

## TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW BEGINS

I'Ching Thomas:

I have a story. I don't know if you're interested.

John Dickson:

Yes. Always interested in stories.

I'Ching Thomas:

All right. I was in Perth, actually, your country, two years ago to launch my book and I was speaking at this church, it was a rather international church and I was doing a seminar on what the book is about; how you can be a Christian and a Chinese without any problem is not an identity dilemma. After my session, this young man, who's obviously Chinese, came up to me and he thanked me for the session.

I'Ching Thomas:

He said, "That was very insightful for me." And then he tells me his story. He says, "I'm from China. And I'm here in Perth because I am an exchange professor," in one of the universities there and he teaches mathematics. So clearly very smart. He's an adult, obviously.

I'Ching Thomas:

And so, he said, "What you had indicated in your session about how I can be a Christian and yet be a Chinese with no problems that really struck me because for a long time I want to believe, but somehow I had this impression that if I became a Christian, I would have to give up my Chinese identity."

I'Ching Thomas:

And subsequently he said, "Thank you for that, because I'm not the only one who's struggling with that question of identity, because I have a few other friends who are also interested, but are afraid to take that step." And then he said, "I'm going to think seriously about accepting Jesus, but let me talk to my mother first."

John Dickson:

Yes.

I'Ching Thomas:

This is an adult. And subsequently I found out that he is married and he has two kids, so he is not under 21. He's obviously older than that. He's a father, he's a professor in mathematics having lived in Perth, this kind of Western setting for a while. But yet these were things that were very important to him. And I

thought that was fascinating, such a reflection of what we, Chinese, hold very dear to our hearts and close to us.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

That's my friend, I'Ching Thomas. We'll meet her a little later in the episode, but her story highlights one of the difficulties that arises when the Eastern mind meets the Western mind. Some would say it's particularly obvious in the area of religion. Christianity is a Western religion and a religion of individual freedom, right? But Eastern traditions emphasize family and community above the individual.

The Christian mind and the Chinese mind are two venerable yet incompatible things. So, Christianity should have a real problem in China. It's one of the attempted foreign invaders, and yet Christianity is alive and growing in China. There's evidence of Christianity in China from as early as the eighth century. Loads of evidence from the 13th century. And for the last 200 years, Christianity has grown in China to almost unbelievable numbers between 40 and 80 million.

China is set to become the largest Christian nation in the world, so say some scholars, in less than two decades. So, what's going on? Is this a Western controlled religious insurgency or is there an Eastern Jesus many in the west have missed? Does Jesus' middle Eastern origin make him just as compatible with the East as the west.

I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Deep Peace* by Todd Hunter. Every episode of Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Xi Lian:

Well about the political seeing in the late 19th and early 20th century, I think the most important thing that happened was the revolution of 1911, which ended a dynastic system that had lasted for about 2000 years. But what that was followed by, was not a Republic as it was declared. It was a Republic on paper.

China was the first Republic in Asia on paper. But what happened to China was that it began to slide into warlordism and later on the civil war between the Communist and the Nationalist. So, the larger context is this post-dynastic chaos, and China was trying to find a way out of that chaos.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

That's Xi Lian, distinguished professor of world Christianity at Duke University Divinity School in North Carolina. Professor Lian's research is focused on China's modern encounter with Christianity. Among his many academic writings are several more accessible books, including *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant missions in China* and *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, and another one I can't wait to tell you about.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

Xi Lian:

Well, the Protestant missions to China began in 1807. So, at the dawn of the 20th century, it has been there for 100 years. It was beginning to take root and it was mostly in a form of denominational missions. There were the American, the British, the European and Australian. Porteous missionaries were working in China, operating in different parts of China, doing medical work, doing education and social services.

John Dickson:

And I mean, were there many? Can you give us an idea of... You just said they were doing schooling as well, but were they a big feature of early 20th century Chinese society? Or was it just really a sideshow?

Xi Lian:

Well, in fact, it was a much, much bigger impact, long-term influence than its number would suggest. In the 1920s, that was the peak of the Christian missionary movement in China. There were about 8,000 Western missionaries operating in China, but it's not just the size of the missionary force, but it's the work that they were doing.

