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Spiritual Christians in Republican China: Reconceptualization beyond Pentecostalism and Indigenization

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Abstract: Pentecostalism contributes significantly to Christian revivals as well as to the rise of indigenous churches in the non-Western world. This is due to its proximity to local religious traditions, such as the practices of dream interpretation, healing, and exorcism. However, Pentecostalism as a term also reflects an American-dominated narrative; it has proven incapable of covering the main traits of indigenous Christian movements, either in the Global South or in China. For instance, in the 19th century—far before the birth of Pentecostalism as a modern term—both the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851–1864) and the ministry of the legendary Pastor Hsi (Xi Shengmo 席胜魔, 1835–1896) expressed some Pentecostal characteristics. In the early 20th century, some indigenous churches, like the True Jesus Church and the Jesus Family, had clear connections with Pentecostal missionaries or organizations and showed obvious Pentecostal characteristics. However, leading evangelists such as Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声, 1903–1972) agreed with some practices of Pentecostalism and opposed others. Instead of claiming a Pentecostal identity (*Ling'en pai* 灵恩派), most Chinese Christians preferred to be defined as “spiritual” (*Shuling* 属灵). With the Spirit (*Ling* 灵) at the center, Chinese Christians went beyond the narrative of both Pentecostalism and indigenization; their exact aim was to seek the authentic Christianity of the apostolic age. “Spiritual Christian” (*Shuling jidutu* 属灵基督徒) would thus suggest a re-conception of part of the history of Christianity in China.

Keywords: spiritual Christian; Pentecostalism; indigenization; spiritual theology; Watchman Nee



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1. Introduction

Pentecostalism, together with its charismatic development, is called the most dynamic Christian movement in the 20th century. Originating from the United States and with an obvious American character, it is growing into a global phenomenon. Moreover, it has become the most notable characteristic of churches in the Global South due to its synthesis of local religious traditions and its participation in local socio-economic changes. More importantly, Pentecostalism contributes to the gravity shift of world Christianity, both in terms of the Christian population and Christian forms (Jenkins 2002, 2006).

Indigenization is a significant key theme in studying Christianity in the non-Western world. Africa knows diverse forms of African Independent/Initiated/Instituted Churches (AICs) (Hayward 1963; Anderson 2001). Latin America is marked by the popular Christian movement or folk Christianity (Gonzalez and Gonzalez 2008). China has its Three-self Movement and the current Sinification (*zhongguo hua* 中国化) thesis. Several similarities and conflicts exist between indigenous churches and Pentecostalism. While Pentecostalism has contributed to indigenization movements to some extent, the Pentecostal churches tend to denounce their connection with local religious traditions (Meyer 2004).

Compared to the Global South, China has a rather different discourse regarding Pentecostalism and indigenization. Pentecostalism does contribute to the indigenization of Christianity in China, and it also denounces local religions to some extent. However, Chinese religious authorities and the general populace express a totally negative attitude to

the term Pentecostalism. Although it is claimed by some scholars as a majority movement among Chinese Christians (Bays 1996, pp. 307–16; Wesley 2004), even the churches with obvious Pentecostal-charismatic characteristics prefer not to be called as such. The dominant discourse is that Pentecostalism is heretical or an “evil cult” in the eyes of the government and academia, as well as in both official churches and “house churches”.

How do we understand the self-conceptualization of Chinese Christians with both Pentecostal and indigenous characteristics? On the one hand, we may find that Pentecostalism as an American phenomenon cannot be applied well to churches in the non-Western world. On the other hand, we discover that there are some similar trends in the Global South and the Global East (Yang 2018). In Africa, Zionist churches would prefer to call themselves “spirit churches”. In China, Christians would like to be called *shuling* (属灵, spiritual) instead of *ling'en* (灵恩, Pentecostal) (Liu 2018). Here, the “spirit” includes two different dimensions: the first is the Holy Spirit at the center of worship and daily life; the second is the various spirits of local religious traditions.

Therefore, from a perspective of world Christianity and Chinese Christianity in particular, we need a reconceptualization of relevant terms, such as indigenization and Pentecostalism. In this article, the authors review the conceptual relationship of Pentecostalism and indigenization, as well as the historical trends in modern China. Utilizing a Pneuma-centric approach, the authors provide a case analysis of Watchman Nee’s theology and practice. In conclusion, the authors reflect on the relevant terms in the study of Chinese Christianity.

