

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reaching Chinese in the World—Christian Literature in Post-war Hong Kong

Yun Zhou

School of Culture, History & Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Email: yun.zhou@anu.edu.au

Abstract

During the Cold War, various political forces sought to shape the mindset of the Chinese diaspora. One understudied cultural influence that played an important role in reaching overseas Chinese was Chinese Christian literature. Focusing on *Dengta* (*Lighthouse*, 1956–1967), the first Chinese Christian magazine aimed at non-Christian communities in the diaspora, this study examines how the magazine developed an evangelical discourse that engaged with the cultural and spiritual identities of the Chinese diaspora amid political and ideological conflicts. Published in Hong Kong, which emerged as a hub for Chinese Christian literature in the post-war period, the magazine reflects a pivotal shift in Chinese Christian publishing: the start of a global movement aimed at evangelizing overseas Chinese. To appeal to the diaspora, *Dengta* adopted an ethnic and cultural rhetoric of Chineseness and presented Christian ideals in a context that resonated with the experiences of the Chinese diaspora. I argue that the Chineseness promoted by *Dengta* helped construct a transregional and transnational sense of belonging for overseas Chinese by framing a blend of traditional Chinese culture and modern knowledge within a Christian cosmic worldview. This study foregrounds the evangelical efforts of Christian literary workers to shape the diasporic experience amid the political tensions of the Cold War.

Keywords: Chineseness; diaspora; Christian literature; *Dengta*; the Cold War; Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The term “Cold War” often refers to the geopolitical tension between the US-led camp and the Soviet-aligned communist bloc following the end of WWII. During the Cold War, various political forces sought to shape the mindset of the Chinese diaspora. With the rise of the People’s Republic of China, concerns over “China-mindedness” emerged among colonial authorities in Southeast Asia. Scholars have

shown that competing forces at the time engaged in the “imaginings of a Chinese ‘motherland’ (and of Chineseness without a ‘motherland’)” to serve their political agendas.¹ However, little attention has been paid to the role of Chinese Christian literature in shaping cultural discourse among diasporic communities. While existing research has noted the transnational Christian literary network throughout China and Southeast Asia during the Republican period (1912–1949),² it was in the 1950s that Chinese Christian literature began to decouple from its geographic center and focus more on overseas Chinese. As Hong Kong emerged as a hub for Chinese Christian publishing following the 1949 political shifts in China, Christian literary workers launched a range of evangelical initiatives aimed at reaching the Chinese diaspora, adding their own efforts to shape diasporic identities into the broader context of Cold War ideological competition.

This article examines how evangelical writers navigated political and ideological conflicts through the case study of *Dengta* (*Lighthouse*, 1956–1967), an influential Christian monthly published by the Christian Witness Press of the China Inland Mission in Hong Kong.³ *Dengta* was the first Chinese Christian magazine designed to reach non-Christians worldwide. Its global evangelical vision distinguishes it from contemporary Chinese Christian publications, which often target believers. The magazine marks a pivotal shift in Chinese Christian publishing, signaling a global movement aimed at evangelizing overseas Chinese. To appeal to this audience, *Dengta* adopted an ethnic and cultural rhetoric of Chineseness and presented Christian ideals in a context that resonated with their experiences. The term “Chineseness” refers to a dynamic process of negotiating what it means to be Chinese. As Weiyu Zhang suggests, this ongoing identity work is best understood when Chineseness is seen as “a constitutive element of the world and is relational to other identity works” in host countries.⁴ *Dengta*’s evangelical discourse engaged with the cultural and spiritual identities of the Chinese diaspora. I argue that the Chineseness promoted by *Dengta* helped construct a transregional and transnational sense of belonging by integrating traditional Chinese culture and modern knowledge into a Christian cosmic worldview.

Dengta was published and circulated at crucial “diaspora moments” when the notion of Chineseness was contested and challenged in Southeast Asia. In light of Shelly Chan’s study of diasporic Chinese experience, this article adopts an analytical paradigm that treats the notion of diaspora as a series of moments linking to an imagined homeland or cultural identity. The term “diaspora,” originally referring to the Jewish people in exile, has become a common framework in migration studies. Scholars of Chinese migration, however, critique the notion of diaspora for its tendency to flatten differences and

¹Jeremy E. Taylor, “Putting ‘Chineseness’ Back into Cold War Cultures,” in *Chineseness and the Cold War: Contested Cultures and Diaspora in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong*, ed. Jeremy E. Taylor and Lanjun Xu (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 8.

²Joshua Dao Wei Sim, “Making the South Seas a ‘Chinese’ Mission Field: Chinese Evangelical Missionaries to Southeast Asia, 1920s to 1950s,” *Mission Studies* 39 (2022): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341861>; and Daowei Sim, “Bringing Chinese Christianity to Southeast Asia: Constructing Transnational Chinese Evangelicalism across China and Southeast Asia, 1930s to 1960s,” *Religions* 13, no. 9 (2022): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090773>.

³While *Dengta* [燈塔 in Chinese characters] ceased its publication in 1970, this paper focuses on the period until 1967, which was compiled in microfilms that I could obtain.

⁴Weiyu Zhang, “Chineseness as method,” *Global Media and China* 8, no. 4 (2023): 516, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364231214074>.

essentialize Chinese identity into a singular construct. They argue that using the notion of diaspora as an analytical tool overlooks the rich diversity and complexity within diasporic communities. In response, Chan introduces temporality as an analytical tool to study overseas Chinese communities. By foregrounding diasporic experiences that challenge rigid, monolithic views of cultural identity, this paradigm restores the fluidity of Chineseness, acknowledging it as a dynamic and context-sensitive concept in constant flux, and its negotiation as a key process in Chinese immigrant history.⁵ This article applies Chan's concept of temporality to *Dengta*, exploring how the magazine facilitated a space for its readers to navigate and negotiate their identities about an evangelical vision of Chinese culture and history. By engaging with *Dengta*, readers were positioned at intersections between faith, culture, and overseas Chinese communities. Readers' encounters with *Dengta* thus illuminate an understudied aspect of the diasporic experience mediated through evangelical literature. This article foregrounds the evangelical efforts of Chinese Christian literary workers to shape the diasporic experience amid the political tensions of the Cold War. It examines how *Dengta* emerged within the thriving Christian publishing landscape of post-war Hong Kong and developed a religious discourse of Chineseness.

II. Shifting Chinese Christian Literature and Post-war Hong Kong

An integral part of Protestant missions in modern China was their publication enterprises. Pioneer Protestant missionaries turned to literary work due to imperial decrees that prohibited missionary activities and public preaching in the early nineteenth century. After missionaries were allowed to build churches and preach the gospel throughout the Qing empire after the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) and the Convention of Peking (1860), Christian literary work remained on the agenda of missionary societies, though rarely as a priority. Most societies, as John Tsz-pang Lai notes, delegated literary work to prominent tract and literature societies.⁶ With the arrival of liberal-minded missionaries in the late nineteenth-century China who aimed to launch broad socio-cultural transformation, leading Christian publishers published a wide array of religious books, periodicals, and tracts. Christian publications surged during the Republican period, with Protestant publishers established in many Chinese cities, including Shanghai, Beijing, and Chengdu.⁷ In the study of Chinese Christianity in the modern period, Lai even advocates a "literary turn" to foreground the role of Christian texts in exploring the dynamic encounter of Chinese literary traditions and Christian thinking.⁸

When the Communist Party won the civil war (1945–1949) against the Nationalist Party and established a new regime in 1949, Christianity underwent a series of reforms in line with government social ideals. The United Front Work which oversaw religious

⁵Shelly Chan, "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2015): 107–128, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001703>.