Xi Lian:

For instance, they were pioneering in education for women, completely new kind of education that the Chinese women had never known back in the imperial periods. That efforts for women's education for instance, began in the late 19th century and by the early 20th century, it was really taking quite a mature form.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

But for all that progress in the social sphere, Western Christian missionaries often struggled to explain the theological meaning of Christianity in a culture where very different intellectual traditions had long reigned.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

I'Ching Thomas:

A lot of the rituals or traditions that we see today that is practiced by cultural Chinese is not just Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. It obviously is a syncretism of all three, but all of these rituals were cultivated in the soil of shamanism.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

That's I'Ching Thomas, a writer, thinker, and speaker specializing in making sense of Christianity in an Eastern, particularly Chinese context and her book, *Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing* is a masterful account of why Christianity does, and sometimes doesn't make sense to someone raised in the Chinese philosophical and religious tradition. Part of that tradition is what's called shamanism spiritualism.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

I'Ching Thomas:

Our belief in the afterworld, belief in the after-death world that is parallel to the world that we live in today. And I think that's reflected in a lot of the rituals that we do today. I'm not sure if your listeners are familiar. For example, we believe that the departed spirits have a need for food, have a need for money, have a need for a house to live in and so on and so forth.

And you see that during Chinese [inaudible 00:09:53] day, where a lot of cultural Chinese would burn paper construct of these things because they believe once they burn that their departed family members would be able to receive them in the afterworld.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

This shamanism is perhaps the oldest layer of the Chinese spiritual tradition, but it's not the only one. There's also Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Okay. So, this is pervasive and very ancient and it predates the three formal religious traditions. Can we move to the Dao now? Like what on earth is it?

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

I'Ching Thomas:

Dao basically means the truth or the way, and therefore it's commonly known as religion of the way. It believes that we are all part of one reality and the problems that we have with humanity, pain, suffering and all that exist because we have moved away from the ultimate reality. And therefore, in order for us to regain some balance in the universe or harmony in the universe, we have to return to the Dao. So how do we do that?

I'Ching Thomas:

And obviously there are different ways that have been promoted of how we can do that. But philosophical Daoism talks about this quiet activeness. Actionless action is what it is. It's really hard to define that because even if you ask Daoist priests, I think it's going to be difficult for them to actually define what this means. Actionless action.

Essentially, it is to a point where you contemplate and allow yourself to drift back and join the Dao so that there's harmony in the universe again, by spending time in contemplation, in meditation, with nature, being one with nature. Over time, it has evolved into a belief system that seeks eternal life in a sense where if you look at popular Daoism, a broad range of different gods that will help you achieve your different goals in life basically.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

The quest for harmony by returning to the Dao, the way. Then there's Confucianism.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

I'Ching Thomas:

Confucius was born at a time where there was a lot of poverty and there were a lot of political and social problems caused by a lot of the rulers in his area, in his district, in his region. And he came to the conclusion that it is because of the corruption of the emperors and of the rulers that the normal citizen is suffering. And it got him thinking about what does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be human? How do we achieve full humanness? How do we flourish?

And I think his conclusion was that we are meant to flourish, and we are meant to flourish in community. However, because of the corruption of the people around him, of all the officials and the rulers, it has taken the opportunity away from every person to flourish. And essentially that's the basis of his teaching. How do we get back to a point where we can cultivate ourselves?

And he talks about the noble self, the noble men and women, someone who is educated, someone who is kind, someone who is virtuous, someone who has an appreciation for the arts, for beauty, someone who is humane and benevolent, as I said. Someone who keeps his duty to his elders and keeps us duties to the ones who are in his community.

So self-cultivation is really a journey or a pursuit in how to be a better person, a better self, someone... You want to be better than your past self and you want to get to be better than your present self in that sense of the word. And of course, he prescribes what are some of the things that you should do in your journey to become a better person.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

The easiest way to get a sense of this better human being that Confucius aimed for is to read his analects a short compendium of his quotable sayings. It's really short, shorter than the New Testament and it's fascinating.

SPEAKER READS CONFUCIUS QUOTES:

Respect yourself and others respect will respect you.

To be wealthy and honored in an unjust society is a disgrace.

The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones.

Tsze-Kung asked, "Is there one word with which to act in accordance throughout a lifetime?" The master said, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

John Dickson:

Famously one of the things he said was a version of the golden rule; don't harm others, because you wouldn't want it done to yourself. So very much he valued peace, didn't he? Peace amongst human beings. It was not really a power trip or a violence trip in any way.

I'Ching Thomas:

I think you brought up a really good point because what you know as peace, I think for the Chinese, we call it harmony. Because I think the pursuit of harmony is something that is very significant for cultural Chinese, and you see that expressed in our social relationships, in our relationship in our family. And I think it's got to do with our shame-honor culture as well.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

So that's Confucianism. In order to flourish, become a person of honor, justice and peace. Then there's Buddhism, a topic we'll explore in detail in its own episode, but I'Ching has some really important thoughts here. I want to know in particular what you would say about how Buddhism manifests itself in China, what is the Chinese vibe on Buddhism?