2. Pentecostalism, Spiritual Theology, and Spirit Church

Pentecostalism is said to be the most dynamic Christian movement in the 20th century, together with its charismatic development (Martin 2002). A common story is told of three or four waves, i.e., the classic Pentecostalism starting with the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906, the charismatic movement among mainline churches in the 1960s–1970s, and the neo-charismatic movement since the 1980s featured by new Apostolic churches, church growth ministries, and prosperity gospel. The ecstatic revival in the 1990s, such as the Toronto Blessing, is sometimes called the fourth wave.

However, this is criticized as an American-dominated narrative. A pioneer in Pentecostal studies, Walter J. Hollenweger, prefers to describe Pentecostalism as a multi-centric movement. During the classic Pentecostalism period, there were simultaneous revivals in Africa, India, Korea, etc. Some of these were partially associated with the Azusa revival, while others shared common characteristics, but without definite connections with the Apostolic Faith Mission from Los Angeles. Pointing out the multiple origins of Pentecostalism, Hollenweger highlights the “Black root” — orality of liturgy, dreams and visions in worship, and the corresponding relationship of body and mind (Hollenweger 1997). Allan Anderson names these Pentecostal-style movements outside of the Azusa story a particular type of “older independent and spirit churches” (Anderson 2010; for more details, see Anderson 2004). They not only shared Pentecostal characteristics but also contributed to the indigenization of Christianity in non-Western contexts.

“Signs and wonders” are said to be two labels of Pentecostalism, with “speaking in tongues” as the most obvious characteristic. Harvey Cox goes further to argue that “Pentecostals have touched so many people because they have indeed restored something”, and “they have done it in a very particular way” (Cox 1995). Pentecostalism has enabled people to recover elemental spirituality in three dimensions. The first is “primal speech”, which is described as “speaking in tongues” and “praying in the Spirit” by the followers, and as “ecstatic utterance” or *glossolalia* academically. The second is “primal piety”, which includes the practices of trance, vision, healing, dreams, dance, etc. The third is “primal hope”, which means the millennial outlook that a radically new world age is about to dawn. “Speaking in tongues” does matter as an external characteristic, but the point here is that it is the way to express “being baptized in the Spirit”. There are some indigenous forms such as dreaming and healing, but more importantly, it is highlighted as the key characteristic

of churches during the apostolic period. That is why Cox adds the adjective “primal” in front of the three described terms.

From a theological perspective, Donald W. Dayton proposes a four-fold Christological framework: Christ as Savior; Christ as Baptizer with the Holy Spirit; Christ as Healer; and Christ as Coming King (Dayton 1987). It reflects a strong Wesleyan-Holiness orientation, with conversion, sanctification, and perfection as key terms, as well as the influence of healing ministry and premillennialism. Frank D. Macchia tries to construct a pneumatobaptist-centric (Spirit baptism-centered) theology. In reference to the New Testament, he highlights two points: first, “Spirit baptism is the most distinctive belief about Jesus shared by the New Testament writers”; second, regarding baptism in the Spirit, “the metaphor functions in the New Testament in a way analogous to how it functions among Pentecostals globally” (Macchia 2008). Pentecostalism does help bring back the metaphor of Spirit baptism to the center of Christian eschatology.

Simon Zahl tries to bridge Christian theology and experience. “The experience of God is to be understood and described first and foremost as experience of God the Holy Spirit” (Zahl 2020, p. 52). The experience encompasses the dramatic changes such as conversion, and the longer term of affections and dispositions, i.e., “the fruit of the Spirit”. It also includes some specific instances, for example gifting and healing (Zahl 2020, p. 53). Frederick Dale Bruner argues that “The Pentecostal doctrine of the Spirit (pneumatology) is centered in the crisis experience of the full reception of the Holy Spirit” (Bruner 1970, p. 57). The experience of the Holy Spirit is understood essentially as the baptism in the Spirit and the consequent gifts of the Holy Spirit. Baptism in the Spirit can be explained in three points: (1) the indwelling of the Spirit, which should be permanent, personal, and full; (2) the spiritual power for service; and (3) the gifts of the Spirit. The distinctiveness of Pentecostalism lies in the conviction that “the initial evidence of this baptism is speaking in tongues” (Bruner 1970, p. 76). Wolfgang Vondey says that the rise of Pentecostalism contributed to the renaissance of pneumatology, emphasizing the spiritual dimension. Pentecostalism shows “the significant interest in the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit in the Christian life” (Vondey 2014).

