

Book Review of:

Chan Shun-hing – Jonathan W. Johnson, *Citizens of Two Kingdoms. Civil Society and Christian Religion in Greater China*, Religion in Chinese Societies Vol. 17, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2021, xi, 316 pp. Introduction, Diagrams, Tables, Index. ISBN 978-90-04-45933-5 (HB) · ISSN 1877-6264

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This publication is interesting to read and can be recommended. The volume, edited by Chan Shun-hing and Jonathan W. Johnson, brings articles on the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and Hong Kong and Macao, which date back to a conference in December 2016, organised by the Centre for Sino-Christian Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, and which have been updated again for publication in 2021.

The question that the various authors explore is the relationship of religion – in particular the Protestant and Catholic Churches and Christian organisations – to the State, government and Party, and what part the Christian religion plays in the development and extent of civil society in the geographical, ethnic and cultural region of “Greater China,” which includes the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macao and the Republic of China on Taiwan.

The major space is taken up by the discussion of the situation in the People's Republic of China, framed by an introductory and concluding article, followed by three articles on Hong Kong and one article each on the situation in Taiwan and Macao.

None of the authors is based in the People's Republic of China. Similarly, unfortunately no mainland Chinese Catholic social services at diocesan level, such as the Catholic Social Service Centre in Xi'an, are listed, as is so often the case in corresponding publications (see also the book review on Levy – Pissler, *Charity with Chinese Characteristics. Chinese Charitable Foundations between the Party-State and Society*, in: *China heute* 2021, No. 3, pp. 184-187). Benevolently, the reviewer supposes that these omissions are deliberate acts of restraint and political prudence on the part of the authors and are not due to ignorance or perceived marginal importance of the institutions.

Nevertheless, the reading remains intriguing, as the authors raise a number of questions that open up the reader's view when considering the two “kingdoms” – whereby this dichotomy can be used in a latently ambiguous way and can initially refer to the rela-

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tionship between religion/Church and State/Party, but also to the relationship of (secular) civil society to the Christian Churches, as well as specifically, with regard to the Catholic Church, to the tense relationship between the Chinese state leader and the Pope as head of the Catholic Church.

Thus in addition to the obligatory definition of “civil” and civil society, Chan and Johnson already formulate essential challenges in the introduction: On the one hand, the observation that with civil society a concept that originated in the West was transferred to a non-Western context, and on the other hand, that of the double identity consisting of Christian religious affiliation and the associated “heavenly” bond as well as the “earthly” life as a citizen and subject in the People’s Republic of China.

Throughout the discussions, the question is posed as to what role Christianity, in its various forms, has played and continues to play in the societies of the different “Chinas”: that of the mainland, that of Hong Kong and Macao, and that of Taiwan.

The diversity of the different “Christianities” in the cultural, political and social areas of Greater China is stressed time and again. The authors discuss which manifestations of civil society correspond with the different Christian variants – for example, in Madsen, the liberal, the republican (i.e. based on common core values of a society and linked by common goals) and the corporate, the latter with potential for totalitarianism. Madsen sees the liberal and republican form of civil society represented in Hong Kong and Taiwan, while he assigns the corporate form to the Mainland social mosaic.

Above all, the most topical question is also raised again and again: How do civil society and Christianity interact with the agenda of the current state leader Xi Jinping?

Christianity in China has many variations. Madsen highlights the differences between Christians in northern China and Christians – Protestant and Catholic – in southern China, especially in the southern Chinese city of Wenzhou. There he sees economic prosperity united with the Christian faith. This local economic potential – manifested in terms such as the “Jerusalem of China” for Wenzhou or the “Boss Christianity” – cared little for State directives in the past, so that a more liberal civil society with Chinese characteristics was able to emerge here.

Madsen also points out that being a Christian is still shaped by a transcendent reality, a reality that poses a potential threat to any “earthly system,” social as well as political. Therefore, no secular power can fully count on the loyalty of Christian believers. The history of Christianity has shown time and again that any kind of martyrdom is understood as a testimony of faith, especially in times of reprisals and attempts to eradicate Christian faith.

Some of the research (such as Hao Zhidong) focuses on showing in the individual Chinese regions of “Greater China”

- what degree of organisational, communication and cooperation structures the Christian Churches have,
- in which political and legal framework they can act,
- which values they live and are able to live and
- what influence they have on civil social activities, or
- what impact they have in terms of social services.

In the view of all the authors, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao show only marginal differences in the ranking of civil society activity in terms of political framework conditions and organisational structures. On the other hand, the scope for action of the Christian Churches and other civil society organisations in Mainland China has been decreasing since 2012 at the latest, and even more so as a result of new regulations in 2016/2017.

However, in the meantime, even in the administrative zones of Hong Kong and Macao, Beijing's recent influence has increasingly restricted the freedoms of civil society and religious activities, especially those of the Christian Churches. This is particularly true of Hong Kong and its active democratic movements and those linked to the Christian Churches, which, in disregard of all existing treaty arrangements, are now much more closely monitored by Beijing's security forces than they were a few years ago.

In terms of civil society activism and the resulting impact, Hong Kong and Taiwan appear to be the strongest, followed by Mainland China (examples cited are Wenzhou and Shanghai – where the at that time consecrated Bishop Ma Daqin publicly announced his resignation from the Patriotic Association), while the Church in Macao is probably the least active, here actually only through initiatives by individual Christians.