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

I'Ching Thomas:

Yeah, it's fascinating. When people think about Buddhism today, they would not see Buddhism as a foreign religion to the Chinese, but it is. It came from India. I mean, in comparison to Christianity, the Christian faith is still seen as a foreign religion, but not Buddhism. And I think one of the things that has contributed to that acceptance and embrace of Buddhism as their own is the fact that in a lot of ways, as you know, Buddhism is not as creedal as the Christian faith.

And along the way, I think, because it's much more open-ended and is not as creedal as Christianity, it was able to integrate very comfortably with the local belief system, especially with Daoism. There's a lot of similarities between Buddhism and Daoism. I mean, Daoism and shamanism believes in an afterlife and Buddhism believes in that as well. And so, they just marry very conveniently.

John Dickson:

And also, that idea of actionless action that you mentioned is very much like the detachment of Buddhism.

I'Ching Thomas:

Exactly. Exactly. And also in Buddhism, it is believed that we suffer because of our desire, of our cravings and therefore the solution to the problem is to cease from desiring, cease from craving. Very similar to Daoism where it is to return to the Dao where you leave your world behind and find a way in your actionless action to return to the Dao and be one with Dao again. And because of that, I think, Buddhism has very easily and very quickly been assimilated into the belief system of the Chinese people.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

So, China has its own rich, ethical and spiritual traditions, whether it's the very ancient shamanism or Daoism, Confucianism, or Buddhism. They've all been regarded as trustworthy paths to negotiating the spiritual realm and improving the self and/or society. It's no wonder then that under Chairman Mao, Christianity was treated as an unnecessary foreign invader. Professor Xi Lian.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

Xi Lian:

Well, the communists under Mao came to power in 1949, and that quickly was going to mark the end of Western missions because the communists were going to kick out the missionaries by the early 1950s. So, it was going to bring entirely a new era to the Christian movement in China.

John Dickson:

And is it possible to describe the cultural revolution? I mean, I know it's a massive field of scholarship but how would you characterize that cultural revolution? What were its goals and methods?

Xi Lian:

The cultural revolution broke out in 1966 and its most tumultuous and radical extreme phase lasted for about three years, but then it continued really until Mao's death in 1976. So officially the cultural revolution lasted for about 10 years and it was the most radical phase of Mao's revolution.

As the name would suggest, Mao attempted, not just to bring about a political revolution, he was not satisfied with the political revolution or the social revolution that had been introduced into China, but rather he wanted a cultural revolution. He wanted to completely remake the Chinese culture, and that was the extreme kind of revolution which wreaked havoc throughout China.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

Professor Lian has researched and written an amazing book titled *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China*. It's about a young woman who embodies this struggle between the old China and the new. Lin Zhao was born in 1932. And her life would embrace a passionate commitment to communism and then a passionate commitment to Christianity. She eventually became a fiery dissident in Maoist China. She started out in the mission schools, but then embraced communism with zeal. So, I want Xi to tell us about those early days before she was a dissonant.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

Xi Lian:

Yeah, so it was quite a torturous personal journey that she embarked on and that journey began at this mission school, the Laura Haygood Memorial School founded by Americans, the Southern Methodists. And the Methodists would try to re-introduce a kind of a gentle reformism to remake the Chinese society, to address the social ills and that's where she began.

But quickly it became clear to her that that kind of reformism was not radical enough. It did not promise a complete salvation or redemption of Chinese society. And so, during that time, she was hearing this gospel of communism which promised to end exploitation and injustice once for all and introduce this utopian society and she was drawn to that.

And the ironic thing is that she became an underground Chinese communist party member just a few months after her own baptism into the church. So somehow, in her mind, the two things could fuse together. This baptism into the church and this baptism into the revolution could somehow become one. It's unthinkable from our perspective, but at that time, in fact, it was quite a popular thing to do for many of the radical students who saw Christianity and communism as embarking on a same kind of mission to remake the Chinese society.

John Dickson:

And is it, especially because Methodism historically has been very concerned for the poor and the outcast. And so that step to communism one can see it come on.