Asian theologian Simon Chan explores this trend further. Different from dominant Pentecostal studies, Chan emphasizes the significant role of theology in Pentecostalism. He put Pentecostal theology in the framework of systematic theology, which he coins as “traditioning”. As he explains,

If Spirit-baptism refers to the coming of the Spirit upon the church to establish a special relationship with the Trinity, and glossolalia is a particular kind of prayer which makes the best sense in the light of that reality, then the biblical explanation of glossolalia will have to take into account a number of teachings, including the nature of revelation (especially theophany), prayer, personal relationship, divine action, etc., and not just the texts where glossolalia and Spirit-baptism are explicitly referred to (Chan 2000).

He goes further to describe a “spiritual theology”: “Spirituality is the lived reality, whereas spiritual theology is the systematic reflection and formalization of that reality” (Chan 1998, p. 16). With reference to theology as a discipline, “The spiritual theology stands between systematic theology and Christian praxis. Without the mediation of spiritual theology, Christian praxis is reduced to mere activism” (Chan 1998, p. 20). Chan proposes three criteria of spiritual theology: the global-contextual, the evangelical, and the charismatic. “The global-contextual scope of spirituality, expressed primarily in terms of the poles of transcendence and history, can best be developed by taking seriously the church’s evangelical resources. The elements of spiritual theology will be enriched by a larger concept of grace if the charismatic component is included” (Chan 1998, p. 39).

Another term related to this study is “Spirit churches”, also formerly described as “Spirit-type churches” by Allan Anderson when he studied African Christianity. This terminology is appropriate to the independent churches without “mission connection”, but which “may be regarded as Pentecostal or Spirit-type churches in the true sense of the

word”, or most dependent/independent Pentecostal churches in Africa. It delicately resolves the distinction between “independent Spirit-type churches”, “independent Pentecostal churches”, and “Pentecostal churches of Western origin”. The term “Spirit churches” is seen as “broad enough to embrace them all” (Anderson 1991, p. 3). It is a self-designated name of independent churches with Pentecostal characteristics, i.e., the Zionist and Apostolic churches. They called themselves “Spirit churches” because of “their emphasis on spiritual gifts like prophetic revelation and healing”; they could not be categorized as “Pentecostal” without further qualification (Anderson 2018, p. 9). This could also be “a genuinely African manifestation of Christian pneumatology” (Anderson 1991, pp. 3–5). Spirits become a bridge between Pentecostalism and African society. “A spirit-filled world pervades African social consciousness and underlies almost all religious expressions” (Anderson 2018, p. 13).

Certainly, a difference needs to be made between the Holy Spirit in Christianity and many other spirits in local religions. Anderson categorizes African Independent Churches into three types: the “Ethiopian” churches in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the “prophetic-healing” and “Spirit” churches, and the independent charismatic churches originating after the 1970s. African Pentecostalism also knows three types: the classical Pentecostal churches originating from missionaries, the “new Pentecostal churches” established by local leaders, and the Zionist and Apostolic churches. There are some convergences between Pentecostalism and Independent Churches, especially in the case of Zionist and Apostolic churches. However, these churches are distinctive in two senses. On the one side, “they do have striking differences from other Pentecostals”, especially in the external rituals such as the use of blessed water and symbolic objects in healing and the wearing of characteristic church apparel. On the other side, “they also differ in their approach to African religions and culture” in liturgy and healing practices (Anderson 2018, p. 46).

Ogbu Kalu criticizes Anderson’s position as “a phenomenological bias that eschews the exclusion of other religious forms”, and states that his method “ignores the typology within the movement and insiders’ self-perceptions” (Kalu 2008, p. 71). When describing the divisions and connections among AICs, Kalu argues that “the same providential outflow of the Spirit operated in the early AICs and later flowed into modern Pentecostal movements, mediated directly through African religious genius”, and at the same time, “there was a religious shift” which indicated that “they were not the same” (Kalu 2008, p. 73). While “spirit” is a key term in the African religious context, the Pentecostal point of contention is that not all spirits are from Christ or the Holy Spirit of God. There are spiritual conflicts in Pentecostals’ concern, which can be categorized into three levels: low-level demonic attacks, occult-level warfare, and territorial spiritual warfare (Kalu 2008, pp. 79–80).

In short, Pentecostalism is a Pneuma-centric movement, while speaking in tongues is an external sign of baptism in the Spirit. The Spirit or spirituality also connects Pentecostalism and local religious traditions in the non-Western world and contributes to the indigenization of Christianity in local contexts.¹ But, Pentecostalism with a traditionally American-dominated narrative cannot cover the characteristics of churches in the non-Western world exactly. Instead of highlighting Pentecostalism as a label, the non-Western churches prefer to emphasize the central role of the Holy Spirit in worship and life. Spiritual theology or spirit church also becomes a common phenomenon in the Global South and the Global East. Especially in China, Pentecostalism has a negative image among most people. This pushes us to rethink the relevant terms in studying Chinese Christianity.