⁶John Tsz-pang Lai, "Christian Literature in Nineteenth-Century China Missions—A Priority? Or an Optional Extra?," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no. 2 (2008): 72–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693930803200205>.

⁷The total number of Protestant publishers was fifty-eight in 1917, increasing to eighty-two in 1933, with a concentration of forty-nine publishers in Shanghai. See Hoi-Lap Ho, *Protestant Missionary Publications in Modern China* (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2004), 71.

⁸John Tsz Pang Lai, *Literary Representations of Christianity in Late Qing and Republican China* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

policy established the basic principles regarding Christianity and required it to be severed from imperialism and operated by Chinese people. In the context of the Korean War, the government intensified campaigns to eliminate American imperialist influence, leading to a mass reform campaign within Christian organizations.⁹ Amid the anti-imperialist patriotic transformation of Christianity in China, the religious publishing industry came under increasing centralized political censorship and was eventually incorporated into the state's planned publishing system in early 1956.¹⁰

The political upheaval during the Chinese civil war led to the southward relocation of several Protestant publishing institutions to Hong Kong. While some missionary societies withdrew all or most of their resources from Hong Kong to elsewhere in fear that the Liberation Army would take Hong Kong back, some chose to stay in Hong Kong due to the large number of diasporic Chinese there.¹¹ Christian literary work for Chinese people consequently surged in Hong Kong. According to Ying Fuk-tsang, Christian literary work in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s can be divided into three categories. A prominent one was major Christian publishers who either relocated to Hong Kong or established branches there, eventually concentrating their literary work in Hong Kong after foreign missions were expelled from China in the early 1950s. Among these Christian publishers were the Christian Witness Press of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF, previously known as CIM—the China Inland Mission) and the Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese (CCLOC), which succeeded the work of the interdenominational Christian publisher the Christian Literature Society. The second category was comprised of publishing departments established by several denominations after relocating to Hong Kong. The third type of literary work involved Christian publishers newly established in Hong Kong, primarily by individual Christians.¹² With the influx of mission funds and evangelists from mainland China, Hong Kong rapidly emerged as a center for Chinese Christian publishing enterprises.

The political changes in China in 1949 altered the trajectory of Chinese Christian publishing, prompting Christian groups to focus more on overseas Chinese communities. In 1956, a conference was convened by the CCLOC to better understand the tasks facing Christian literary workers and find a more united and effective approach to accomplish them. Representatives of various Christian publishing organizations in Hong Kong as well as delegates from the chief overseas centers of the Chinese church attended the conference. Driven by the belief that the “ministry of the written word is a Christian vocation,” there was a consensus among participants who viewed print media as the most efficient tool to evangelize overseas Chinese at the time.¹³ Regarding the question of how

⁹Fuk-Tsang Ying, “The CPC’s Policy on Protestant Christianity, 1949–1957: An Overview and Assessment,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 89 (2014): 886–890, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2014.882565>.

¹⁰Chen Ling, “Xin Zhongguo chengli chuqi jidujiao chubanye zouxian lianhe de qianyinhouguo” 新中国成立初期基督教出版业走向联合的前因后果 [The Causes and Consequences of the Unification of the Christian Publishing Industry in the Early Years of the People’s Republic of China], *Dong Yue Tribune* 39, no. 5 (2018): 78–90.

¹¹Fuk-Tsang Ying and Pan-Chiu Lai, “Diasporic Chinese Communities and Protestantism in Hong Kong During the 1950s,” *Studies in World Christianity* 10, no. 1 (2004): 140–142, <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2004.10.1.1>.

¹²Fuk-tsang Ying 邢福增, “Wushi zhi liushi niandai de Hong Kong Jidujiao wenzi chubanshiye” 五十年代的香港基督教文字出版事业 [Christian Publications in the 1950s and 1960s in Hong Kong], accessed May 19, 2023, <http://acp.org.hk/christian-publishing-industry-3/>.

¹³*Report of The Hong Kong Conference on Chinese Christian Literature October 30–November 2, 1956* (Hong Kong: Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese, 1956), 23.

to “better serve the Cause of Chinese Christian literature,” Rev. Lee Ching Ming, the chairman of the Publications Committee of the CCLOC, highlighted the importance of delving deeper into Chinese culture and bringing to the Chinese people “a realization that the Chinese Church has a glorious history of its own.” Rev. Lee advocated that the CCLOC was “not merely for Chinese, but of Chinese” and similar attempts should be made by the Chinese Christian community.¹⁴ While the emphasis on the role of Chinese Christians in producing literature reflects a determination to indigenize printed materials, many Christian publications in the 1950s and 1960s continued the mission work previously conducted in mainland China and few original works published in Hong Kong at the time.¹⁵

A notable change during the transition period of Chinese Christian literary work was its increasing orientation toward a global approach. Historically, Christian publishing efforts had been hampered by dispersed resources and a lack of unified, far-reaching plans, as many Christian organizations operated independently.¹⁶ However, the 1950s and 1960s saw a notable interdenominational and interregional collaboration, leading to the formation of the Hong Kong Christian Writers’ Fellowship and the establishment of a global network for distributing printed materials.¹⁷ The question of how to reach the broader Chinese diaspora was a key topic at the 1956 conference on Chinese Christian literature. At the time, it was reported that regions such as Malaya, Borneo, Indonesia, Taiwan and Burma had a combined Chinese population of thirteen to fourteen million. An estimated 50 percent were literate in Chinese, though only 2–10 percent were able to read advanced Chinese. In response to these limitations, conference participants emphasized the need to produce printed materials with simplified vocabulary to maximize accessibility.¹⁸ With a renewed focus on Chinese communities outside mainland China, Hong Kong-based Christian presses began to export gospel tracts, magazines, books, and posters across Southeast Asia and beyond.

III. *Dengta*: Globalizing the Gospel to Non-Believers

The early 1950s provided the context for the emergence of *Dengta*. When the CIM, an interdenominational mission society active in China since 1865, retreated to Hong Kong, it readjusted its mission focus. In 1951, the CIM convened a conference in the United Kingdom, where it formally changed its name to the OMF. This rebranding marked a strategic shift in its focus toward serving overseas Chinese communities and other populations in new mission fields. The mission society adapted its evangelical strategies and redeployed its missionaries to various regions, including Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, and Thailand. The OMF relied on cooperation with mission partnerships such as Protestant mission forces and indigenous Christian leaders in these mission fields. By the end of 1952, the OMF had stationed 199 missionaries across seven countries and regions in the Pacific rim. Noting the importance of printed materials in evangelism, the OMF carried on its literary program under the new name of the Christian Witness Press

¹⁴Ibid., 15.

¹⁵Ying, “Wushi zhi liushi niandai de Hong Kong Jidujiao wenzi chubanshiye.”

¹⁶Cao Xinming 曹新銘, “Jidujiao wenzi gongzuo de jiantao (shang)” 基督教文字工作的檢討(上) [Review of Christian Literary Work (Part 1)], *Christian Weekly* (August 30, 1964): 2.

¹⁷Ying, “Wushi zhi liushi niandai de Hong Kong Jidujiao wenzi chubanshiye.”

