole world, as one indivisible unit) as the theological and theologising context. The super-diversity paradigm adopted and applied for theological/missiological discourses in ecumenic studies makes one aware that 'the gaze which explicitly aims to describe, rather than unravel, the inherent complexity²⁴ of its object will never rest contented with a single-factor account, but will always be on the lookout for additional forces and new angles' (Eriksen 2007). This practice and way of observing fuel theology/missiology to operate carefully on the edge of the inclusion/exclusion game.

'Theological judgment has to be exercised in order to give meaning and structure to the cultural materials that figure in Christian social practice: those materials are vague and circulate in many versions, with many different potential or actualized associations with other cultural materials and particular patterns of social action' (Tanner 1997: 160). The principle of super-diversity is a salutary reminder that Christians cannot control the movements of the God they hope to serve. It helps them to remain open to the Word by keeping them from taking their own point of view for granted. Super-diversity, then, as a guiding principle, helps one to comprehend diversity as the product of the effort to be a Christian in different cultural, social, ethnic, and other contexts. Super-diversity is an awareness that the development, maintenance and formation of Christian identity creates multiple theological/missiological contexts, which relate to the larger context encompassed in World Christianity. In this sense super-diversity is always bound up with creation and creativity.

²³ Also see Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections* (London: Routledge, 1996), where he argues that homogenising processes associated with industrial-society nationalism are being counteracted by heterogenising globalisation processes.

²⁴ From a theological point of view, N. H. Gregersen elaborates on the concept by distinguishing seven types of complexity (descriptive, constitutional, organisational, causal, functional – these are ontological categories -, algorithmic, effective – these being computational categories) (Gregersen 2004).

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About the Author

Dr. Dorottya Nagy is a theologian and post-doctoral research fellow at the MPI. She is the author of *Migration and Theology: The Case of Chinese Christian Communities in Hungary and Romania in the Globalisation-Context* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009).