Xi Lian:

Yeah. I think you're right. There were mission societies, for instance, like the China Inland Mission, which was a very conservative and very individualistic kind of preaching, a very individualistic kind of Christian faith that did not invest as much as the Methodist missions did on things like education or healthcare. So, there is that that characteristic that we find in the Methodist missions.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Lin Zhao was an educated Chinese nationalist, a Christian convert and an ardent communist, at least for a while. These seem like contradictory traditions. But as I'Ching tells me, there are elements in the Christian faith that resonate with the historic Chinese longings. Even behind the venerable tradition of Confucianism, there is an often-overlooked theism, a sense that behind everything and perhaps just out of reach, there is a mind that rules all.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

John Dickson:

You said a moment ago that he has been misunderstood as a humanist, and it reminds me one of the things that struck me when I read some of the Confucius literature, he talks a lot about heaven, I mean as a metaphor of something above us. He says, heaven guides us heaven determines our future. Heaven this, heaven that. What do you think he means by that?

I'Ching Thomas:

I think when he talks about heaven, he is referring to the one Supreme Lord or God. There is a belief of Shangdi, which is the one Supreme Lord, the one God. Obviously, I started off talking about Shen and Guei ... and Shen which commonly in Chinese language, people use it interchangeably with the term God, but Shen is actually good spirits. It's not really God.

Shangdi is the one Supreme God. So, there is an evolution, if you trace back, of how it was Shangdi and over time as it syncretized with some of the belief system and eventually neo-Confucianism with



Buddhism and so on, it has evolved from reference to the one Supreme Lord from Shangdi, to heaven, Tian, but yet heaven is used interchangeably with Shangdi, which is a Supreme Lord.

In Confucius' writings, he often talks about the mandate of heaven and what this is is that there's this belief that the heavens know best. Shangdi knows best what's best for us as humanity, as people. And therefore, I believe that even as Confucius was writing and talking about how we should be better noble men and noble woman, there's this belief that we should seek the will of the heavens as to how we should do that.

He may not have explicitly talked about it, but in the Analects, in one of his discussions and dialogue with his followers, he actually talked about praying to heavens for the healing of one of his followers.

John Dickson:

This reminds me of the ancient Jewish tradition of avoiding naming God and speaking, instead, of heaven, Jesus actually followed that tradition. In Mark's gospel, you frequently hear Jesus speak of the Kingdom of God when God comes to make all things well. But in Matthew's gospel, a gospel clearly written for a more Jewish audience, these same statements of Jesus are usually rendered kingdom of heaven.

They mean the same thing, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, but Matthew's way of putting it probably does preserve Jesus' usual way of speaking. Well, Confucius did something similar out of respect, referring to God as heaven. There is a kind of monotheism in Confucius, or at least henotheism, the one behind the many, that goes a long way back in Chinese culture, even before Confucius.

I'Ching Thomas:

Absolutely. I totally reject the theory that we started out polytheistic and evolved to be monotheistic. In fact, I think it's the other way around. Winfried Corduan has written a really good book on that and he's done a lot more research. But I think even as you look at Chinese history, I mean, if you look at the... In Beijing, they have what they call Temple of Heaven where they offer sacrifices, not to God in that sense. But it's an alter that faces heaven, there's a sacrifice and worship of heaven.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

It's popular to think that polytheism, the belief in many gods, came first in history and monotheism only evolved over the millennia. I'll explain later why I think the reverse is true, that monotheism is the root of all cultures and polytheism is the branches. In any case, the monotheism found in Confucius 500 BC makes clear that Christianity's vision of one Supreme Lord is not completely foreign to the Chinese mindset.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

And as Lin Zhao's belief in Christianity's single God grew stronger, her faith in communism slipped away, but then Lin Zhao somehow becomes disillusioned with the communist project. Can you tell us... I mean, what do we know of how she became disillusioned?

Xi Lian:

Well, the disillusion came very gradually. It was really hard for her to shake off this utopian believe, this fantasy in the communist revolution, being able to deliver the Chinese people once for all. So, after the communists came to power, she just threw herself into whatever political movement that the party unleashed. There was the Land Reform Movement, and she was quite happy to go along with it, even when it involves some degree of violence to suppress the landlords, for instance.

Many, many landlords were killed because they were deemed as the exploiting class. And so, during the Land Reform Movement, she witnessed some cruelty, she witnessed the hypocrisy of those petty potty cutters at the local level, but that still could not shake off her faith in the communist movement.

So really the turning point came in 1957 after Mao launched two campaigns, one was called the Hundred Flowers Campaign to entice the intellectuals to speak out, to criticize the party, promising them that you'll be fine and nobody will get into any trouble for criticizing the party, but immediately turning around to denounce more than a million people across the country as rightists and Lin Zhao also became one.