¹⁸Report of *The Hong Kong Conference on Chinese Christian Literature*, 29.

based in Hong Kong. Until autumn in 1951, it distributed evangelical tracts to mainland China, and then shifted focus to Mandarin-speaking populations in new mission fields when the mainland closed its door to foreign missions. The Press later expanded its program and by the early 1960s had distributed millions of tracts, tens of thousands of bible study booklets, and gospel posters in thirty-five languages.¹⁹ *Dengta* was one of its literary initiatives aimed at reaching the Chinese diaspora.

The founding editor of *Dengta* was Rev. Paul H. Bartel, a former Alliance missionary who used to be the co-editor of the bimonthly *Shengjing Bao* (*The Bible Magazine*), a periodical published by the Alliance Press in 1947 in Shanghai.²⁰ In 1949 Bartel moved the Alliance Press to Hong Kong.²¹ The initiative to reach overseas non-Christian Chinese through a monthly magazine began around 1954, when Bartel envisioned creating a Christian publication for this demographic. He collaborated with colleagues from the Christian Witness Press, who shared his passion for Christian literature. Chinese editor Liu Yiling was a former Republican diplomat in India in the 1940s who converted to Christianity in Pakistan. Later Liu relocated to Hong Kong and worked on translation.²² In the early years of *Dengta*, Liu worked with Bartel and took on the role of editor independently when Bartel retired. Liu continued as editor until the 134th issue was published in August 1967. Wu Huaizhen took over as editor for subsequent issues until 1970.²³ Throughout its course, the magazine's diverse columns included religion, education, home life, hygiene, novels, stories, biographies, an English section, book reviews, church news, photos, and readers' correspondence. As a global evangelical magazine, *Dengta*'s editorial board actively welcomed feature stories from overseas Chinese, particularly those focusing on church life, local culture, the daily life of overseas Chinese communities, and their interactions with local populations.²⁴

Dengta's approach to reach non-Christians with Christian materials met with resistance from some within the Christian community. At a time when the primary mission of Chinese Christian publishers was to nurture the spiritual life of churches and believers, Christian magazines were largely directed at a Christian readership, focusing on biblical teachings, faith-related topics, and issues pertinent to children, youth groups, and family life.²⁵ Zhou Tianhe (Rev. Daniel Tin-Wo Chow), a frequent contributor to *Dengta*, identified three types of opposition to this outward approach. First, some critics argued that articles for non-Christians lacked "spiritual value" (*shuling jiazhi*), citing the verse about building with wood, hay, and straw in 1 Corinthians 3:12. Second, others claimed that their spiritual gift was "inward" (*duinei*), meaning they wrote effectively for believers

¹⁹Anthony J. Miller, *Pioneers in Exile: The China Inland Mission and Missionary Mobility in China and Southeast Asia, 1943–1989* (PhD diss.: University of Kentucky, 2015), 204–218.

²⁰聖經報 in Chinese characters.

²¹Jean DeBernardi, *Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819–2000* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 271.

²²Liu Yilin, ed. 劉翼凌, *Fuyin jicheng* 福音集成 [A Collection of the Gospels] (Berkeley: United Gospel Literature, 1982), 338–348.

²³"*Dengta* chuankuan qianhou de xiaogushi" 燈塔創刊前後的小故事 [Stories around the Time when *Dengta* was Established], *Dengta* no. 134 (August 1967): 6. Liu resigned his editing work and went to the United States to reunite with his family. See Deng Maodeng 鄧茂登, "Jiju zhibie yu huanying de hua" 幾句致別與歡迎的話 [A Few Words about Farewell and Welcome], *Dengta* no. 135 (September 1967): 5.

²⁴"Tougao jianzi" 投稿簡則 [Submission Principles], *Dengta* no. 1 (July 1956): 32.

²⁵Ying's list shows that the number of Christian magazines peaked in the 1950s at seventeen, before declining to just four by the late 1970s. See Ying, "Wushi zhi liushi niandai de Hong Kong Jidujiao wenzi chubanshiye."

but found writing for non-Christians spiritually exhausting. Third, some felt that the writings of well-educated Christian authors were too difficult for *Dengta's* general readership to comprehend. In response, Zhou emphasized that the magazine's mission was to preach the gospel "outward" (*duiwai*), adopting an approach that subtly wove the gospel message into "secular" themes. Given the low literacy rate of the Chinese language among the diaspora, *Dengta* intentionally used simple and plain Chinese. Zhou ultimately affirmed that God's omnipotence could work through any form of writing to fulfill His purpose, whether directly or indirectly.²⁶

Dengta, a Mandarin-language magazine for non-Christian Chinese, had a wide circulation from the outset, primarily in the Asia-Pacific region but extending as far as the United Kingdom, the United States, South Africa, and Switzerland. In its launch year of 1956, the magazine had established fourteen communication offices around the world, in addition to its office in Hong Kong.²⁷ In 1957, more than 10,000 copies of the publication were distributed across forty countries.²⁸ By 1960, the magazine had reached seventy-three countries and the monthly circulation that year was around 20,000 copies.²⁹ By 1967, local offices dealing with subscriptions had increased to twenty-two. Readers in Taiwan could also place subscriptions at any local post office, indicating an extensive distribution network.³⁰ Additionally, Christian readers with evangelistic fervor acted as individual agents in distributing the magazine. The editorial board encouraged readers to purchase extra copies for friends and relatives.³¹ One example of the many readers who responded to this call was the famous Chinese evangelist Cai Sujuan (Christiana Tsai, 1890–1984), writer of *Anshi zhihou* (*Queen of the Dark Chamber*), who subscribed to sixty copies of the magazine for her friends.³² OMF missionaries also provided copies of *Dengta* for evangelical work in military hospitals and detention centers in Hong Kong and Taiwan.³³

Dengta was printed in Hong Kong and posted to Southeast Asia, unlike most production in the OMF literature program which was "dispersed among centers in Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila" while having "literature superintendent and other staff residing in Hong Kong." The decentralization of the literary work, according to Anthony J. Miller, was due to the fear of "political instability in the New Fields."³⁴ For over a decade, *Dengta* managed to attract a relatively stable number of subscriptions, until when the Indonesian government banned Chinese-language publications in 1968, leading to a loss of 5,000–7,000 monthly subscriptions. Coupled with the

²⁶Zhou Tianhe 周天和, "Wo zenyang wei Dengta xie wenzhang" 我怎樣為燈塔寫文章 [How Do I Write Articles for *Dengta*], *Dengta* no. 100 (October 1964): 34.

²⁷"Dengta yuekan gedi tongxinchu" 燈塔月刊各地通信處 [The Communication Offices for *Dengta* Magazine], *Dengta* no. 5 (November 1956): 32.

²⁸The editor, "*Dengta* zai quanshijie" 「燈塔」在全世界 [*Dengta* is Distributed around the World], *Dengta* no. 13 (July 1957): 1; "Bian hou hua" 編後話 [Words After Editing], *Dengta* no. 12 (June 1957): 31.

²⁹The editor, "Ganku simian" 甘苦四年 [Four Years of Joys and Sorrow], *Dengta* no. 49 (July 1960): 1.

³⁰"Dengta yuekan gedi dingyue jiamubiao" 燈塔月刊各地訂閱價目表 [The Price List for *Dengta* Magazine], *Dengta* no. 138 (December 1967): 32.

³¹"Xinxiang" 信箱 [Letter Box], *Dengta* no. 7 (January 1957): 30.

³²暗室之後 in Chinese characters. "Dengta liangyou" 燈塔良友 [*Dengta* as Good Company], *Dengta* no. 18 (December 1957): 30.