3. Pentecostalism and Indigenization of Christianity in Modern China

Indigenization is a main theme of Christianity in modern China. This had already started in the late 19th century, for instance with the missionary John Livingston Nevius (1829–1893) and the Chinese Christian leader Chen Mengnan (陈梦南, 1840–1882) in Guangdong Province. Throughout the 20th century, it can be divided into three categories: (1) the independence movement in the early 20th century, such as the Chinese Christian Union (Zhongguo jidutu hui 中国基督徒会) and Christian Independent Church (Zhongguo yesu-

jiao zilihui 中国耶稣教自立会); (2) the indigenization movement in the 1920s, featured by the establishment of the National Christian Council (Zhonghua quanguo jidujiao xiejinhui 中华全国基督教协进会) in 1922 and the Church of Christ in China (Zhonghua jidu jiaohui 中华基督教会) in 1927; (3) the Three-self Patriotic Movement since the 1950s (Sumiko 2000; Duan 2004).

From 1851 to 1864, Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全, 1814–1864) established the legendary Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping tianguo 太平天国), with the Christian faith as a dominant ideology. But this vision of Christianity combined a number of Chinese factors, including a family structure of Jesus Christ, visions and dreams in worship, as well as premillennialism. Western missionaries criticized it as heresy. A new trend in academic study is to admit the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom as an authentic Christian movement (Spence 1996; Zhou 2013). As Thomas H. Reilly says, “Taiping religion was something new: fully Christian, albeit with Chinese popular religious elements; fully Chinese, albeit inspired by Anglo-American Protestantism” (Reilly 2004). The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom represented one early effort to seek “Chinese Christianity”.

A similar story centers around Pastor Xi Shengmo (Hsi Sheng-mo 席胜魔, aka Xi Zizhi 席子直, 1836–1896). A Confucian scholar who was attracted by Buddhism and Taoism but later got addicted to smoking opium, he was converted by the British Methodist missionary David Hill (1840–1896) during the famine relief in the late 1870s. Pastor Xi was called a pioneer of indigenous Christianity in China. He won fame through the network of the China Inland Mission, including a personal relationship with the founder James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) and one member of the famous “Cambridge Seven”.² Xi was well known for his work with opium refuges, his experience as a “demon-overcomer”, and his worship with indigenous hymns and practices. One thing missing in his story so far was a particular focus on the Holy Spirit. As described in his biography:

Though so young Christian, only a few days converted, he had already perceived some glimmering of the great truth about the full indwelling of the Holy Ghost. In thought and prayer over the Word of God, he had learned that there is a baptism of the Spirit different from the regeneration of the soul at conversion. Already, in the hour of his helplessness and anguish, he had cast himself upon the power of the Holy Ghost, and had been lifted out of his despair and carried into a new life of victory and rest. But this experience seems only to have convinced him that there were yet further possibilities open to faith. The story of Pentecost had raised his expectations, while it quickened his longings; and for this fuller baptism he prayed (Taylor 2005).

Once he received this experience of the Holy Spirit, it did not lead to speaking in tongues, or a healing ministry. Instead, Xi’s life was characterized by the warfare between God and evil spirits, and he always kept prayer and fasting to enhance his faith. For him, the Holy Spirit was the only, authentic guide. Together with the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Pastor Xi’s story provides proof that some early Chinese Christians had shown Pentecostal characteristics before Pentecostalism came to China.

Pentecostalism came to China as part of the Western missionary movement, and it is closely connected with the Azusa Revival in Los Angeles in 1906. Thomas James McIntosh (1879–1955) and his wife Annie Eleanor Edens (1882–1958) are considered the first Pentecostal missionaries in China. With some support from the Pentecostal Holiness Church of North Carolina, and after a stopover in Los Angeles, they arrived in Macao in 1907. In the same year, Alfred Gallatin Garr (1875–1944) and his wife Lillian Anderson (1875–1916), who had experienced baptism in the Spirit at Azusa Street, arrived in Hong Kong. After a short welcome, they met critics from the missionary groups. In 1908, a local evangelist Mok Lai Chi (Mo Lizhi 莫礼智, 1868–1926) began to publish a Pentecostal periodical, *Wuxunjie zhenlibao* (五旬节真理报, Pentecostal Truth), which had a nationwide influence. In North China, an important figure was Bernt Berntsen (1863–1933). Originally from Norway and with a Lutheran background, he joined a non-denominational mission in China in 1904. After reading the news about the Azusa Street Revival in *The Apostolic Faith*, he trav-

