

## Book Review

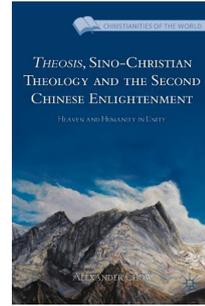
Alexander Chow.

*Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity.*

Series: Christianities of the World.

New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Reviewed by, Edwin E.M. Tay. Trinity Theological College, Singapore.



This book is a revised version of Chow's 2012 doctoral dissertation undertaken at the University of Birmingham. It traces the development of contextual theology in China over the period of the two Chinese enlightenments that spans the early years of the twentieth century and the twenty-first. Throughout the book, Chow argues the thesis that "*theosis* is not merely a core element of Eastern Orthodoxy, but is also an underlying theme within another 'Eastern' Christianity – Chinese Christianity" (157).

Chow's project is driven by two main goals: (1) map and evaluate various types of Chinese theology; (2) explore "the Eastern Orthodox salvific view of *theosis* and its related subjects as a possibility in complementing or supplementing future developments in Chinese Christianity" (14).

Seeking to accomplish his first aim, Chow draws upon the typological recommendations of the missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, both of whom employed a revised form of tripartite typology first introduced by the church historian Justo González. This typology is expressed in terms of types A, B, and C, with Tertullian, Origen, and Irenaeus as the respective archetypes.

Type A represents law-oriented theologies that conceive of humanity's sin, salvation and eschatology in legal categories. Type B represents truth-based theologies that conceive

of human culture positively in terms of its revelatory potential. Type C theologies place emphasis on the outworking of history where God's purposes for the world is centred in the incarnation and headed towards the eschatological union of God and humanity. This third type is where Chow sees the greatest potential for enriching Chinese contextual theology with resources drawn from the wells of Eastern Orthodoxy.

In chapter one, Chow sets his study against the historical backdrop of the May Fourth movement (*wusi yundong*) in the early 1900s and the revival of interests in religions and traditional Chinese teachings since the 1980s. His discussion of these two Chinese enlightenments reveals the crucial point that the development of Chinese contextual theology must engage with the issues highlighted by China's religiophilosophical traditions and her sociopolitical quests for nation-building.

Having laid the historical stage, Chow goes on to examine the theologies of three twentieth-century Chinese Protestant theologians in chapters two to four: Watchman Nee (Nee Tuosheng), T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen), and K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun). Offering sensitive accounts of their theologies, Chow shows how the González and Bevan/Schroeder typologies, while useful, are nevertheless inadequate for the Chinese context. Watchman Nee, for instance, teaches penal substitution and is clearly a type A theologian. However, his efforts at gathering

signatures for the Christian Manifesto and calling on supporters to work with government relief efforts meant that type B concerns are also significant (41-63).

Such is also the case with T. C. Chao and K. H. Ting. While Chao moved from type B to a type C theologian due to the stresses of war and imprisonment (65-87), Ting's theology of the Cosmic Christ makes him a type C theologian who unfortunately fails to properly address his context of the Second Chinese Enlightenment (89-111). In view of the above methodological inadequacies, Chow offers a modified tripartite typology that involves adjustments to key aspects of the typology.

Chow's second aim is explored in chapters 5 and 6. These final two chapters demonstrate the resonance of Sino-Christian theology with Eastern Orthodoxy. Chow shows that the Orthodox doctrines of sin, synergism, and union with God point the way towards solutions to problems in traditional Chinese concepts, problems which have been readily noted by Chinese theologians. It is in pursuit of this second aim that Chow takes his readers on a stimulating tour of possibilities for Sino-Christian theology. These possibilities are not far-fetched since Chow has already shown that inherent in traditional Chinese thought are concepts that share close affinities with Orthodox teachings.

For instance, the failure to distinguish between transcendence and immanence in the traditional Chinese concept of *Tian ren he yi* has been rightly noted by Liu Xiaofeng. T.C. Chao expresses this problem in terms of the loss of one's individuality. The Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* affirms a corresponding union (*he yi*) between God and humanity but avoids the above problem since *theosis* involves human participation in the divine energies and not the

divine essence, thereby maintaining the proper distinction between God and creation. Chow demonstrates similar solutions supplied by the Orthodox doctrines of ancestral sin (130-7) and the synergy of God's energies and human will (137-43).

Although Chow's work would have been more robust if the contributions of Chinese Catholic theologians were also examined, it has nevertheless broken new grounds in the analysis of Chinese contextual theology. His proposal, if taken seriously, will not only lend theological weight to the development and maturation of Sino-Christian theology, but also contribute significantly towards ecumenical engagements and interreligious dialogue.