³³Miller, *Pioneers in Exile*, 219.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 218–219.

decline in the use of the Chinese language in overseas Chinese schools and even the closure of Chinese schools amid the rise of indigenous nationalism in Southeast Asia, *Dengta* eventually ceased in 1970.³⁵

As the first Chinese Christian magazine for non-believers outside mainland China, *Dengta* filled a gap by providing accessible Christian literature aimed at a broader audience to overseas Chinese communities. Although based in Hong Kong, local subscribers in the first year were under 1,000; most readers were overseas Chinese living in the Pacific rim.³⁶ A report published in *Dengta* in July 1957 shows that it was widely received in many mission fields. In Japan, *Dengta* was reported to be the most popular Chinese-language magazine and became a key tool for reaching the Chinese diaspora. It was equally well-received by the Chinese community in South Korea. Circulation in the Philippines reached around 1,000 copies: a relatively strong outcome given the size of the local Chinese population. In Taiwan, the report noted that a university subscribed to *Dengta*, and the magazine could be seen at newsstands in train stations and on the streets. In Malaya, even in small villages, the magazine was sold in several Chinese shops. In North Borneo, *Dengta* was available in bookstores. In Argentina, one reader subscribed to nine copies for friends and ordered another ten for his relatives. In New Zealand, another reader often gave *Dengta* to Chinese sailors.³⁷ One article highlights that the readership also included individuals without Chinese heritage who had learned the language. For instance, a Korean Christian studying Chinese literature at Seoul University transferred from a Korean church to the Seoul Chinese Christian Church. He wrote to the editorial board expressing his enthusiasm for the novels published in *Dengta* and his desire to read more issues featuring original religious novels created by the Chinese Christian community.³⁸ While the report circulated in *Dengta* may be written for fundraising purposes, readers' active responses as seen in the readers' columns introduced from late 1957 demonstrates the magazine's popularity among global Chinese diaspora communities.

The birth and popularity of *Dengta* highlight a shift in mission history among overseas Chinese communities. In the early twentieth century, evangelical work in the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was conducted by both Western and Chinese missionaries, facilitated by transnational networks that were centered in China. During this time, several Christian periodicals emerged to reach overseas Chinese. Before delving into a textual analysis of *Dengta*, it is beneficial to first compare *Dengta* with these pioneering evangelical literary works to form a comprehensive understanding of its distinct contributions and its place within the broader context of overseas mission history.

Nanzhong (Southern Bell, 1928–present)³⁹: *Nanzhong* was established by the Malayan Chinese Methodist Church and published in Singapore. Its founding purpose was to promote Christian doctrine and report on church activities. An issue published in 1949

³⁵Liang Guanting 梁冠霆, "Qishiniandai Hong Kong Jidujiao chuban zonglan" 七十年代香港基督教出版業綜覽 [An Overview of the Christian Publication in Hong Kong in the 1970s], accessed May 11, 2023, <http://acp.org.hk/christian-publishing-industry-4/>; Ying, "Wushi zhi liushi niandai de Hong Kong Jidujiao wenzi chubanshiye"; and Michael Anthony R. Ngo, "Resilience and Survival in the Twentieth Century of a Chinese School in Iligan City, Philippines," *China & Asia* 4 (2023): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2589465X-04020005>.

³⁶Liang, "Qishiniandai Hong Kong Jidujiao chuban zonglan."

³⁷The editor, "Dengta zai quanshijie," 1.

³⁸"Aidu Dengta xiaoshuo" 愛讀燈塔小說 [I Love Reading Dengta Novels], *Dengta* no. 40 (October 1959): 28.

³⁹南鐘 in Chinese characters.

shows that the magazine featured substantial religious content, including sections on preaching, revival, religious education, and youth evangelism.⁴⁰ The magazine remained bi-monthly until 2024 when it transitioned to a monthly publication. It is currently published by the Chinese Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Kuala Lumpur of Malaysia.⁴¹

Nandao Husheng (*The Call of the Southern Islands*, 1929–1935?)⁴²: Published in Guangxi Province in South China, the annual magazine *Nandao Husheng* was established by the Chinese Foreign Missionary Union (Zhonghua guowai budaotuan). The magazine's primary objective was to disseminate news about evangelical activities in Southeast Asia, then known as Nanyang. Despite the geographic focus of mission work being centered in China at the time, the magazine sought to “promote the call of missions to Nanyang in the churches of China.” It emerged from Alliance missionary Robert A. Jaffray's journey across the region south of China, where he observed “a vast un-Christianized space” with “a lack of churches and pastors to cater to” Chinese Christians there.⁴³ *Nandao Husheng* was published at least until 1935.⁴⁴

Changkai de men (*The Open Door*, 1937–1939)⁴⁵: *Changkai de men* was a bimonthly magazine distributed in China and Southeast Asia. It circulated news and the letters of Ni Tuosheng (1903–1972, also known as Watchman Nee), an influential church leader of the twentieth century. The magazine was founded during the escalation of the Japanese invasion of China with the aim of articulating the principles of evangelical work and connecting the scattered followers of Ni.⁴⁶

Magazines of Chinese Evangelistic Bands from the 1930s to 1940s: In his study of transnational Chinese evangelism across China and Southeast Asia, Joshua Dao Wei Sim observes that the large-scale Chinese migration to Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century created a context for the development of diasporic Christian networks. Song Shangjie (1901–1944, also known as John Sung), a prominent evangelist-revivalist, started the evangelistic bands in the 1930s, which later developed into a transnational network. The evangelistic bands established magazines, often titled “*Quanguo Jidutu Budaotuan Tuankan* or Nationwide Evangelistic Bands (or Leagues) Magazine,” to publish their evangelistic experiences to be disseminated throughout China and Southeast Asia. Sim notes the inaugural magazine was published in 1935 by Hangzhou Evangelistic League after Song's bible study meeting there.⁴⁷

Shengjing Bao (1913–1939, 1940–1941, 1947–1980, 2000–)⁴⁸: Initially established in Guangxi Province by Robert A. Jaffray, *Shengjing Bao* circulated writings by leading evangelical Christians and shifted from literary Chinese to Mandarin in the 1930s when

⁴⁰“Catalogue,” *Nanzhong* (December 1949): 1.

⁴¹“南鐘 Southern Bell,” accessed September 6, 2024, <https://methodist.org.my/southern-bell/>.

⁴²南島呼聲 in Chinese characters.

⁴³Sim, “Making the South Seas a ‘Chinese’ Mission Field,” 311.

⁴⁴She He 舍禾, “Nanyang kaihuang zhe (yi)” 南陽開荒者(一) [Pioneers of Nanyang (one)], *Great Commission Bi-Monthly* (August 2016): 36.

⁴⁵敞開的門 in Chinese characters.

⁴⁶DeBernardi, *Christian Circulations*, 283–285.

⁴⁷Sim, “Bringing Chinese Christianity to Southeast Asia,” 4–5.

