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If We Say Chinese Have No Sin, We Deceive Ourselves: A Rejoinder to Hsu's 'Contextualising "Sin" in Chinese Culture'

In his article 'Contextualising "Sin" in Chinese Culture: A Historian's Perspective', published in *Studies in World Christianity* 22.2 (2016), Danny Hsu challenges the idea that Chinese cannot comprehend the Christian concept of sin due to various cultural factors, including optimistic humanism and a cultural aversion to law. Hsu's article, however, suffers from a few fatal flaws. Because he misunderstands my views and those of others, Hsu largely presents a straw-man argument by opposing ideas not held by those he presumes to challenge. At times, his rhetoric could subtly mislead readers to agree with his conclusions, particularly when he begs the question when talking about sin. In this rejoinder, I correct key points in Hsu's discussion concerning the contextualisation of 'sin' in Chinese culture. Given space limitations, I primarily address his comments about my arguments, although there is certainly overlap between myself and other writers whom he critiques.

First, I will offer a few clarifications to demonstrate subtle ways Hsu misconstrues the views of other writers (including myself). For instance, his response mis-characterises my claim about why Chinese are less inclined to accept legal explanations of sin (106). He writes, '[W]hereas we used to think that Chinese avoided the court system and lawsuits because such actions were looked down upon by the state as being not in conformity with Confucian harmony, we now know that this was simply not the case' (107). Hsu mistakes a mere illustration (which I give in *Saving God's Face*) for the basis for my argument, a fundamental distinction not to be missed. I never claim that official state views led

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Chinese people not to think in terms of law. Rather, I have argued that Chinese laws across time reinforce the more pervasive and primary cultural values of honour and shame (Wu 2013: 107; 2015: 156).

Similarly, I never remark whether Chinese see 'good works as a way of overcoming sin' (106); instead, I observe that typical Chinese do not share Martin Luther's angst about whether the holy Creator God will accept them. Hsu's generalised statement does not imply the latter. Chinese are more concerned with existential problems like *guanxi* (relationship) and reputation, that is, 'face'. While I have only commented on Hsu's interaction with my work, glosses such as these weaken the force of his overall argument.

The most serious weakness of Hsu's survey is the fact that he constructs a straw-man argument. In short, he presents a case against positions not actually taken by me or his other interlocutors. At the core of his paper (110–16), he affirms that Chinese do in fact have an understanding of evil, human wickedness and wrong-doing; thus, some religious practitioners in history felt the need to confess their 'sin' (however defined). Thus, Hsu objects to characterising many Chinese as optimistic humanists, stating, 'Neo-Confucian belief in one's ability to become a sage did not preclude an understanding of one's own wickedness and the need for divine intervention' (115).

What is the problem? Not only do these arguments *not* refute my views and those of others, they implicitly suggest we affirm ideas that we in fact reject. I and others don't deny that Chinese conceive of right and wrong, good and evil. To the contrary, I spend much time in *Saving God's Face* and elsewhere arguing that Chinese could *better* understand 'sin' if explained using other metaphors besides simply juridical imagery (for example, honour and shame). Hsu's error perhaps stems from his proclivity to overstatement, such as when he claims that Enoch Wan and I say that 'Chinese cannot understand the Western idea of sin' (120). In fact, I am not aware of anyone who says that Chinese are utterly incapable of understanding legal metaphors.

It seems Hsu fails to distinguish wrong-doing (in general) from law-breaking, which is a far narrower conception of the moral error. Breaching family rules and cultural traditions are two examples of 'wrong-doing' not typically described as 'crimes'. Hsu himself demonstrates that Chinese frequently explain 'sin' by using other metaphors such as disharmony (110), impurity (112), burden (119).

Inexplicably, Hsu mistakenly supposes that other authors dichotomise the traditional Chinese belief in self-cultivation and the awareness of

human evil. Yet he never shows evidence that others actually hold these two ideas in contradiction. The tension is entirely inferred and the error then imputed to his interlocutors (for example, Chow).

Hsu further constructs a straw-man argument against imagined objections when he rebuts, 'there should be no reason to assume that the lack of equivalencies between languages inevitably results in unbridgeable cultural chasms' (118). Again, he does not cite authors who in this way defend their view about 'sin' in Chinese culture.

Compounding these problems, Hsu's rhetoric gives a misleading sense of contrast and assurance. For example, he repeatedly claims to examine 'actual practice' or 'on-the-ground reality of Christianity in China' (as opposed to idealised conceptions of Chinese religion). Yet he largely appeals to Chinese culture from centuries past, such as medieval and late imperial China. Consequently, readers are led to presume that practices selectively drawn from prior ages typify the modern Chinese experience.

Hsu asserts that Chinese history has certain conceptual resources to grasp Christian notions of sin; granting the point for the sake of argument, this fact does not prove that such a view is sufficiently typical of contemporary Chinese people. While he laments the use of an 'idealised' version of Chinese culture, it is a cultural set of ideals or values that are most likely to be passed along generations (even as specific expressions of those ideals vary). In many respects, much of what he dismisses as 'ideal' provides initial clues about the meaning of social practices across generations.

Unfortunately, Hsu nearly accuses his interlocutors of 'Orientalism' (107). In a footnote, he softens the charge by saying that writers probably attempt a synthesis that is 'something close to the Orientalist binary of the West and non-West as mutually exclusive entities' (121, note 4). We must be careful to avoid using inflammatory labels that marginalise contrary opinions. Decades of scholarship have affirmed unmistakable differences between traditional Eastern and Western cultures. Legitimate contributions can come from both cultural insiders and outsiders. Of course, cultural distinctions exist along a spectrum. In some form, elements that characterise one context will undoubtedly be found in another. Nevertheless, acknowledging differences does not imply that I and others assert 'the unique superiority of the modern West in contradistinction to a wholly different and backward non-West' (121, note 4).

Finally, I suggest a few ways to reorient the present discussion. One can appreciate Hsu's desire to ensure we do not completely sever 'sin'

and legal metaphors; after all, much of Israel's scripture concerns the Mosaic Law. Nevertheless, because the Law of Moses was a national covenant with God, we must not read biblical language about the law in a generic fashion. Ancient Near Eastern covenants established relationships and collective identity. The concept of covenant must shape attempts to relate sin to law in the bible; even so, we should not restrict 'sin' to legal metaphors since, as Rom. 5: 13 states, 'sin indeed was in the world before the law was given' (ESV). We would be wiser to allow the contextualisation of 'sin' to reflect the diversity of biblical images that depict sin. Ultimately, biblical theology provides the flexible yet firm framework for talking about sin.

We certainly need a historian's perspective, yet we must guard against historical generalisations that overlook critical theological and cultural distinctions that make contextualisation meaningful.

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