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The East Asian Rediscovery of 'Sin'

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The East Asian Rediscovery of 'Sin'[1]

ABSTRACT

Christian teachings on 'sin' have met a number of barriers in their historical encounters with the East Asian context. However, since the end of World War II, indigenous Christianities in China, Japan and South Korea have experienced growing interests in this hated doctrine. 'Sin' has become a valuable category to address the existential concerns found in those societies. This has developed in an East Asian discourse about intellectual foundations and, in certain instances, has resulted in a revival of Christian belief. This paper will discuss the development of this rediscovery and connect it to a re-evaluation of millennia-old understandings of the existence of evil.

Keywords: contextual theology, East Asian theology, hamartiology, Kazoh Kitamori, Minjung theology, Sino-Christian theology

THE PROBLEM WITH 'SIN'

Ever since the first Jesuits travelled to Japan and China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Christian teachings on human nature have met significant challenges in their encounter with the East Asian context. Since then, much of the Catholic and Protestant missionary enterprise has carried with it the theological understanding of 'original sin'. However, it is this very same Augustinian doctrine that has often been cited as a major obstacle for the East Asian context. While there may be a number of reasons for this conflict, I would like to highlight three barriers found in the encounter between Christianity and East Asia.

The first major barrier has been linguistic: how does one translate a Christian concept such as 'sin' into another culture? The first Jesuit missionaries appropriated an understanding of sin from East Asian Buddhism to convey this deep theological and biblical meaning: 罪. With cognates to the Chinese character (*zui*) in Japanese (*tsumi*) and Korean (*choe*), it is deeply linked to other indigenous religious understandings like Chinese folk religion (Eberhard 1967: 12–23) and Japanese Shintoism (Fallero 1998: 165–71). Moreover, this term has a long tradition of usage within societal contexts as well. According to the second-century dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi*, the character 罪 originally meant a 'fish trap'; but, during the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), the character was unified with a now obsolete character (辠) that carried the legal idea of a 'crime'. This latter, law-oriented meaning perhaps better reflects the sense one gets from the character's appearance itself: the radical form for 'net' (罒 for 网)[2] above the character for 'wrong' or 'blame' (非), portraying the ideogram of a net that has captured a wrong. Hence, this character is often understood as the violation of some societal law in which the culprit has been caught and convicted. While it can be combined with other characters to form more complex meanings in the East Asian languages, Wolfram Eberhard notes that the term by itself has the three basic meanings of 'crime', 'punishment of a crime' and 'sin' (Eberhard 1967: 13).

When this term is used within the Christian context, it is often understood as having strong legal overtones that may borrow from an Augustinian theological understanding of sin and, perhaps, a forensic understanding of atonement and salvation from Anselm or John Calvin. If we were to think about this further, in English, when the term 'sinner' is used, there is often a recognition that the word is meant to convey some kind of theological or biblical meaning. But in the East Asian context, this often creates a significant linguistic barrier for Christianity. When the average East Asian hears the word for 'sinner' or, in Chinese, '*zui ren*' – 罪人 – this can very easily be misunderstood as describing a criminal or a convict. In contemporary usage, it is sometimes recognised as part of the vocabulary of a type of 'Christianese' – the language of the Christian subcultures of South Korea or China. But for the most part, a *zui ren* is a criminal who has been captured, charged and declared guilty of a crime.

Beyond the linguistic issues involved with conveying the Christian understanding of sin in East Asia, there have also been conflicts with traditional ideologies. In particular, the pessimism of original sin is

often cited as being at odds with the optimism about the human potential in Confucianism. The Confucian scholar Mengzi (c. 372 – c. 289 BC, also known as Mencius) argued that evil is the product of contact between a good human nature[3] and a wicked environment. Humanity is fundamentally good, and every person has the inherent potential and inclination to become a perfected person. However, this view of human nature was not held universally by Confucians. Xunzi (c. 310–237 BC), for example, spells it out quite clearly in the outset of his treatise on the subject: 'Human nature is evil; any good in humans is acquired by conscious exertion' (Xunzi 23:1a; Knoblock 1994: 150). He believes humanity has an overall tendency towards chaos and destruction. Yet, despite this negative disposition, Xunzi insists that individuals can be transformed by social and moral education, enforced by laws and guided by the moral code, in order to become a good and morally beautiful person. So while the two Confucians may differ in their views of human nature, both agree in an overall optimism in the human potential to achieve the wisdom of a sage.