⁴⁸The *Shengjing Bao* had intermittent circulation between 1947 and 1980. See “聖經報,” accessed September 7, 2024, <https://biblemagazine.org/download>.

the editorial office was moved to Shanghai. The content included biographies, bible expositions, and teachings.⁴⁹ The magazine began being published in Hong Kong from the third issue of 1949 after the Alliance Press relocated there. With nine branches and agencies including Penang, Singapore, Taiwan, Manila, and Surabaya at the time, *Shengjing Bao* had around 10,000 subscribers across Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ From 1962, the bimonthly magazine became a monthly publication and expanded to have sixteen agencies in various countries and regions.⁵¹

Shengming (*The Life*, 1949–1970s)⁵²: *Shengming* was published by Sheng dao (Holy Word) Press in Hong Kong, which was the publication department of the transnational Evangelize China Fellowship (ECF, Zhongguo budaohui) founded by Ji Zhiwen (also known as Andrew Ji). The magazine was initially established to supply churches in mainland China with regular Christian literature. It later became “one of the few regularly published magazines produced by a Chinese evangelical organization during the 1950s to 1970s” across the world. In 1960, according to Sim, “the magazine was sold from Hong Kong to distributors and supporters in parts of Southeast Asia, Taiwan, Australia, North America, France, and even the West Indies.” Content often included reports about “the activities of the different ECF branch organizations in Asia.”⁵³

An overview illustrates that most of these Christian magazines were centered in China before 1949, with *Nanzhong* being one of the few published by overseas Chinese Christians. In addition to religious content, several of these magazines reported on evangelistic activities, often led by well-known evangelists through transnational networks. In contrast to these “inward” approaches, *Dengta* took a more “outward” perspective by engaging a broader audience beyond the Christian community. It promoted an evangelical vision of Chineseness in the modern world, aiming to reach Chinese diasporas through a synthesis of cultural and religious perspectives.

IV. Advocating an Evangelical Rhetoric of Chineseness

The Cold War has been described as an ideological conflict where a vast amount of cultural production including radio broadcasts and printed material is generated amid propaganda campaigns launched by different political sides. From the end of WWII to the late 1950s, efforts were made by the United States, the People’s Republic of China, and the Republic of China to transform the minds and hearts of overseas Chinese who had Chinese heritage in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.⁵⁴ Literary scholars of Chinese-language texts produced during the time highlight the “complex interplays of international and national politics,” showing how diasporic cultural expression “creatively responded and adapted to local and global hegemonic forces.” In studying an influential non-Christian Chinese-language magazine titled *Chinese Student Weekly* (published in Hong Kong between 1952 and 1974), Shuang Shen explores how the magazine served as a

⁴⁹DeBernardi, *Christian Circulations*, 261–262.

⁵⁰“The Alliance Press,” *Shengjing Bao* 3, no. 5&6 (1949): cover page; “Jinji qishi” 緊急啓示, *Shengjing Bao* 5, no. 2 (1951): cover page.

⁵¹“Qing xiang xialie dailichu dingyue benbao” 請向下列代理處訂閱本報, *Shengjing Bao* 16, no. 2 (February 1962): 64.

⁵²生命 in Chinese characters.

⁵³Sim, “Bringing Chinese Christianity to Southeast Asia,” 10.

⁵⁴Meredith Oyen, “Communism, Containment, and the Chinese Overseas,” in *The Cold War in Asia: Battle for Hearts and Minds*, ed. Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 59–93.

network that “informed and intersected with the transpacific and intercultural production of ‘Chineseness’” in the context of Cold War.⁵⁵ Unlike the Cold War cultural infrastructure established by organizations sponsored by the United States such as *Chinese Student Weekly*, the Chinese Christian literary work examined in this article was driven not by political ideologies but by an evangelical vision. Christian publications of the time illustrate that Christian intellectuals were acutely aware of the political forces in post-war Hong Kong and wanted to maintain a clear separation between politics and religion. In a 1964 meeting hosted by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union, prominent Christian writer Cao Xinming (1896–1984) reflected on Christian literary work, stating that it should not be tainted by political influences as Christianity has its own theology of the heavenly Kingdom, which treats all nations and peoples equally.⁵⁶ *Dengta*’s evangelical approach differentiates itself from political propaganda by promoting a discourse of Chineseness that intertwines both cultural and religious perspectives. This section traces three threads of this discourse.

Promoting a Religious Cosmic View: In the whirlpool of post-WWII transformations, where political, economic, and cultural forces, along with Western influence, intersected to shape the identities and experiences of overseas Chinese communities,⁵⁷ *Dengta*’s evangelical discourse advocated a religious and cultural vision that synthesized traditional culture and modern knowledge into a Christian cosmic view. A distinctive feature of the magazine was the inclusion of traditional Chinese culture such as calligraphy and painting. From its inception, the magazine recognized the value of traditional culture, curating the Chinese characters *Dengta* in a font that was taken from the work of a leading Chinese calligrapher Yan Zhenqing (709–785) from Tang Dynasty. A reader once advised the editor, Liu Yiling, to change the calligraphic style of the Chinese title to a modern one, but Liu insisted on using Yan’s work as Yan was an influential Chinese calligrapher, and the two Chinese characters taken from Duobaota bei (inscription on Duobao Tower) were highly acclaimed. Liu believed that using Yan’s calligraphy, which represented mastery of traditional arts, would allow the modern-day audience to better appreciate the beauty of Chinese traditions and culture.⁵⁸

Many articles and images published in *Dengta* were about Chinese paintings by artists of the Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting. The founders of the Lingnan School endeavored to modernize traditional paintings “with new Western ideas and artistic techniques” and promote it as the “new national painting” in Nationalist China. After 1949, Hong Kong became “a natural refuge for non-Communist Cantonese artists” who were “supported by the local pride of a predominantly Cantonese population.”⁵⁹ One regular contributor to *Dengta* was Zhao Shao’ang (1905–1998), whom Ralph Croizier notes as “probably the most famous of all the second generation painters in the Lingnan School.”⁶⁰ Zhao was a leading figure in promoting Chinese paintings overseas and had

⁵⁵Shuang Shen, “Empire of Information: The Asia Foundation’s Network and Chinese-Language Cultural Production in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2017): 590, 592.

⁵⁶Cao Xinming, “Jidujiao wenzi gongzuo de jiantao (san)” 基督教文字工作的檢討 (三) [Reflections on Christian Literary Work], *Christian Weekly* (September 13, 1964): 2.

⁵⁷For a detailed discussion, see Jennifer Cushman & Wang Gungwu, eds., *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese Since World War II* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988).

⁵⁸“Qing huan fengmian Dengta erzi” 請換封面「燈塔」二字 [Please Change the Dengta characters], *Dengta* no. 14 (August 1957): 30.

⁵⁹Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906–1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5, 183.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 183.

held various exhibitions in the United States. After his American exhibition tour in 1960, *Dengta* published an interview with Zhao to highlight the importance of Chinese art.⁶¹ In 1963, Liu invited Zhao to write articles for the column on practical painting. From January 1965 onwards, the magazine regularly published Zhao's writings on painting theory and skills, and altogether published close to seventy articles in this column.⁶²

The promotion of traditional Chinese culture in *Dengta* paralleled the broader cultural revival in post-war Hong Kong. A prominent endeavor that sought to uphold Chinese tradition as opposed to the cultural iconoclasm launched by Chinese Communism was the establishment of New Asia College in Hong Kong in 1949. Grace Ai-Ling Chou demonstrates that the early history of the College reflects its mission guided by "principles of Confucian educational philosophy and Chinese culture."⁶³ However, unlike the nationalist agenda of the New Asia founders, Liu Yiling's inclusion of traditional Chinese paintings was motivated by their reflection of the aesthetical dimension of divine creation. As seen in the early 1960s debate about whether to circulate in *Dengta* the paintings and writings of Zhou Qianqiu (1910–2006) and Liang Canying (1921–2005), an artist couple in the Lingnan School who were not Christians at the time, Christian faith remained a key criterion for selecting paintings in Christian magazines. Nonetheless, there was a consensus among members of the Christian Association of Writers in Hong Kong—including Liu and Liu's successor, Wu Huaizhen—that Zhou's views aligned with the bible and that the work of both Zhou and Liang possessed high artistic refinement.⁶⁴ The debate sheds light on the intersection of religious beliefs and artistic expression, illustrating how Christian writers in Hong Kong justified the inclusion of non-Christian art within a faith-based framework and facilitated the broader integration of traditional culture into their evangelical discourse.