And so, throughout China, all critics were silenced and punished very harshly. So that really was the turning point and as she became entirely disillusioned in this party that was so autocratic and so intolerant of dissent and any kind of criticism.

John Dickson:

Did that send her back to Christianity, or was there something else that ignited or reignited that Christian faith?

Xi Lian:

Well, the interesting thing is that obviously during the early 1950s, when she threw herself into the party's work, she could not attend church on a regular basis because that was incompatible with her pursuit of communism, but I don't think she ever lost her faith. The roots that had developed during her year at Laura Haygood, of Christian faith had taken much deeper root than she realized.

So eventually after she was denounced as a whitist, she came back from the church. So, I think the real change was the external, her of practice, the fact that she returned to the church, went back to church services on Sunday. That was what people could see. But I think I suspect that throughout... In fact, there's no evidence that she ever abandoned her faith during those years when she was trying to do the party's work.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

The more disillusioned Lin Zhao became, the more strident her criticism of the communist party, and it led to her imprisonment. But what she pulled off from prison was remarkable and it had a significant, if little known, impact on the Chinese Christian landscape. That's a story coming up after the break.

SPONSOR BREAK: ZONDERVAN

This episode of Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book *Deep Peace* by Todd Hunter.

Hey Siri, what is peace?

Siri:

Peace is a concept of societal friendship and harmony in the absence of hostility and violence. Shall I continue?

John Dickson:

No, that's fine. Peace is one of those words that we all like the sound of, but many of us aren't quite sure how to get it. In fact, the pursuit of peace can often create more anxiety, not less. In *Deep Peace*, author, Todd Hunter, analyzes the anxiety and desperation of our times from bitter cutting personal attacks, to the atrocities of war. From pervasive racism to knee-jerk microaggressions.

It's no wonder we feel like the problems and challenges of our world far outstrip our ability to respond to them. And Hunter walks us through what peace really might be like based on what the Bible has to say about it. He argues that peace is a restoration to wholeness or completeness.

And he doesn't just mean the theory of peace, he offers practical things we can be doing in daily life to become people of peace. *Deep Peace* is published by Zondervan and it's available now at Amazon, of course, or just go to [zondervan.com](http://zondervan.com) for more information.

SPONSOR BREAK: ANGLICAN AID

John Dickson:

Right now, around the world, there are 129 million girls who don't go to school. And we know that for every additional year of primary school, a girl's future wage increases by 10 to 20%, they get married later. They are less vulnerable to violence. There is no doubt then that educating girls saves lives and builds stronger families and communities. Anglican Aid is committed to ensuring that girls are able to receive a quality education regardless of their economic circumstances.

Just in the last 12 months, Anglican Aid has supported 20 projects, either schools or vocational education initiatives around Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These projects are providing girls with a safe space to learn and grow. They're been given a chance to create a better future. You can help Anglican Aid do more of this essential work. I really trust these guys. I hope you will as well. Go to [anglicanaid.com.au/donate](http://anglicanaid.com.au/donate). That's [anglicanaid.com.edu/donate](http://anglicanaid.com.edu/donate).

SPONSOR BREAK ENDS

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Professor Lian's biography of Lin Zhao, *Blood Letters*, details an incredible story of an indigenous Christianity persisting under communist rule.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

John Dickson:

So, tell us now about her arrest and her imprisonment and her extraordinary writings in prison. I mean, this is one of the most fascinating things I have ever read.

Xi Lian:

Thank you. It's a painful story, as you can see. Her arrest was not an extraordinary thing because so many people at the time were arrested. And after she was denounced as a rightist, instead of going silent as almost everybody else did, she decided to fight back. And the way that she fought back was to write these two very long poems.

One of them called Prometheus's Day of Passion in which she presented Prometheus as a Christ-like figure who suffered because he dares to oppose this tyrannical Zeus and to steal this fire or freedom and bring it to humanity. And so that was her way of fighting back against Mao's tyranny.

For that and for her participation in the publication of this underground journal called *A Spark of Fire*, she was arrested and thrown into jail, that was 1960. Now, again, even that was not extraordinary because I mean, so many people were imprisoned and so many people became counter-revolutionaries and they were just locked up and that would be the end of it.

And you would try to toe the party line, you would try to accept and undergo bizarre thought reform. And you would be fine after 15, 20 years and you'd be out of prison, but she decided not to do that. She refused to be silenced because she did not believe she was wrong. She did not believe that she could undergo that kind of reform because there was nothing wrong with her.