However, this disposition is not limited to Confucianism. As Tu Wei-ming explains, 'A defining characteristic of East Asian thought is the widely accepted proposition that human beings are perfectible through self-effort in ordinary daily existence' (Tu 1985: 19). Within Daoism, humans have the innate ability to follow the flow of nature and return to a perfect, primordial simplicity that is available to all. Those who pursue too much knowledge and too many desires have lost their original virtue. But true happiness and freedom ultimately come when one forgets the distinctions between oneself and the universe. This orientation is likewise found in the form of Buddhism popular in East Asia: Mahāyāna Buddhism. One of the key principles in this tradition is that all sentient beings (that is, all beings that can feel and perceive things) have the Buddha-nature within them, giving them the inborn potential to obtain Buddhahood. Similarly to Confucianism, there has been some debate as to whether human nature is good or evil, or if the Buddha-nature is good or has traces of evil. However, Mahāyāna Buddhism still holds to a positive outlook in the potential for universal salvation, which is achieved through devotion to the Buddha and love for humanity (Ch'en 1964: 12–14; Takakusu 1975: 1). Despite some parallels that have occasionally been raised (see Spae 1987: 123–30), these foundational, East Asian understandings of humanity are often seen to differ greatly from the alien teachings carried by many Christian missionaries. These foreigners to East Asia tended to uphold an Augustinian view that, rather than

speaking about universal perfectibility, has focused on humanity's depravity and inability to do good without divine help.

Beyond the linguistic and traditional barriers to the Christian understandings of 'sin', there has perhaps been a third, more recent barrier found in many regions of East Asia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several of the major East Asian countries underwent revolutions entailing a shift in ideologies. While Japan would be the first East Asian country to work towards a strong and modern nation during the Meiji Restoration period (1868–1912), the year 1919 would be a monumental year when both Korea and China would likewise follow suit, as championed in their March First and May Fourth movements, respectively, though, of course, Korea's path to modern nationhood involved a repudiation of Japanese colonial control. In their own different ways and over time, each of these East Asian countries engaged in developing themselves as nations and pursuing modernity. In this context, many East Asian Christians maintained a more traditional, otherworldly theological outlook. This was especially true in Korea where conservative Protestantism became a defender of Korean interests under Japanese rule (Park 2001: 50–69; Grayson 2002: 160–2; Park 2012: 59). However, there also arose more theologically liberal approaches that emphasised the possibilities of human, social and national progress in Japan (Furuya 1997: 19–42), China (Ling 1981: 60–100) and much later in South Korea (Grayson 2002: 160, 166–7; see Suh 2001: 43–55). Like Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers in the West, these 'liberal' East Asian Christians began to identify the mind-set based on Augustinian theology as oppressive and counter-productive for their country's modern pursuits and sought to formulate theologies of their own that would be useful for their respective contexts.

'SIN' REDISCOVERED

With this brief survey, we have identified three major barriers to the Christian theological anthropology that have been encountered in East Asia: linguistic, traditional and revolutionary. Yet World War II and the events immediately following it would drastically change the situation in China, Korea and Japan. In a somewhat paradoxical turn, since the end of the War, we find a surprising rediscovery of 'sin' in East Asia.