elled to Los Angeles and got baptized in Spirit in 1907. He then returned to China with a group of Scandinavian missionaries from the United States. Berntsen influenced the future founder of True Jesus Church, Wei Enbo (魏恩波 Paul Wei, 1876–1919). The Pentecostal Holiness Church was the first organized Pentecostal denomination in China. Departing from the McIntoshs and Garrs, Anna Maria Deane (1864–1918) had a new start in Hong Kong in 1909. The Assemblies of God built a missionary department in 1919 and established stations across North China, as well as in Gansu, Yunnan, Ningbo, South China, and the Manchurian area (Tiedemann 2020).

For a long time, Pentecostal missionaries were just a small group among missionaries in China. The rise of indigenous Pentecostal churches, True Jesus Church (Zhen yesu jiaohui 真耶稣教会), and Jesus Family (Yesu jiating 耶稣家庭) (Ye 2011) changed the landscape of Christianity in China. Pentecostalism and the indigenization process interacted in China in two ways. On the one side, Pentecostalism contributed to the indigenization of Christianity in China; on the other side, it is due to indigenization that Pentecostals became a majority of Chinese Christians.

The founder of True Jesus Church, Wei Enbo was baptized in a church of the London Missionary Society and connected with the Pentecostal missionary Bernt Berntsen due to a healing experience. During one meeting, Wei had the experience of baptism in the Spirit, and his wife and son followed. In 1917, with a special revelation, he began to write *Shengling zhen jianzhengshu* (圣灵真见证书, True Testimonies of the Holy Spirit). Together with some fellows, he had the full-immersion baptism in a river. This was the start of the True Jesus Church. In 1919, he began the periodical *Wanguo gengzhengjiao bao* (万国更正教报, Universal Reformed Church Times). Two important figures joined the church as co-founders. One is Zhang Lingsheng (张灵生, aka Zhang Bin 张彬, 1863–1935), who experienced speaking in tongues in the Apostolic Faith Mission and got ordained by Bernt Berntsen. He joined Paul Wei in 1918 as a co-worker. Another is Barnabas Zhang (aka Zhang Dianju 张殿举, 1882–1961), who was saved through Zhang Lingsheng and had the experience of speaking in tongues. In particular, Zhang took the True Jesus Church to South China to make it a national movement.³ Daniel H. Bays comments that, with a mix of “unitarian” Pentecostalism, Seventh-day worship, and intense millenarianism, its worship and behavior based on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including tongues, and also on the believers’ receiving divine revelations during trance, the True Jesus Church is “very Pentecostal” (Bays 1996, pp. 311–12). Melissa Wei Inouye argues, while acknowledging the overlap between native religious practices and the healing, exorcism, and tongues-speaking within the True Jesus Church, it is far more than “the prior strength of Chinese popular religion, or even the classical Pentecostal movement of early twentieth century”. The practices were framed by “a distinctively Christian nexus of ideas, texts, and forms of collective religious life”, and “charisma was a doctrinal, ritual, moral, and organizational resource holding together church communities” (Inouye 2018). Inouye highlights the charismatic character instead of the synthesis between Christianity and Chinese religious traditions. As in the case of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the aim of the True Jesus Church is to seek an authentic Christianity.

The Jesus Family was founded by Jing Dianying (敬奠瀛, 1890–1957), a local Chinese in Tai’an of Shandong Province. He had been educated at the American Methodist School, and later was hired as a Mandarin teacher for a missionary, Nora Dillenbeck (1883–1938), as well as a preacher in the hospital attached to Shandong Christian University. Later, he was connected with the mission of Assemblies of God (AG) in Tai’an, led by Leslie Anglin (1882–1942), and also had a chance to work for the missionary enterprise, the Home of One-siphorus (Albus 1951). Under the influence of AG missionaries, Jing had the experience of Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues. In 1927, Jing formally started the Jesus Family as a new organization, with himself as the head of the big family. It was organized as a commune with all participants contributing their personal property to the family and living and working together. The husbands and wives were even separated to live in dormitories of the same gender and could only meet at regular intervals. Children were brought

up in a common way. Jing was influenced by the “Shandong Revival” in the 1930s, as well as the Spiritual Gifts Society (Ling’en hui 灵恩会), both with very obvious Pentecostal characteristics (Crawford 1933). Tao Feiya emphasizes the typical utopian organization of the Jesus Family with both Chinese and Christian factors, rather than its Pentecostal characteristic (Tao 2002; see also Tao 2004). In the history of Christianity in China, the Jesus Family is recognized as one of the three largest independent churches, together with the True Jesus Church and the Assembly Hall of Watchman Nee. It was disbanded during the Three-self Patriotic Movement in 1952 but continued to influence the Chinese indigenous leaders even to the current times.