She says, "It's the party that is wrong." And this is what I find is truly extraordinary about Lin Zhao, and that is, I don't think that would have been possible without her Christian faith. It's her faith that gave her the sense of duty that she had to oppose what she called the tyranny and slavery of communism.

John Dickson:

And she wrote not just with a pen on paper, tell me about these letters.

Xi Lian:

That's right. And so instead of writing her confessions in prison, she started writing all kinds of things, poems and essays castigating Mao's revolution and this communist system. And so, during certain period of time, when she was under interrogation, when she refused to write the kind of things that she would, they took away her pens and paper. So, there was no stationary and she was handcuffed behind her back.

So, under those circumstances, the only way for her to keep up her writing was using her own blood. And then the title of the book came from that particular form of writing. So, she pokes her finger with a sharp bamboo or something, or even the back of her toothbrush after she grounded on the concrete floor to sharpen it and poked her finger and then started writing or whatever she could find.

She wrote it on her shirt. She wrote it on torn pieces of her sheet. So, her blood writing was both in matter of necessity, but also later on, even when she got her stationary back, there were moments when she would still go back. She would go back to her blood writing as a form of protest.

John Dickson:

Am I right in thinking she wrote something like 100,000 characters?

Xi Lian:

Oh, that's the... One letter that she wrote from her prison cell to the people's daily. And this particular letter, well she did that in ink with ink, she said. She was very careful, very clear about what she did with ink, and what she did with her blood. This particular letter was written in ink, and it was 140,000 characters. But she stamped each page with a personal seal that she made, and that was stamped in her own blood. So, she still put her own blood to every page of what she wrote.

John Dickson:

So, does that translate to something like 100,000 words when you translate it? Or is it not that much? I'm just trying to get a sense of the literary output of this woman.

Xi Lian:

The literary output is almost unthinkable. Of course, that happened not all at once, but at various points throughout about between 1960, when she was first imprisoned and 1968 when she was executed. So, during those years she produced a steady stream of writing that total about 500,000 Chinese characters.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

Mao Zedong's revolution inflicted severe famines on his people, and his cultural purge sought to rid China of capitalists and traditionalist. One of his many famous mottoes was Mercy to the Enemy is Cruelty to the People. The end result of Mao's reconstruction program, including the enforced famines was between 10 and 50 million deaths. No one knows the precise number.

Among the countless numbers of intellectual martyrs in this period, there were, according to scholars like James T. Myers of the University of South Carolina, many thousands of Chinese Christians targeted for execution. Lin Zhao became one of them.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

Xi Lian:

She was sentenced in 1965. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison. So, the first few years there's a pre-sentencing interrogation, imprisonment, interrogation. It was the most brutal part, but then 1965, the 20-year sentence was passed on her. And so, supposedly this will be the end of it, right? She'll be spending the rest of her days and rot away in prison, except that she refused to back down and continued to denounce the violent ideology and practice of Mao's revolution.

And then came the cultural revolution of 1966, when everything was radicalized, when the revolution really enters into a feverish phase. And one consequence of that was that the suppression of counter-revolutionary activities also stepped up.

And because she had done so many things, that was the amount of sacrilege against Mao's revolution. She would tear Mao's portrait that's painted on the front page of newspaper or smear his face with her own blood. All those kinds of set sacrilege just became unbearable, so her sentence was then changed to the death penalty. And so, she was put to death in April of 1968.

John Dickson:

And this was shot, that's how she was executed.

Xi Lian:

That's right. She was shot.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Let's press pause. I've got a 5 Minute Jesus for you.

There is a fascinating argument amongst historians and anthropologists about whether polytheism or monotheism is the more ancient. It's probably fair to say that the majority view is that belief in many gods, polytheism, is older, but I'm not alone in saying that's dead wrong.

Sustained philosophical monotheism is probably more recent, but it seems that wherever you go in history, there is talk of the one unreachable mind behind the many. There is a kind of lament built into all the traditional non-Abrahamic religious speculations. The myriad gods or spirits are a kind of coping mechanism or compensation for the fact that the reality behind everything feels too distance, perhaps ultimately, it's unknowable.

Chinese culture originally had this concept of Shangdi, the Supreme force behind all reality. Confucius later depersonalized this concept a little bit, anyway, when he spoke of heaven, not God, but he still speaks of heaven, calling him heaven, ruling everything, heaven, rewarding us and so on. And the spiritual void Confucius accidentally created by this de-personalization was eventually filled by untold numbers of Chinese deities and spirits. Monotheism was the root and polytheism the branches.