In China, since the late 1980s, there has been a growing interest in academic research on Christianity in what has become known as

Sino-Christian Theology. Zhuo Xinping (b. 1955), a well-known representative of this field, writes,

> The collapse of the relation between God and humankind is reflected in the individual's feeling of being lost; it manifests itself in the abnormal existence of whole societies, the absence of absolute values and standards, where confusion, uncertainty and disorder reign. This is the state of 'original sin'. (Zhuo 1995: 84)

The casual observer may presume that these are the words of a Christian theologian commenting on the socio-political situation in China. The irony, however, is that Zhuo Xinping is not a Christian, but a Communist Party member and an atheist by profession. Yet he sees 'original sin' as a foreign understanding that can help explain the socio-political disorder found in present-day China by speaking about the human condition. Another scholar in this field, Liu Xiaofeng (b. 1956), compares Christianity and its 'culture of sin' with China and its 'culture of joy' in his famous 1988 work *Salvation and Easy Wandering* (Liu 1988: 173–83; see Liu 1992: 17–25).[4] As a culture of joy, Chinese tradition emphasises the innate self-sufficiency of the human person to achieve perfection and joy. In contrast, Liu argues that the Christian culture of sin is realistic about a world of evil and suffering, and represents the limits of human nature and our need for help from a force outside of ourselves – that is, a transcendent God. Christian hamartiology challenges the naturalistic emphasis of Chinese thought and points to the need of a transcendent and objective moral reference point that is not limited by the natural realm or one's own abilities.

In addition to Zhuo Xinping and Liu Xiaofeng, there are several other Christian and secular scholars in Sino-Christian Theology who are increasingly interested in hamartiology. Both scholars write after the great turmoil experienced in Chinese society from the Cultural Revolution.[5] Writing later than Liu Xiaofeng, Zhuo Xinping is able to reflect on other experiences such as the 1989 military clampdown at Tiananmen Square and the growing ills accompanying China's ascent in the global marketplace. To be clear, they often do not wholeheartedly embrace the teachings of Augustine. Zhuo Xinping, for example, wants to de-emphasise the teaching of 'original sin' as having any moral implications and to focus on the subject as an explanation for our broken relationship with some transcendent reality. It explains the human condition – not human actions (Zhuo 1995: 83–4). Nevertheless, 'sin' is

recognised as an important category of discussion in grappling with China's present context.

This rediscovery of sin has also occurred in other East Asian countries across the last half century – often in the context of more explicit theological reflections on pain and suffering. One such example can be found in the so-called 'first generation' of South Korean Minjung theologians – a theology first articulated during a military dictatorship in the early 1970s (Küster 2010: 131–6). The term 'minjung', a Korean formulation of two hanja characters meaning 'people' or 'mass of people', is used in this context to describe the poor and the oppressed, as opposed to the rich and the powerful. Jesus identified himself with the minjung, for they experience '*han*' – 'the suppressed, amassed, and condensed experience of oppression caused by mischief or misfortune so that it forms a kind of "lump" in one's spirit' (CTCCCA 1983: 68, note 1).

Within this theology, Minjung theologians are careful to argue that the term 'sinner' is the ideological language used by the oppressive ruling class against those who were robbed and oppressed – the term can never be properly applied to the poor or the weak (CTCCCA 1983: 146–7). Instead of being viewed as 'sinners', the minjung should more appropriately be understood as the 'sinned against' (Yewangoe 1987: 294–5; Küster 2010: 84–5). In contrast with scholars in Sino-Christian Theology, 'original sin' plays little or no role in the writings of these Minjung theologians.[6] Rather, hamartiology should be understood in terms of the social structure of the oppressor and the 'sinned against' minjung.

Beyond China and South Korea, there is the very different case found in the study of Kazoh Kitamori (1916–98) which is often regarded as the first truly Japanese theology – *The Theology of the Pain of God*. The key theme for Kitamori is neither 'original sin' nor the 'sinned against', but *tsurasa* – 'pain'. He explains that this Japanese concept is traditionally realised in folk drama when one suffers and dies so that others may live. It is an act on stage that shakes the audience as well. Kitamori continues, 'It is correct to say that nothing moves the mind of the Japanese as deeply as these spectacles' (1965: 135). *Tsurasa* or 'pain' is an essential attribute of God. This is not to say that Kitamori upholds some moral-exemplar atonement theory. He is emphatic that Jesus was a historical person who, as God himself, entered a world of sin to bear the responsibility of real sin and to win over sinners by his love and pain (1965: 34–7). God the Father experiences this pain – not by suffering on the cross himself, but as he leads God the Son to suffer and die on the cross.