How do we explain the Chinese churches with both indigenous and Pentecostal characteristics? A common perspective is to describe it as “folk Christianity” or “folkalization of Christianity”, to highlight the synthesis between Christianity and local religious traditions (Sun 1995; Gao 2005). Lian Xi proposes the theme of “popular Christianity”. He describes three relevant trends: the rise of Chinese nationalism, the messianic convictions, and the “Pentecostal effervescence” (Lian 2010). Yeung Tin Yan (Yang Tian’en) describes the phenomenon as “Pneumatic Christianity”, which was formed as counter-inculturation of Chinese culture vis à vis the Christian inculturation. It not only diminishes the foreignness of Christianity but also makes Christianity more universal (Yeung 2002). And Yeung thinks that Pneumatic Christianity is a more universal concept that cannot be limited to Pentecostalism.

4. Spiritual Instead of Pentecostal: The Case of Watchman Nee

Compared to the True Jesus Church and the Jesus Family, Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声, 1903–1972)’s Pentecostal affiliation is not so obvious, although he is well known in the Christian world as a “spiritual man” (Hu 2017, pp. 161–80). Nee grew up in a Christian family; his grandfather had been a pastor in the Congregationalist church. Both his parents were Methodists. Nee himself was educated in the Anglican Trinity School in Fuzhou. Nee started a new ministry in 1922 with the symbolic worship of breaking bread together with his mother and a co-worker.

Nee’s faith and teaching had a strong spiritual characteristic. He was saved under the preaching of the Chinese evangelist Dora Yu (Yu Cidu 余慈度, 1873–1931) (Wu 2002), and educated under the guidance of the faith missionary Margaret E. Barber (1866–1930) (Reetzke 2007). During the formation of his faith and thinking, many people left marks in his mind: John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*; Andrew Murray (1828–1917)’s *The Spirit of Christ*; the biographies of Jeanne de La Motte Guyon (1648–1717), George Müller (1805–1889) and James Hudson Taylor; the books of Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861–1927) about spiritual warfare, etc. (Lee 1991, pp. 26–27). The Keswick Conventions connected Nee with Dora Yu, Margaret E. Barber, and Jessie Penn-Lewis. Both Dora Yu and Jessie Penn-Lewis had been keynote speakers at the Keswick Conventions.⁴ And Nee was introduced to Jessie Penn-Lewis’ works by Margaret E. Barber. While the latter influenced him most as a personal mentor, Nee’s theology has a deep mark of the former. Due to the connection with Keswick, Grace Ying May argues that Nee’s “theology clearly fell in line with the holiness tradition of the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century” (May 2000). Nee could be counted as a fundamentalist to some extent. But, more importantly, he attached the most to the Holy Spirit.

From 1925 to 1927, when writing his masterpiece *The Spiritual Man*, Nee suffered a lot from tuberculosis. After finishing the book, the sickness worsened. He had to lay in bed to be cared for by others. However, with a special revelation of standing and walking by faith, Nee mysteriously rose up to show up at a meeting of his followers and was healed. It was an exceptional story shared by Nee in his personal testimony as an experience of faith healing (Nee 1991). But his co-worker Witness Lee (Li Changshou 李常受 1905–1997) explained, “The kind of divine healing Watchman Nee experienced is different from the so-called gift of healing” (Lee 1991, p. 95). Lee preferred to interpret Nee’s experience with the metaphor of resurrection and grace, instead of a miracle.

Originally, Nee was influenced by the Plymouth Brethren on church matters.⁵ But in the 1930s, he broke with the Brethren over conflicts on ideas and practices, which led to a bareness of his faith and pushed him to seek new directions. During this period, Nee became connected with the Pentecostal revivals in Shandong Province. In the first English biography of Watchman Nee, Angus Kinnear told such a story:

At Tsingtao on the Shantung coast, he encountered the so-called Spiritual Gifts (*Ling En*) Movement which was very active in the province. He viewed with caution its uncontrolled emotionalism and extravagant methods of arousal, and in the summer of 1932 published in his *Revival* magazine a series of articles distinguishing between the divinely given baptism of the Spirit and the external accompaniments thought of as essential by some of its exponents. He quotes with approval Miss Barber's observation: "There is no need for people to feel the power which comes from the Holy Spirit. It is not given for that purpose. Man's duty is to obey God" (Kinnear 2004, p. 117).