The same is true of indigenous religion in both America and Australia. In these traditions, so I'm told by those who know about such things, there is a great spirit that stands behind the more local spirits associated with landmarks and rituals. Indigenous religion does focus on these more local forces, not because they're thought to be more real than the underlying reality, but because they're more tangible, they're more knowable.

They are a kind of compensation for losing touch with the one behind the many. And this was certainly true for Greeks and Romans. They knew there was an eternal logos, a word or operating system behind creation. But in the absence of further information, pagan religion tended to focus on the more manageable placatable gods of the Greco-Roman Pantheon.

It's as if pagan religion said, if we can't know the architect of the universe, we might as well worship the bits and pieces of the house. If we can't know our cosmic parent, we should just make do like spiritual orphans with the scraps of transcendence we find lying around.

To this ancient universal longing and lament, the Gospel of John, in particular, has a stunning answer. John was clearly aware of what the ancient Greeks meant when they spoke of the distant logos or word behind the universe. And his opening paragraphs seemed tailor-made to tell us that although we may be spiritual orphans, if left to our own devices, the logos, the parent of us all has come looking for us.

“In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And God was the word. And this word became flesh and he dwelt among us.”

John opens his gospel, in other words, by saying the logos of the universe has stepped across the eternal threshold into history, in-person in the life of Jesus Christ. You can press play now.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

John Dickson:

Okay. So, I want to take all that we've said so far, we've thought about the spiritism and Daoism and Confucianism and Buddhism and the honor-shame paradigm. I want to talk about what Christianity offers Asia.

I mean, anyone who's been watching the news realizes that Christianity has been booming in China, in particular, but other Asian countries for the last 50 or 60 years. Unprecedented growth there. What do you think culturally and psychologically? We can leave the spiritual stuff aside for a second, but culturally and psychologically, what's the attraction with Christianity in Asia?

I'Ching Thomas:

I think the sense of just freedom, a sense of freedom and individual rights that has definitely been a key thing, I think, for a long time under the patriarchal cultural and religious systems that you find in Asia. Christianity is a breath of fresh air where we talk about our faith with God, our individual belief, our faith, we make our decisions. So, this is where the individualism is a positive spin.

John Dickson:

Are there questions that are sort of really basic in the Asian mindset that maybe Daoism has asked and Confucianism has asked and Buddhism has asked that you think people are finding the answers in Christ.

I'Ching Thomas:

Absolutely. And I think it goes back to what I talk about in my book about Confucianism, about how self-cultivation eventually would lead you to a point where you flourish. Human flourishing. Confucius talks

about human flourishing, but how do you get there? You get there through good education. You get there when you do well in this life, in this world.

But I think a lot of Chinese people are finding that, yes, we have achieved what we need to financially, we are no longer in poverty, like in the past, what now? Life still seems purposeless. And I think this is the perennial existential question that is asked by everyone in every culture. You've got all this, you've got to a point where, now what?

I remember talking to a management consultant who is a Chinese young lady in Beijing once, and she was doing very well in a career and we were having this conversation and she said, "Yeah, I'm very happy where I am. I'm married. I have a child. I'm doing very well in my career. I have never dreamt that I would make this much money in my life. My parents are happy because I'm supporting them and fulfilling my family duties as a child, but there's just this sense of emptiness."

And she says, "I don't know what it is. There's something more. And I don't know what it is." Of course, I knew what it was. And she was telling me about how a lot of her friends feel the same way. There's a sense of emptiness and they fill it with buying more stuff. And that's why consumerism is a huge problem in China. They have all this money, what do they do? There's this void. They have all this money. So, they buy things to fill this void that's empty.

So, I think there's this existential longing that exists whether you are poor or whether you are rich regardless of what culture you come from. And I think that China, especially, with just in the last 30 years having achieved what it's achieved economically, a lot of Chinese have gotten to a point, what next? What now? There's, why do I still feel empty?

Xi Lian:

The communist party had always accused Christianity of being a Western import, a part of the cultural aggression, cultural imperialism undertaken by Western missionaries. But the reality is that the faith has become an entirely Chinese faith that people could identify with. And I see three main reasons for people's response to Christianity.

And the first one is that the Christian faith does empower people, the average to common people to deal with lives' struggles and crises. For a long time in the rural area, for instance, that did not have the medical care, the state-provided medical care. Many people turn to Christianity for faith healing and exorcism, that kind of things.

So, there's that level of people's response, which is a kind of individualistic faith, but then beyond that, the Christian faith also provides moral compass at a time that the Chinese society has been going through, after Mao, a period of ideological bankruptcy, and particularly the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 led to a total disillusionment with the ideology of communism in China.