Originally written at the end of World War II and published in Japanese in 1946, Kitamori's theology was articulated in the midst of Japan's war-torn context. Coming out of this situation, he states that the pain and suffering of humanity points to the pain and suffering of God. That is, the suffering of humanity points to the extent of God's wrath against sin and God's love to unforgiveable sinners. He goes on to say that our human pain testifies to and is a symbol of the pain of God. Human pain is in the service of God's pain by showing the transformative power of God's transcendent love as it works to forgive the individual's sin (1965: 53, 102–3).

Scholars in Sino-Christian theology, the Minjung theologians and Kazoh Kitamori all write within contexts that see Christian theology providing an existential resolve for broken peoples. Writing in Japan at the end of World War II, Kitamori's cries proclaim a theology of *tsurasa* or pain. Likewise, the groans of the first generation of Minjung theologians articulate a theology of *han* and the 'sinned against' in the midst of a military dictatorship. Both are more subtle in their language of 'sin', 'sinner' or 'original sin', whereas scholars in Sino-Christian theology pay more direct attention to the lexicon of Augustinian hamartiology. This tendency may partly be due to the fact that these Chinese intellectuals live within the restrictions of post-Mao China and have learned to self-censor and to not explicitly publish all their thoughts or experiences. The use of 'sin' as a theological category allows the Chinese scholars to speak more broadly about moral evil without speaking directly about sensitive issues like the ills of the Cultural Revolution or the 1989 clash in Tiananmen Square.

The theological language used in South Korea and Japan is somewhat different. Minjung theologians, for example, move away from an Augustinian vocabulary and believe that 'sin' – or more precisely, 'sinner' – is never properly used for the minjung. This perspective may carry even more weight if, as we discussed at the outset of this paper, the Korean term for 'sinner' is understood to mean 'criminal' – a concept that is perhaps more suitably applied to the oppressive ruling class than to the minjung. Kitamori does not detract from the assertion that sin exists in human nature, but, though the language of 'sin' and 'sinner' does exist in his theology, they are mainly categories used to clarify what he means by the pain and suffering of God and of humanity.

Another thing to note is that a number of these thinkers operate largely within the academy and are often not embraced by local Christians. In China, for example, there is much debate about whether scholars in

Sino-Christian theology can properly be called 'theologians' since many of them are not even Christians. Some have charged Kazoh Kitamori with being heretical by teaching a form of Patripassianism – a claim which he himself has explicitly denied (Kitamori 1965: 15; see Furuya 1997: 88–9). Others have asserted that the thoughts of the first generation of Minjung theologians are sub-Christian or anti-Christian because they 'reject virtually all the doctrines of the New Testament and the historic church' (Kim 1987: 272). No matter how 'unorthodox' these thinkers may be, this intellectual rediscovery of sin, pain and suffering must be appreciated as an extension of the existential plight of the masses. These East Asian formulations all arise from and engage with the concerns of battered peoples.

In light of the various historical barriers to Christianity's encounter with East Asia, why have these 'pleasant' subjects of sin, pain and suffering been so important in this region since the end of World War II? The answer, I believe, is in the East Asian need and desire to articulate an 'anthropodicy' (compare Sontag 1981: 137–66). In the West, the problem of evil is often discussed in terms of the theological category of 'theodicy' – the tension between the existence of evil and the justification of a good and omnipotent God. In contrast, in East Asia, the main tension has primarily been between the existence of evil and the justification of a good and 'omnipotent' humanity – that is, the East Asian optimism about human nature and human potential. While there had been in the East Asian contexts various explanations for the existence of evil, World War II and the events immediately following raised concerns about the validity of those explanations. With a starting point in a view that human beings are perfectible through self-effort, East Asian thinkers have needed to reconcile how so much evil has been wielded at the hands of our common humanity.

