

Integrating Archival Research and Fieldwork in the Study of Christianity in Chaozhou and Shantou

(An abstract)

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With the rapid growth of Christianity in China today, scholars have been aware of the need to consult archival materials relating to the Chinese churches and examine the historical experience of native Christians. This reflects a move towards a micro-history approach which emphasizes the development of native congregations in specific temporal and spatial settings. The purpose is to explore what Clifford Geertz calls “a native point of view” in the complicated process of Sino-Christian interaction. Out of this reflection scholars has come to realize that, in conducting empirical studies of native churches, they need not only a good knowledge of the foreign mission policy but also a good grasp of the Chinese side of the story. Therefore it is important to supplement the Western missionary archives with Chinese source materials and fieldwork data collected among native Christians. Only by doing so can we reconstruct what is called “the history from below.”

This article discusses a number of methodological issues arising from my study of the Baptist and Presbyterian movements in the Chaozhou-speaking region of Guangdong

province. Since the late nineteenth century, the Baptist and Presbyterian congregations in Chaozhou had been thoroughly integrated into the local kinship and lineage structure. Christianity became far more indigenous than what scholarly literature has previously acknowledged. The networking effect contributed to this success of Christianization, as the gospel message was passed from individual to individual, family to family, village to village. The native Christians never kept their faith to themselves but took the message to others and built large numbers of churches.

Beginning with an account of the origin of my research, this article critically examines different types of archival materials. It addresses the problems of using these historical sources, such as their reliability and their potentials in the exploration of new themes not yet covered in previous scholarship. This is followed by a discussion of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of conducting fieldwork among the Christian communities in Chaozhou. In particular, it explores the problem of interacting with my informants: how my social status affected the interaction with different groups of informants; how I transformed myself from an outside researcher into a semi-insider; what types of data were collected; what lights these data threw on the subject and so on. This study concludes with an analysis of new possibilities in further research into the dynamics of Chinese Christianity.