So, the party, meanwhile, has tried to come up with a substitute for that bankrupt ideology. It is not appealing to a Chinese nationalism, ultranationalism as something to unite people, but at the end of the day, people still recognize this is a real crisis of this void of ideology in China, and Christianity has filled that void. It provides the kind of a moral north star to guide people in their lives' choices.

John Dickson:



What do you think they find in Jesus Christ when they have this existential question? What is it about Christ?

I'Ching Thomas:

I think what they have found in Christ is that there's this purpose and meaning to what life is about. It's no longer about yourself. I think it's a pretty sad purpose in life if you live for yourself. I think in Christ, you find a larger purpose in life. You're no longer living for these things, but you're living for a mission, in that sense, seeing the kingdom of God come, seeing...

And really looking at what human flourishing is about, which is what Shalom is, making a difference in terms... And I think when they look around them, and I'm referring to specifically in China, Chinese people, when they look around them, there's so much wealth, but yet at the same time, there's so much immorality and evil.

There's a lot of corruption and cheating. And I think that leads them to ask, there must be something more and I think they find that in Jesus, when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." And if you read the Gospel is very clear what this life is about, and Jesus gives that larger meaning to life.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

I asked I'Ching if she reckons there are ways people have presented Jesus as too Western. Jesus wasn't Western or Eastern, he was middle Eastern. Have we obscured that?

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

I'Ching Thomas:

Oh, absolutely. I mean, obviously historically, if you look at how the Christian faith arrived in China, I mean, it was, I always say, on the coattails of the imperialist and the colonialists, right? And they traveled upstream in the river on the boats with a lot of these traders who brought opium to the people of China. And if you talk to any Chinese people, that is definitely one of the radical damages that the west has brought to China. Even today, there's a lot of resentment.

I think that has tainted the impression of Christianity, one. And secondly, I think it's the way we've shared the gospel. And it's understandable that if you come from the west and if you come from a Judeo-Christian worldview, the whole idea of guilt and how in Christ we can have our sins washed away. We have sinned against this one, true God, and therefore we can be saved.

The whole salvation that is couched in the language of guilt and innocent is very easily accepted in the west. However, in the east, because there's a much more shame and honor culture the whole gospel when couched in the language of guilt innocent, yes, obviously nobody wants to be guilty, right? And yes, I want to be saved from my guilt. I don't want to be guilty. I want to be innocent, but I think it doesn't go deep enough to really deal and bring true transformation.

John Dickson:

I'm going to put you on a spot with a final question and ask you to look into the crystal ball. Based on current trends, do you have any idea how Christianity will fare in China in the next decades?

Xi Lian:

Well, there are different ways of looking at that. I have my colleagues in my field, some have projected this phenomenal growth of Christianity in terms of how Chinese Christianity might surpass that of the United States in terms of their number of followers, which [crosstalk 00:58:59]

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

By the way, Professor Lian is here referring to the work of Sociology Professor Fenggang Yang of Purdue university in Indiana. He's the author of the Oxford University press book, Religion in China. And he argues that on current growth rates, China is destined to become the largest Christian country in the world by the 2030s, with close to 250 million Chinese Christians.

Professor Lian, though, isn't so sure, he tells me, but he agrees with Yang that something very significant is going on. Despite government resistance, Christianity is somehow entering the mainstream in China.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

Xi Lian:

Which, by the way, I don't quite share. I think it will continue to have a vigorous growth in China, but I think number is only one side, is only one part of the issue. There are other things involved. I think what's really important for us to recognize is that Christianity is coming into the cultural mainstream as a faith that inspires people.

It has credibility that the communist movement no longer has, and it emboldens people to do things that would have been unthinkable otherwise in the same way that in emboldened Lin Zhao to oppose communism in her time. Let me give you one example. You probably know that December of 2020 a young woman, a citizen journalist by the name of Zhang Zhan, who had gone to Wuhan during the COVID lockdown in Wuhan to report on the real situation on the ground, because the state media would not report on the real situation.

She saw that as her Christian duty to tell the truth, and she produced a lot of writings actually, during those times when she was filming. And so, I think she is one example of this search for civil society in contemporary China, that has been inspired by the Christian faith. And for that she was sentenced to four years in prison. I can see the same kind of thing happening with Christianity continuing to inspire people to do what people believe to be the right thing to do.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL:

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Next episode, we take a look at the universal yet undervalued human relationship of friendship. And we ask, is there something in contemporary culture that makes it hard for us to find and keep true friends? See yah.

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