RE-EVALUATING 'SIN'

As we have highlighted, there have been at least three major impasses – linguistic, traditional and revolutionary – between anthropologies of Augustinian pessimism and East Asian optimism. But are Christianity and East Asia so antithetical? Firstly, it should be noted that Christians along the trajectory of Augustine have not always held such an overtly negative view of human abilities. Hence, despite the pessimistic disposition of teachings like total depravity and the inevitability of sin ('*non posse non peccare*'), there are Augustinian thinkers like the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper who have a fairly positive view of what humans

can accomplish. Likewise, despite the overall optimistic tendencies of East Asian traditional thought, there are important voices like Xunzi and the various 'hells' of folk religiosity that have attempted to address a darker side to humanity. The traditions of Augustine and East Asia are not completely diametrically opposed. Yet, it has often been stated that the encounter between Christianity and East Asian thought tends to possess incompatible understandings of the human person.

Secondly, the historical encounters between the West and East Asia commonly focus on a binary opposition of 'Christianity' on the one side and 'Confucianism' or 'Buddhism' on the other. Buddhism, of course, did not originate in East Asia and, in fact, has an incredible diversity in forms and teachings. Confucianism is also quite varied, undergoing some significant changes in the last century such as the development of variants like 'New Confucianism' and 'Boston Confucianism'. The challenge with discussing Christianity is that it is generally understood by way of its 'Western' or 'Latin' forms. A large part of this comes from the legacy of the foreign missionary enterprise. The greatest number of missionaries to East Asia originated from Western Europe or North America, coming from Protestant and Catholic traditions. These foreigners carried with them both theological concepts and theological debates. This is why the North American fundamentalist–modernist conflict became prevalent in many circles of East Asian Christianity from the early twentieth century and continues to persist today. Thus, East Asian indigenous Christianities have tended to extol theologies built on top of fundamentalism or liberalism, evangelicalism or post-liberal thought.

Following Justo González's *Christian Thought Revisited* (1999), the missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder have argued in their important work *Constants in Context* (2004) that there have been three major theological types that have existed across time and space. The major theological approaches prevalent in East Asia have tended to come from one of two major families of theologies – what they call 'law-oriented' and 'truth-oriented' theologies, with Tertullian and Origen as their respective forefathers. The former is seen within forms of Christianity that utilise forensic categories like a divine law and the need for a perfect penal substitution to atone for humanity's sins. The latter often utilises the truth found in philosophy as the handmaiden of theology (*ancilla theologiae*) and speaks of Christ as a moral exemplar. González, Bevans and Schroeder argue that there is also a third type of theology – a 'history-oriented' theology that finds its origins in Irenaeus' view of recapitulation and continues to exist in present-day

Eastern Orthodoxy. In contrast with the more pessimistic and law-oriented Augustinian teaching of 'original sin', can the millennia-old Eastern Orthodox understanding of 'ancestral sin' (Romanides 1998: 155–69) be useful in East Asia today?

Orthodox Christians have often argued that the bishop of Hippo's teaching on 'original sin' – or, as some call it, 'original guilt' – was an erroneous invention based on a bad translation of the bible (Meyendorff 1983: 144). One of the key verses used by Augustine to debate Pelagius was Romans 5: 12: 'Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ...' (NRSV). However, a vitally important hermeneutical question exists: why have all sinned? Augustine, using a Latin translation of the bible, would have read the words '*in quo omnes peccaverunt*' – that is, 'in whom [Adam] all sinned'. From this basis, he concludes that all of humanity is guilty of Adam's sin because all of humanity has sinned in Adam.