A key person in the story was Miss Elizabeth Fischbacher (1897–1967), a missionary from the China Inland Mission, who had just gotten to know Watchman Nee and later became an English translator of Nee's works. She shared the Shandong revival of ecstatic worship and experienced speaking in tongues. Nee attended her meeting in Chefoo (芝罘, today Yantai 烟台) and brought a message of "the outpouring of the Spirit of God". His co-worker Witness Lee said Nee "never spoke in tongues". However, Kinnear argued that "he certainly believed in the Holy Spirit's lesser gifts to the Church: healing, and speaking with and interpretation of other tongues".⁶

Spirit or spirituality constitutes the core of Watchman Nee's faith and theology. In his classic, *The Spiritual Man*, he explained the tripartite structure of human beings—the spirit, the soul, and the body. According to Nee, the man was created with two independent materials: the spirit and the body. A union of these two elements led to the formation of the soul. "The soul is the seat of personality" (Nee 1992, p. 10). The spirit is responsible for communication with the spiritual realm, and the body is responsible for communication with the physical realm. It is the soul that decides whether the spiritual or the physical realm is to rule in the man. For Nee, a Christian's life is characterized by the competition of these two forces, and a Christian's faith is to let the spirit rule in his/her life. Nee also uses the metaphor of the temple to explain this tripartite structure. "Just as God dwelt in the temple in time past, in the same way the Holy Spirit dwells in the believers" (Nee 1992, p. 11). There are three parts in the temple: the outer court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. As the temple of God, the body of man is like the outer court; the soul is the Holy Place; and the spirit represents the Holy of Holies.

During his European trip of 1938–39, Nee had a chance to attend the Keswick Convention for the Deepening of Spiritual Life, together with some women missionaries from the China Inland Mission. During this trip, Nee shared a message based on Romans 5–8, which was later published as a popular book under the title: *The Normal Christian Life*. After his return, he gave a series of sermons with a strong "spiritual" or mystic note, which were attractive in particular to some women missionaries from the West, who rejoined him in Shanghai. Nee talked in two dimensions regarding the gift of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit outpouring and the Spirit indwelling. In contrast to the Pentecostals, he said, "The purpose of Pentecost is to prove the lordship of Jesus Christ" (Nee 2009, p. 113). The revelation of the indwelling Spirit was used by Paul to criticize the un-spirituality of Corinthian Christians. They were preoccupied with the visible signs of the outpouring of the Holy Spirits, such as "tongues" and miracles, yet they remained spiritually immature (Nee 2009, p. 124).

In 1948, during the training sessions in Guling Mountain of Fujian Province, Nee frequently talked about *The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit*, which represented the culmination of his thinking about spiritual life. He started with the Biblical division between the outer man and the inner man—"God resides in the inner man, and the man outside this God-occupied inner man is the outer man" (Nee 1997, p. 8). In order to work for God, a Christian must break his outer man and let the inner man be released.

But a man cannot do this in himself. It is through “the Holy Spirit on the cross” that this work can be done. It is by God’s grace instead of human efforts that the process is finished.

In particular, Nee highlights the discipline of the Holy Spirit, which is at the core of Christian life and no other practice can replace it. As he explains,

The discipline of the Holy Spirit is too crucial; it is the Christian’s main means of receiving grace throughout his life. Our reading of the Bible cannot replace the discipline of the Holy Spirit. Our prayer cannot replace the discipline of the Holy Spirit. Our meetings cannot replace the discipline of the Holy Spirit. No other means of grace can replace the discipline of the Holy Spirit. We need to pray, to study the Bible, to listen to messages, and to have all kinds of means of grace. They are all precious, but none of them can replace the discipline of the Holy Spirit. If we have not learned the proper lessons in the discipline of the Holy Spirit, we cannot be proper Christians and can never serve God (Nee 1997, p. 72).

The Holy Spirit is at the center of Watchman Nee’s theology. He emphasized the internal experience of Spirit than the external signs. This becomes the basic difference between him and Pentecostalism.