With regard to values such as human dignity, social justice, equality, human rights, gender freedom, tolerance, poverty reduction, democratic ideas (with the exception of the appointment of church leaders) – as can be seen from the volume under review – the Churches in the four regions studied are in no way inferior to each other. There are hardly any differences to be found here. The Chinese Christian Churches uphold these values, even if they differ in their effectiveness due to the very different political framework conditions, especially between the People's Republic of China on the one hand and Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan on the other.

This is especially true when we look at social services and educational institutions. Here Hong Kong (the largest organisation is Caritas), Taiwan (Christian universities) and Macao are much better placed than Mainland China, especially if one compares the number of church institutions on the Mainland today with the time before 1949. The Churches' limited room for manoeuvre, controlled and partly suppressed by the Party and the State, has a very negative effect on the services.

In general, all the authors mention only very few Christian organisations by name, such as Caritas Hong Kong, the Amity Foundation with a Protestant background in Nanjing or the Catholic aid organisation Jinde Charities in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province. The growing number of diocesan Catholic social welfare offices in Mainland China is unfortunately not mentioned at all. A weakness that pervades all the accounts.

Moreover, the individual analyses of Mainland China are limited to the urban part; reference is made almost exclusively to Wenzhou and Shanghai. Some authors explicitly point to this low data coverage and thus view the conclusions with some reservation.

In addition, the rural situation and the activities located there go completely unmentioned, which does not do justice to the Catholic situation in particular, since the majority of Catholic Christians are located in the countryside.

It would certainly also have been interesting to take a closer look at the contribution of Western organisations in terms of finance and personnel in building civil society, as well

as the Christian organisations in China mentioned above. Perhaps some of the inherent intentions of Western support could have contributed to a better understanding of the role and significant orientation of the Chinese institutions that were built up.

Perhaps the most significant question for the foreseeable future of Mainland China in particular, which is discussed again and again in the volume, is the relationship of Christians, Churches and civil society in general to control, restrictions and repression in the People's Republic of China, which have increasingly arisen since the beginning of the authoritarian government of President Xi Jinping. Christians are being more and more characterised as a threat to politics and increasingly faced with the choice of being a good citizen (or subject?) of the State/Party or living their faith as a good Christian. For the authoress Teresa Wright, for example, is the choice clear: the Christian will choose the faith. In doing so, she leaves open (or only latently hints at) what the reaction of the faithful would be should there be further restrictions on the practice of faith or even persecution in the future and thus the already fragile balancing act between good Christians on the one hand and obedient citizens on the other finally be overstretched.

All the authors agree that there are many shades between these two behavioural options, which can show a high degree of variation locally and regionally, since the social, cultural and ethnic spaces in which they are lived are often very different and the respective space of action, which is determined by local representatives of Party and State and their attitude to religion and civil society, can be very different in China.

For better understanding, the reviewer notes here that the Party and the State have never abandoned their fundamental attitude towards religion: the primacy of the Party and the State over religions, religious groups and their activities has always been maintained. Rooted in the tradition of the Chinese Empire, a continuity in policy and practice can be identified for Mainland China on the post-cultural revolutionary timeline, ranging from Document 19 in 1982 to the new legislations for religious, social and civil society groups and their activities in 2016–2018. While from the 1990s until around 2008 the situation in the People's Republic of China was characterised by a certain liberalism, the scope of the “third sector” was then gradually restricted, only to be fundamentally curtailed, controlled and repressed from 2011/2012 onwards with the emerging power of Xi Jinping's government. This currently peaks in particular in the suppression of religious education for future generations, i.e. children, adolescents and young adults, and in the Sinicization of religions that is required and increasingly implemented, and which especially and in particular aims at Christianity, which is still tainted with foreign infiltration.

Apart from the special situation on Taiwan resp. the Republic of China, it is true for all “Chinas,” i.e. for the Mainland, Hong Kong and Macao, that the government of the People's Republic of China has taken control of civil society and religion in recent years and is increasingly shaping the actions of the citizens/subordinates according to its own ideas. In all the articles in this volume, we see time and again the mental balancing act to which the individual Chinese inhabitants are subjected in order to shape their lives in such a way that they are both good citizens and good Christians, alongside the legal regulations, the religious rules, the prohibitions and commandments. How long this state of affairs can

be sustained must remain open, as must the question of what political and social consequences the future will bring should the scales tilt in one direction or the other.

In conclusion, a few formal comments: The volume was published by the Brill Publishing House, based in Leiden, Netherlands, as No. 17 in the series “Religion in Chinese Societies,” edited by Kenneth Dean (National University of Singapore), Richard Madsen (University of California, San Diego) and David Palmer (University of Hong Kong). The volume is available both as hard back and as an e-book.

The structure of the volume is clearly arranged. The table of contents, which assigns the articles to the regions of Greater China in five parts, is supplemented by graphs/tables and a list of abbreviations.

At the beginning, the authors are introduced with their respective research bases and main focus of work.

For the interested reader there is a very helpful list of corresponding reference literature at the end of each article.

The index is supplemented by a small number of Chinese technical terms in Chinese characters. A separate and more comprehensive index of Chinese terms would perhaps also have been desirable.

As already emphasised at the beginning, the publication deserves the full attention of those interested in learning more about Christianity, the Church and civil society and their respective lived relationship to Party and State in today’s political, cultural and social landscape of Greater China with the People’s Republic in Mainland China, the administrative zones of Hong Kong and Macao, and the Republic of China on Taiwan. It is highly recommended reading.