However, it is virtually impossible to justify that Latin rendering on the basis of the original Greek of the New Testament: ἐφ᾽ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον. The key to the translation lies in the phrase ἐφ᾽ ᾧ. One biblical scholar suggests that the Latin sense can only be derived from the Greek if the pronoun ᾧ points back to the masculine ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ('one man') near the beginning of the verse. However, given the great distance between the pronoun and this possible antecedent, he concludes that this does not offer a natural reading of the Greek (Wallace 1996: 342–3). Barring an unnatural explanation of the Greek grammar, many commentators consider the pronoun in the phrase ἐφ᾽ ᾧ to be neuter, resulting in the translation 'because' – that is, 'because all have sinned' (as it is rendered in the NRSV). But Reformation-era interpreters like John Calvin (1960: 111–2) and Martin Luther (1961: 166) continued to maintain Augustine's understanding of the passage.

However, the pronoun can also be masculine referring to the immediately preceding masculine substantive θάνατος ('death'). This would result in the following rendering in English: 'because of it [death], all have sinned'. Along the lines of this second rendering, many Eastern Orthodox theologians have argued that humans have inherited Adam's mortality – not his sin and guilt. From the Augustinian–Reformed tradition, we have sinned with Adam and are guilty with Adam; therefore, we deserve the punishment of death. But from the Orthodox perspective, we are in solidarity with Adam's mortality and therefore we sin. Because of our mortality, we are in a constant pursuit to quench our

bodily needs. Hence we steal and kill and slander because doing so may prolong our temporal lives and increase our chances of survival from the inevitable. If we were immortal, we would not need to do these things. But we are now mortal and, because of our mortality, we sin.

Why is this millennia-old theological category of 'ancestral sin' important today? Firstly, many discussions about Christianity in the East Asian context have operated in a kind of 'Babylonian captivity' of Western normative theology. But this is to essentialise what is meant by the term 'Christianity' (a vice found in much scholarship from both the West and East Asia). Moreover, the pessimistic emphasis of Western (or Latin) Christianity has been seen to produce some barriers, rather than invitations, for East Asians to engage with Christianity. Ancestral sin has the potential of being a *via media* – a mediating voice – between the pessimism of Augustine and the optimism of East Asia. It can serve as a catalyst to open up this conversation by stating that humanity has inherited from Adam and Eve death – not guilt and responsibility. As in East Asian teachings, we are responsible for our own actions and only guilty of the wrongs we actually do.

Furthermore, while original sin focuses on our depravity, ancestral sin focuses on our potential. As one commentator writes, '[S]in and guilt in the [Orthodox] system are ... a hypostatic, rather than essential, quality. What mankind has inherited from Adam is the subjugation to death and corruption, and not culpability' (Boojamra 1976: 27). If they are hypostatic qualities of human nature, then the rejection of sin and guilt does not mean the rejection of the individual 'self' – an important distinction for modernising contexts. Rather than being bound to the guilt of the primordial humans, each individual is created with free will and, therefore, capable and responsible for his or her own choices. Yet, ancestral sin is also perhaps more realistic about humanity's existential struggles, maintaining certain effects of the fall, than the East Asian teachings have suggested. Like its younger sibling 'original sin', 'ancestral sin' has the potential to serve as the basis of an anthropodicy.

CONCLUSION

Why should we amend the time-honoured tradition of Augustine or entertain the seemingly foreign teachings of 'ancestral sin'? After all, in countries like China and South Korea, the growth of Protestantism has largely been witnessed amongst more conservative Christians who have emphasised the doctrine of 'original sin'. However, a pessimistic, Augustinian anthropology has also dug a deep, ideological trench by

positioning Christianity as diametrically opposed to East Asian thought. 'Ancestral sin' provides a platform for discussions where 'original sin' has failed. The Eastern Orthodox tradition must be remembered as part of the greater catholicity of Christianity and recognised as having possibilities to complement or supplement Western Christianity's encounter with East Asia.