Lam Wing-hung (Lin Ronghong) explains Watchman Nee’s thinking as “spiritual theology” (Lam 2003). According to this thinking, the essence of Christianity is not dogma, tradition, ritual, or institution, but a kind of “spiritual reality”. Spiritual reality is born in human spirits, and human beings can communicate with God through the revelation of the Holy Spirit. It starts with baptism; sanctification and perfection are the practical training. Spiritual reality is not something mysterious, but a kind of experience that every Christian can have. It is based on Jesus’ experience at the cross, and Jesus Christ is the aim of spiritual experience. Spiritual theology is the theology of spiritual man, and the church is a spiritual community. Spiritual theology is based on the Scriptures, with Jesus Christ as the model. At the same time, as Hu Jiayin argues, Watchman Nee’s ministry highlights the role of the Holy Spirit but it “arose independently of the Pentecostal movement”; “its characteristic teachings on spirituality and spiritual practices differ significantly from those of Pentecostalism” (Hu 2017, p. 177). Watchman Nee emphasizes the internal work of the Holy Spirit instead of the external manifestations of Pentecostalism. So, Watchman Nee could be called “spiritual” instead of “Pentecostal”.

5. Conclusions

When other terms such as “evangelical” and “fundamentalism” were applied to the Chinese context, they faced similar problems of mismatching. Many churches in China share the title of “evangelical” before their churches’ names. Mostly, it is used to express their Protestant identity as in Germany or on some other missionary fields, instead of evangelicalism as a distinctive tradition of the U.S. and Britain. According to Kevin Xiyi Yao’s research, fundamentalist groups in China were not the same as in the United States, rather it just means they were conservative in theology and spiritual in daily life, without sharing the core fundamentalist doctrines (Yao 2003). Another term is “Reformed”, with which many Chinese Christians would like to be affiliated. But it is not necessarily the Reformed theology as in Calvinist tradition, but just a way to show the orthodoxy of their Protestant faith (Baugus 2014; Wang 2009). Thus, Pentecostalism is not the only problematic term when applied to the Chinese churches. This does not mean that Chinese Christianity is too distinctive to be defined by any common terms. Instead, some terms have their specific origins, and it would be problematic when applied to different contexts without further explanation. Hence, a new re-conceptualization of Chinese Christianity is necessary, especially regarding to the study of Pentecostalism in 20th-century China.

“Spirit” (*Ling* 灵) constitutes a core term to describe the identity of Chinese Christians. It means the central role of the Holy Spirit in worship and daily life. And spirit is also a bridge to connect Christianity with Chinese religious traditions (Paper 1995). Certainly, there should be some distinction between the Holy Spirit and other spirits. Moreover, “being spiritual” (*Shuling* 属灵) also becomes a common identity shared by most Chinese

Christians, whether they are evangelical, fundamentalist, or Pentecostal. Even among the so-called liberal or modern Christians, “being spiritual” is also a characteristic that they would like to highlight in their faith and life. Therefore, we may find that “being spiritual” is not something theological or ecclesiastical. Rather, it is a notable characteristic of Christian faith and practice. Furthermore, it implies how important faith is in the daily life of Christians. It is partly because Chinese Christians do not share the historical burden of theological and ecclesiastical conflict in the West, so they would prefer to highlight how the new faith is practiced in their daily life. This life emphasis becomes one of the main differences between Western and non-Western churches.

A last question is what is authentic Christianity and who is a true Christian? (Sanneh 2003) When talking about Christianity in the non-Western world, a common thesis is about syncretism. With the “spiritual Christians” (*Shuling jidutu* 属灵基督徒) case, there is some synthesis between Christianity and Chinese culture. However, with such an argument, both Christianity and Chinese culture are reduced to a single, standard form, which cannot be a fact anymore. Some scholars would call them “folk Christianity” or “folkalization of Christianity”. That partly explains why the Pentecostal-charismatic churches are called heretical in China, and why most Chinese have a negative attitude toward them. In this article, we have found that although synthesis and indigenization are obvious characteristics of “spiritual Christians”, their aim is precisely to seek an authentic Christianity in apostolic times, or at least beyond the Western version. With the Holy Spirit at the center, and living their faith in daily life, they are true practitioners of Jesus’ teaching.

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Notes

- ¹ David Lindenfeld has highlighted “concentration of Spirituality” as a prominent form of interactions between Christianity and local religious traditions. See (Lindenfeld 2021).
- ² About Pastor Hsi’s work as well as his connection with the China Inland Mission, see (Austin 2007).
- ³ A critical study of the history of True Jesus Church, see (Iap 2020).
- ⁴ About Keswick conventions, see: (Pollock and Randall 2006; Harford 2017).
- ⁵ About the Brethren, see (Coad 2001).
- ⁶ (Kinnear 2004, p. 140). Regarding the relationship between Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, see (Liu 2016).

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