Another crucial dimension underpinning the religious cosmic view portrayed in *Dengta* is modern knowledge, which was incorporated into nearly every issue. These writings covered aspects of medical science, childrearing, hygiene, scientific development, biology, psychology, and photography. The two most regular themes were health and science, which in many cases were intertwined. The editorial board believed that physical health was just as important as spiritual health: therefore, the magazine aimed to publish articles on wellbeing and hygiene.⁶⁵ Over time, the religious magazine published a series of articles on common diseases, including colds, dental hygiene, diarrhea, and cardiac disease. It also introduced cutting-edge medical research to readers in plain language. For example, in April the year after the ninth International Cancer Congress held in Tokyo in October 1966, *Dengta* published an article based on the report of Italian pathologist Umberto Saffiotti, who spoke at the opening scientific sessions of the Congress about the

⁶¹ Dengta journalist, "Zhao Shao'ang youmei guilai" 趙少昂遊美歸來 [Zhao Shao'ang Returning from the United States], *Dengta* no. 63 (September 1, 1961): 1–3.

⁶² Guan Guoxuan 關國煊, "Lingnan huapai di'erdai zongshi Zhao Shao'ang" 嶺南畫派第二代宗師趙少昂 [Zhao Shao'ang—the Master of the Second Generation of the Lingnan School of Painting], *傳記文學* 72, no. 6 (1998): 50.

⁶³ Grace Ai-Ling Chou, *Confucianism, Colonialism, and the Cold War: Chinese Cultural Education at Hong Kong's New Asia College, 1949–63* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 3.

⁶⁴ Liu Guanghua 劉廣華, "Yanxing yizhi, shengming yishu: shijie ming yishujia Zhou Qianqiu kangli xinyang licheng" 言行一致, 生命藝術: 世界名藝術家周千秋伉儷信仰歷程 [The Deeds Matching the Words as Life Art: The World-Renowned Artist Couple Zhou Qianqiu and Liang Canying], *Chinese Baptist Church of Miami Home News* (December 2020): 11.

⁶⁵ "Bian hou hua" 編後話 [Editorial Afterword], *Dengta* no. 2 (August 1956): 32.

role of vitamin A in preventing and curing lung cancer.⁶⁶ The magazine translated his speech and used both descriptive words and terminology in Chinese and English to explain the research procedure and findings.⁶⁷ Positioned right after the cover page, this article attempted to popularize advanced medical knowledge among overseas Chinese communities. Likewise, the usage of the Chinese language to introduce scientific breakthroughs enabled Chinese readers to understand and conceptualize modern concepts that were otherwise conveyed in English.

By circulating medical knowledge together with other scientific knowledge ranging from energy to the cosmos, *Dengta* crafted a religious discourse of modernity that highlighted the alignment of the material aspects of the world with Christian faith. This perspective was evident in articles published in *Dengta* in August and September 1960 written by cancer expert Dr Tan Tianjun. These articles argued that God created the world and revealed Himself through both creation and the bible. The Christian view of science, as presented in the articles, was that science glorifies the divine being and enhances human welfare.⁶⁸ The narrative of a modern world governed by a divine being differs from the secular writings at the time. In the context of the Cold War, research shows that the term “modernity” was linked to the reimagining of the nation in mid-twentieth century Chinese literature following the 1949 political division. Chinese writers at the time took different directions in response to socialist agendas, colonial modernity, anti-Communist regimes, and the global arena.⁶⁹ The Christian magazine *Dengta*, however, engaged with the cultural discourses from an apolitical perspective and integrated modern knowledge into its religious framework. It helped overseas Chinese-language speakers conceptualize a modern world that harmonized faith with contemporary realities, encouraging them to embrace Christian beliefs while maintaining their cultural heritage. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Chinese communities cultivated a “more flexible” cultural identity to facilitate their integration into the emerging host nation-states,⁷⁰ *Dengta* reaffirmed their cultural roots.

Remapping Chinese History and (Re)structuring Everyday Life: In his study of overseas Chinese Christians, Sim argues that religious ethnocentrism became a prominent form of identity after WWII. It denotes narratives that stress “the special obligation of the Chinese Christians to evangelize the world, and the need to proselytize the Chinese diaspora.” In short, this type of overseas Chinese Protestantism, as seen in transnational Chinese evangelical institutions worldwide, was “ethnic-centered—rather than China-centered.”⁷¹ However, such an interpretative framework risks oversimplifying the complex relationship between ethnicity and China as a country, particularly during the

⁶⁶Saffiotti’s research on Vitamin A was later published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in August 1969. See Umberto Saffiotti, “Role of Vitamin A in Carcinogenesis,” *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 22, no. 8 (1969): 1008.

⁶⁷Sim Changsheng 司馬長生, “Weitaming A dui fei’ai zhi fangzhi” 維他命A對肺癌之防治 [Vitamin A in the Prevention and Treatment of Lung Cancer], *Dengta* no. 130 (April 1967): 1–2.

⁶⁸Tan Tianjun 譚天鈞, “Kexue yu jidujiao xinyang” 科學與基督教信仰 [Science and Christian Faith], *Dengta* no. 50 (August 1960): 30; and Tan Tianjun 譚天鈞, “Kexue yu jidujiao Xinyang (xia)” 科學與基督教信仰 (下) [Science and Christian Faith 2], *Dengta* no. 91 (September 1960): 30–31.

⁶⁹Xiaoqie Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face: Reimagining the Nation in Chinese Literature Across the 1949 Divide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

⁷⁰Gungwu Wang, “The Study of Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia,” in *Changing Identities*, 5.

⁷¹Joshua Dao Wei Sim, “The Formation of Global Chinese Christian Identities,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society*, ed. Jayeel Cornelio, François Gauthier, Tuomas Martikainen, and Linda Woodhead (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 285.

transitional period following the 1949 political split. An examination of the evangelical writings in *Dengta* reveals efforts to situate China within the broader history of Christ's salvation. Whether addressing China's modern history or contemporary overseas Chinese communities, the magazine presents a Sino-Western Christian narrative intertwined with the goal of Christianizing the world, highlighting the universal nature of the Christian faith that transcends race, ethnicity, and geography.

At the 1956 CCLOC conference, there was a broad consensus among Chinese Christian literary workers on the need to demonstrate that the Chinese church had its own history. The editorial board of *Dengta* was also aware that many Chinese readers rejected Christianity due to its perceived foreignness. In a September 1961 article in *Dengta*, Zhou Tianhe noted that many "Chinese compatriots" saw Christianity as a foreign religion. Citing John 3:16, Zhou argued that Christianity was meant for all humankind.⁷² This ecumenical perspective was evident throughout the magazine, with many articles working to place China within the broader history of salvation. From its inception, *Dengta* published stories of both Chinese and foreign Christians who witnessed to their faith during the late Qing and Republican periods. In its second issue, the magazine featured the story of Shi Meiyu (1873–1954, also known as Mary Stone), who played a pioneering role in women's medical service and Christian mission work.⁷³ That same issue introduced readers to the first Chinese Christian martyr, Che Jinjiang. The author, Christian historian Jian Youwen, argued that Che died for his faith in Christ. Unlike Cai Gao, the first Chinese Christian who died in prison due to international politics, Che was killed by local bandits on October 15, 1861, after being tortured for his faith.⁷⁴ By choosing a figure with a less political narrative, the magazine emphasized personal sacrifice and individual religious devotion instead of focusing on the broader geopolitical context.