Secondly, while conservative Protestantism has seen a great growth over the past few decades in East Asia, will this trajectory continue? In South Korea, while statistics have shown an increase in the overall number of religious believers, recent years have highlighted a noticeable decline in the number of Protestants (Park 2012: 59–61). According to South Korea's Population and Housing Census Report, from 1995 to 2005 Protestantism saw a decrease of 1.6 per cent, while Catholicism and Buddhism both saw increases, by 74.4 per cent and 3.9 per cent, respectively. (The statistics collected do not include Korean shamanism, also known as Muism, as a separate religion.)

In China, Protestantism is arguably the fastest growing religion today. However, this has occurred alongside a religious revival in all spiritual traditions – especially in the more indigenous religiosity based on Buddhism, Daoism and the various folk religions, as well as a growth in Catholicism. Likewise, while the May Fourth movement and the Cultural Revolution heavily attacked Confucianism, recent decades have witnessed many Chinese, especially Communist leaders, championing Confucius. During a highly publicised celebration of Confucius' 2,540th birthday in October 1989 – later in the very year of the infamous clash in Tiananmen Square – the General Secretary Jiang Zemin made a surprise appearance and spent two hours recalling his Confucian upbringing and giving praise to the head of the Confucius Foundation (de Bary and Lufrano 2000: 581–2). While there may be various factors involved in all this, Christianity must be willing to address some of its fundamental ideological impasses in its encounter with the East Asian contexts.

Though historically there have been a number of barriers in the Christian understanding of 'sin' in East Asia, we also have a unique moment – some may say a *kairos* moment – because of the challenges faced in the context that continues to develop today. In recent years, there have been many well-publicised reports of manufacturing companies in China installing fences and nets to prevent employees from jumping out of factory buildings to take their own lives. Why is it that as China has risen to become the second largest economy, the country is recognised to also have one of the highest suicide rates in the

world (Xie 2007; see Law and Liu 2008: 80–1)? Likewise, as recorded on the World Health Organisation website, other East Asian nations like Japan and South Korea which have enjoyed economic success for the last few decades continue to report comparably bleak numbers of self-inflicted deaths. It seems that, for East Asia, economic prosperity is often partnered with a societal poverty. This suggests the need for an ideological re-evaluation.

Moreover, can we say that, today, the West is a post-Christian society? Can we say that the doctrine of original sin causes barriers in the West, as well as the East? Is a rediscovery of 'sin' in the West also possible? 'Ancestral sin' itself may not be the best hamartiology for the East Asian or Western contexts. But this alternative understanding of sin helps to broaden the theological discourse and provide greater points of discussion between Christianities of the West, the East and East Asia.

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NOTES

1   An earlier version of this paper was presented in June 2012 at the annual conference of the Yale–Edinburgh Group on the History of the Missionary Movement and World Christianity, held at the University of Edinburgh.

2   A 'radical' is a basic building block of a given Chinese character and is commonly used to look up that character in a dictionary.

3   It is commonly stated that Mengzi spoke of an originally good human nature. However, as Bryan W. Van Norden points out, Mengzi simply spoke about human nature as good. It is only much later in the commentaries of Zhu Xi (1130–1200) on Mengzi that we are told that human nature is originally good (Van Norden 2008: xv, xliii).

4   In the 1940s, Ruth Benedict popularised the distinction between (Western) guilt cultures and (Eastern) shame cultures – the latter aimed at understanding Japanese culture during World War II. During the 1980s and 90s, Benedict's distinction became hugely debated amongst Chinese intellectuals. Here, Liu Xiaofeng continues this academic discourse with his contemporaries, calling China a 'culture of joy' and the West a 'culture of sin'.

5   While the exploration here is focused on the post-1980s interest in hamartiology, Chinese Christians in the early 1900s were also discussing this doctrine, often redefining sin in terms of a Confucian understanding of selfishness (Chow 2013: 116–20).

6   While Sino-Christian theology does not speak about the 'sinned against', another thinker in China's recent history has: Bishop K. H. Ting (1915–2012, also known as

Ding Guangxun), the retired head of China's government-sanctioned church. He speaks about the 'sinned against' by way of explaining the shared experiences of both Christians and non-Christians, particularly Communists (Ting 2000: 44–5).

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