The Regional Development of Protestant Christianity in China: 1918, 1949 and 2004

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Abstract

The rapid growth of Protestant Christianity in Reform China has attracted many scholars interest in interpreting the so-called “Christianity Fever” from different perspectives. This article aims at quantitatively reconstructing the growth of Protestant Christianity in twentieth and early twenty-first century China, focusing particularly on the numbers of Chinese Christians in different provinces. These regional figures are based on the surveys and statistics of 1918, 1949 and 2004 respectively. 1918 marked a centenary review of the Western missionary movement in China since Robert Morrison’s arrival in 1807. 1949 opened a new chapter as the church struggled for survival under Communism. 2004 marked another period of Protestant Christianity after a quarter of century of Post-Mao Reform. The overall pattern and salient characteristics of Protestantism in different provinces in the above three epochs are illustrated. Interesting topics to be
explored are also pointed out throughout the article. Regional studies instead of the grand narrative should be the key of exploring the development of Protestant Christianity in China.

Introduction

It has been over a quarter of a century since China allowed the Church to reopen in 1979. Ever since the “Reform and Opening,” the unprecedented growth of Protestantism in China has become an issue of much debate in both academic and church circles. It is beneficial for us to explain the so-called “Christianity Fever” with an eye on examining the reasons why Christianity blossomed after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Scholars studying post-Mao Chinese society try their best to interpret the “Christianity Fever” from different perspectives. However when we approach the “Christianity Fever” from a regional perspective, we find that the uneven geographical distribution of Chinese Christians is a field not yet well researched.

The diversity of “China” has become a point which is a relevance that cannot be ignored by scholars of China studies. Historians have affirmed the importance of regional studies. One prominent example is the project “Modernization in China, 1860–1916: A Regional Study” conducted by the Institute of Modern History of the Academia Sinica. This huge project aims at exploring the processes, successes and failures of modernization in coastal and hinterland China in 1860–1916. After years of labouring, case studies on Hubei, Shandong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Taiwan, Hunan, Jiangsu, Anhui, and Guangxi have been completed and published. Although regional conflicts between the Chinese people and the Christian converts, as well as the contributions of missionaries to education, have been noted in the aforementioned research project, the focus is still on the different levels of modernization; although Christianity is important, it is still regarded as one of the background forces of western challenges.

Amid the areas of studies of Christian history of modern China, regional studies are still a field uncultivated. Many case studies concerning Christianity in specific regions have been conducted, but the focus has been on individual missionary societies, denominations, missionary enterprises and persons. Therefore, strictly speaking, these case studies do not belong in the domain of regional studies. In my opinion, regional studies can lead to a breakthrough from the confine-