Dengta also published the evangelical work of foreign missionaries in modern China to demonstrate that God's love was transnational and cross-cultural. The magazine published two articles on Gladys Aylward in March 1958 when the British missionary visited her friends in Hong Kong. Aylward was famous for her evangelical work in China in the 1930s and 1940s. The two articles discussed how Aylward travelled to Shanxi without any Christian institutional support in 1930 yet conducted evangelical work among local people until 1949. Driven by the love of God, Aylward took in nearly 150 orphans and risked her life to take them to safety when the area was invaded by Japanese military forces.⁷⁵ She even burned her British passport when reminded by God to be devoted to the mission work in China.⁷⁶

The magazine highlights that Chinese Christians were active in evangelistic activities in domestic society and overseas Chinese communities. Several articles written by Wu Mu'en were devoted to the influential evangelist Song Shangjie. The author depicted one

⁷²Zhou Tianhe, "Buxin Yesu de sanda liyou" 不信耶穌的三大理由 [Three Reasons Not to Believe in Jesus], *Dengta* no. 63 (September 1961): 28–29.

⁷³Hu Meilin 胡美林, "Shi Meiyu yisheng zhuan" 石美玉醫生傳 [Biography of Dr Shi Meiyu], *Dengta* no. 2 (August 1956): 1–2.

⁷⁴Jian Youwen 簡又文, "Zhongguo jidujiao diyiwei xundaozhe Che Jinjiang" 中國基督教第一位殉道者車錦江 [The First Chinese Christian Martyr Che Jinjiang], *Dengta* no. 2 (August 1956): 8.

⁷⁵Yang Zhijian 楊志堅, "Weida de xiaofuren" 偉大的小婦人 [The Great Little Woman], *Dengta* no. 21 (March 1958): 1.

⁷⁶Ai Weide 艾偉德, "Wo weishenme ru Zhongguoji" 我為什麼入中國籍 [Why Did I Join Chinese Citizenship], *Dengta* no. 21 (March 1958): 2.

of Song's revival meetings that he attended in Chaoshan. According to Wu's account, Song's sermon focused on the doctrine of sin and advocated that the cleansing of sins was a prerequisite for the church to experience a spiritual revival. At the meeting, many believed in Christ because of the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷ Song's work also reached the Chinese community in Southeast Asia and was commemorated by local people. In an article published in the magazine in August 1966, the Thai-Chinese author Chen Enxing recalled a revival gathering in Thailand in 1938 where many local people repented and converted to Christianity. On May 25 the following year, Song revisited Thailand and healed a girl with mutism in Phrae. The news of this miracle was widespread across the region, and many started to believe in Christ.⁷⁸ Another Chinese evangelist who worked among overseas Chinese was Zhu Xinghun. In an article published in February 1966, the author Zhu Jianji wrote about the life of his father Zhu Xinghun, who pioneered missionary work in Vietnam and Indonesia. Born in Guangzhou, Zhu Xinghun received the divine call at an early age and worked at a local Presbyterian church after graduating from the Alliance Bible Seminary in 1917. Following the steps of Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary Robert Alexander Jaffray, he visited Vietnam in 1921 to establish new churches. There, he committed himself to preaching to local Chinese people and worked at the establishment of a Chinese church and a bible school for local women. After seven years, Zhu Xinghun travelled to Indonesia to establish a Chinese church. Later, he shifted his work to proselytizing indigenous Indonesians.⁷⁹

The incorporation of articles on Christian work in domestic Chinese society and overseas Chinese communities reconfigured Christianity as an integral part of modern history. The focal point throughout the narratives was to present a past that was Christianized. Some articles written by contemporary Chinese Christians who reflected on their encounters with Christianity indicated a continuity of a Christianized past into the present day. For example, in his testimony, the influential Chinese evangelist Ji Zhiwen attested to how he was converted to Christianity and committed himself to evangelical work. While much of his work in mainland China ceased after 1949, the work of the Evangelize China Fellowship he established in 1947 continued and developed into a global organization.⁸⁰

In addition to reinterpreting Chinese history through the lens of Christianity, a significant focus of *Dengta* was on the core beliefs of the gospel. Articles on Christology drew from the works of both Chinese and Western Christians. For example, in October 1963, the magazine reprinted the article by Chen Chonggui (1883–1963), a prominent Chinese Christian leader, on how one can be born again and have fellowship with Christ.⁸¹ In his sermon on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, Chen defined Christians as those who were reborn in Christ. As Christianity centered on Christ, Chen criticized the Chinese church for being centered on doctrines, just as Nicodemus viewed

⁷⁷Wu Mu'en 吳沐恩, "Zai Song Shangjie boshi de fengxinghui Zhong" 在宋尚傑博士的奮興會中 [At the Revival Meeting of Song Shangjie], *Dengta* no. 55 (January 1961): 23.

⁷⁸Chen Enxing 陳恩興, "Song Shangjie yizhi yanü zunbei" 宋尚傑醫治啞女尊碑 [A Tablet in Memory of Song Shangjie Who Healed a Girl with Mutism], *Dengta* no. 122 (August 1966): 32.

⁷⁹Zhu Jianji 朱建磯, "Guowai budao tuohuangzhe: Zhu Xinghun mushi" 國外布道拓荒者: 朱醒魂牧師 [The Pioneer in Overseas Preaching: Rev. Zhu Xinghun], *Dengta* no. 116 (February 1966): 28–29.

⁸⁰Ji Zhiwen 計志文, "Cong sadan de shufuzhong shifang chulai" 从撒旦的束缚中释放出来 [Released from the Constraints of Satan], *Dengta* no. 6 (December 1956): 19.

⁸¹Chen's article was originally published in the book titled *Jidu yu wo* 基督與我 [Christ and I] in 1927. See Chen Chonggui, "Jidu yu wo" 基督與我 [Christ and I] (Chongqing: Budao zazhi she, 1927).

Jesus as the teacher who only provided external guidance. Chen clarified that the role of Jesus was to redeem, transform, and give new life to people. Those who were moved by the Holy Spirit would repent and be reborn. One therefore needed to accept Jesus and believe in him.⁸²

When addressing the daily practice of Christian ideals in the modern day, *Dengta* established a column titled Answers from Billy Graham in 1957, featuring an influential American evangelist well known for his radio and television ministry. The column in *Dengta* was based on a newspaper column titled My Answer, an endeavor commenced by Graham in 1952 to address the personal dilemmas of readers with simple theological teachings. This column appeared in various American newspaper dailies and had an extensive readership. *Dengta* selected some of the questions from My Answer and published the translated version in almost every issue.

