

# Christianity, culture must co-exist in China, scholar insists

April 22, 2014

WACO—As Christianity continues to grow dramatically in China, the nation's culture and the Christian culture must co-exist, educator Jing Cathy Zhang told a Baylor University audience.

“It is true. There is always conflict and tension with the two cultures,” said Zhang, assistant to the director of the School of Liberal Arts at [Renmin University](#) in Beijing, China, in a lecture sponsored by [Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion](#).



Zhang offered suggestions on how the two cultures can interact in healthy ways by examining the history and dissecting the state of Christianity in China.

Although the Christian faith in China dates back nearly 1,000 years, it did not grow rapidly until the 1980s, she said. Christians in China today number at least 60 million, and some sources estimate up to 100 million.

## Dynamic growth

“China has been one of the most dynamic places for the growth of Christianity,” she said.

Even so, many of the nation's 1.3 billion residents view Christianity as alien, she observed.

“For the majority of Chinese, Christianity is still a foreign religion,” she

said.

Chinese Bishop K.H. Ting called for a theological reconstruction in Chinese Christianity. After his death in 2012, much of his theology was forgotten, Zhang said. But she hopes to see a revival of his indigenous Christian theology—sometimes called “Eastern” Christian theology—void of Western missionary influence and sensitive to the Chinese culture.

“He thinks an Eastern religion is rational, scientific and is more pragmatic,” she said, citing Ting’s writings. “He is strongly against the kind of Christian faith that says you only focus on your own interest, your own salvation.”

Ting was attracted to the social gospel that surfaced in China in the 1920s, which called for an active humanitarian participation by Christians, Zhang said.

### **Transforming society**

“He always pushes the young people to devote (themselves) to the transformation of the society,” she said. “You should think of the injustice in the society, and you have to change it and do something.”

Ting promoted this theology over the traditional emphasis on “justification by faith” that proved ineffective for evangelization, Zhang said.

“For Chinese people, if you only focus on the very strict, traditional understanding of the justification by faith, it’s not going to take Christianity anywhere,” she said. “Then, Christianity will be like the other religions—Buddhism or Taoism—because retribution and heaven and hell are very common language for Buddhists and Taoists.”

Many Chinese people refuse to define heaven, viewing it as a vague concept beyond human understanding, Zhang said. Generally, the Chinese

think of spirituality in abstract ways, and even as a Christian, she embraces that mindset.

“When I think of the Christian God, I refuse to take it into a very specific human image,” she said. “For me to think that God cannot be confined to the pronoun ‘he,’ that is very natural. “

Zhang was raised in what she considered a typical Chinese family—with a committed Communist father and Communist-turned-Buddhist mother.

### **Christians showing love**

When Zhang served at a church as an interpreter, her conversion resulted from Christians showing love toward her—not because of any theological debate or discussion.

“My conversion is because beautiful witnesses have been singing around me,” Zhang said. “Very close Christians around me were behaving like Christ”

She especially was encouraged by the love her co-workers showed her, even though she was not a Christian.

“I don’t want anybody to force me. A lot of Chinese will be like that,” she said. “If you press them too much, they will reject it. Street evangelism never works. People will think you are crazy.”

Many Chinese today have a great interest in Christianity, Zhang noted, just as she did before her conversion. They are attracted to Christianity but fear if they embrace it, they will have to abandon the rational thinking so central to their lives and culture.

Zhang recommends integrating the love and compassion of the Christian culture with the rational thinking and sophistication of the Chinese culture.

“There are always good parts in both cultures,” she said. “What we need to do is to decide what to take, and this job must be finished and fulfilled by Chinese scholars.”