Raised by individual readers, these questions were personal and were derived from everyday life. One was raised by a Christian who questioned how to prove to non-Christian colleagues that the bible was God's words. In response, Graham discouraged the reader from arguing with them as no one would believe in Christ simply through debates. Instead, he suggested the reader to replace the religious debate with a discussion on the importance of Jesus in the reader's life. In Graham's belief, it was crucial to introduce to non-believers who Jesus was, and he recommended the reader to give *The Gospel of John* to his/her colleagues.⁸³ A female reader asked whether she should oppose her husband's decision to stay unemployed. This reader used to be a housewife but had to work when her husband was ill. Now that her husband was healed and capable of working, he hoped that she could continue with her job while he stayed at home. Graham replied that this reader's husband had an incorrect understanding of the concept of family. While many women had a career at the time, they did so by their own volition and were not expected to replace their husbands as breadwinners. Graham considered this issue an example of the chaos in contemporary human society that disrupted the divine order where men should work. Therefore, Graham considered it necessary for the reader's husband to form a correct understanding of God first. The reader was advised to pray for this matter and invite her husband to discuss the issue with their pastor.⁸⁴

Graham's simple and straightforward answers to readers' personal dilemmas through his columns were reflective of evangelical forces that emphasized daily religious experience. In his study of Billy Graham's My Answer, Charles H. Lippy argues that Graham's approach took on the evangelical legacy of "the revival movements of the nineteenth century" which stressed "the role of the individual in deciding whether to accept the 'gift' of salvation available to all." Thus, the individual's rebirth was viewed as crucial to determining whether the conversion was genuine, which required "some public dimension at least so that the community of believers may assess its authenticity." A genuine Christian would seek "guidelines in order to channel behavior in the right direction,"⁸⁵ and My Answer was an attempt to help readers to think and act in a proper way. Although the personal matters might be individualistic, Lippy assesses the questions as

⁸²Chen Chonggui, "Yesu yu Nigedimu" 耶穌與尼哥底母 [Jesus and Nicodemus], *Dengta* no. 88 (October 1963): 30–31.

⁸³"Gepeili dawen" 葛培理答問 [Billy Graham: My Answer], trans. Zhao Chongsheng 趙重生, *Dengta* no. 19 (January 1958): 27.

⁸⁴"Gepeili dawen" 葛培理答問 [Billy Graham: My Answer], *Dengta* no. 107 (May 1965): 5.

⁸⁵Charles H. Lippy, "Billy Graham's 'My Answer': Agenda for the Faithful," *Studies in Popular Culture* 5 (1982): 28–29.

paradigmatic and essentially dealing with “issues which disrupt an orderly life of faith or generate doubts as to the genuineness of one’s Christian affirmation.”⁸⁶ The incorporation of Graham’s column in *Dengta* likewise offered guidance to Chinese readers interested in conducting a Christian life. The theological principles undergirding Graham’s answers could address readers’ concerns in a broad sense. Using simple languages and examples from daily life, this column was part of the evangelical narrative promoted by *Dengta* to (re)construct day-to-day life in communion with Christ.

While *Dengta*, like the overseas Chinese evangelical organizations discussed by Sim, focused on ethnic Chinese communities, its Sino-Western narrative—both past and present—emphasizes the universality of the Christian faith. By positioning China within the global Christian movement and situating overseas Chinese communities within the evangelical discourse of global salvation, the magazine documented the integration of Chinese Christianity into the broader unfolding global narrative. In this sense, the notion of Chineseness portrayed by *Dengta* highlights religious connection within the global evangelical community rather than its ethnic distinctiveness.

Forming a Global Diasporic Chinese Community: *Dengta* deliberately created a kind of singular understanding of Chinese diaspora that scholars criticize for its overgeneralization to serve the development of a group identity. In the process of reaching Chinese diasporas, the magazine emphasizes a sense of a global diasporic Chinese community prompted by the editorial board and its readers. The magazine foregrounded a collective consciousness by circulating and reporting news about key cultural and social developments within Chinese communities around the world. For example, an article published in 1958 introduced prominent overseas Chinese, including Nobel prize winners, by publishing their photos and summarizing their achievements in science, politics, arts, and music in 1957. By highlighting these figures, the magazine not only celebrated the global successes of Chinese individuals but also reinforced a sense of pride and unity among its readers. It created a narrative of shared progress among overseas Chinese, who were collectively categorized as *hua qiao*.⁸⁷

Dengta made a persistent effort to form a sense of overseas Chinese community, primarily by portraying the world through a diasporic lens. The magazine featured articles and photos from different countries and regions. In its early years, these articles focus on the local culture, religion, and the history and contemporary life of the Chinese diaspora in the Asia-Pacific rim. Furthermore, the magazine addressed crucial topics related to the significant changes facing Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. As nationalism surged after WWII in newly independent countries like Myanmar and the Philippines, several articles in *Dengta* reported on the shifting conditions within these emerging nations. For example, two months after the Malayan Declaration of Independence, *Dengta* published an article discussing its impact on the local Chinese population. The author, Lin Zhengye (1903–1986), a pioneering Chinese missionary in Indonesia, addressed the issue of nationality. At the time, 40 percent of Malay’s total population was Chinese. While Chinese people maintained their own language, religion, and customs, Lin thought that the majority would choose to become Malayan citizens as they were born and raised in Malaya and had deep roots in local society. However, with the rise of Malayan nationalism, Chinese Malaysians would face challenges in preserving Chinese

⁸⁶Ibid., 30.

⁸⁷Huang Jiali 黃嘉歷, “Qunian de Huaqiao xinwen renwu” 去年的華僑新聞人物 [The Chinese News Figures of Last Year], *Dengta* no. 19 (January 1958): 2, 29.

culture. Lin acknowledged that ethnocentrism had been common among overseas Chinese in the past. In light of the independence movements, Lin promoted the principles of equality and mutual respect to avoid racial conflicts. According to Lin, the Chinese diaspora should adopt the Confucian ideal, "If a gentleman is deferential and cautious, if he treats others with respect and propriety, then everyone will consider him his brother."⁸⁸ He also advocated the Christian virtue of humility by citing Philippians 2:3, which admonished people for viewing others as better than oneself. Noting the increase of anti-Chinese incidents in Southeast Asia, Lin expressed hope that the Malayan government would recognize the vital role of the Chinese diaspora in the domestic economy.⁸⁹ On one hand, the magazine provided references to help overseas Chinese conceptualize and form a panoramic view of the world they lived in. On the other hand, it highlighted traditional values and Christian ideals focused on building relationships with others in the context of Cold War cultural politics. It infused a religious and cultural dimension of Chineseness to guide Chinese diasporas in navigating the challenges posed by emerging local nationalisms.

Reader's Letter Box column, included from the beginning of *Dengta's* publication, created an opportunity for readers to interact with the magazine and fellow readers, facilitating a sense of interconnectedness among diasporic readers. Readers' letters touched on various issues including religious questions, content recommendations, and the impact of the magazine on their life. For example, one Malayan reader called Wang Ai'an wrote that she used to read novels but later became a loyal reader of *Dengta* after reading one issue at her Christian friend's home. She was deeply moved after reading the story of Liu Meili, a Christian writer who survived and thrived despite the amputation of her four limbs at an early age, published in 1958.⁹⁰ Liu's story reminded the reader of her own sorrowful experience, and like Liu, Wang found great comfort in her Christian faith.⁹¹ Another reader called Li Guojun wrote that he was surprised to find his father's photo circulated in the first issue of *Dengta*. Li's father lived in Guangzhou and travelled to Hong Kong to visit Li in 1956. At the time, Li's father attended Billy Graham's evangelistic campaign and accepted Jesus as his savior. The photo in *Dengta* had captured this moment. The reader was surprised to find this photo as he was not with his father at Graham's campaign. Perceiving this incident as a miracle, the reader became fond of reading *Dengta*.⁹² The circulation of readers' letters like Wang's and Li's thus created a close community through the sharing of personal stories and thoughts.

Readers' active engagement with *Dengta* further fostered a sense of global diasporic Chinese community. A letter published in August 1957 reflected some readers' desire to form a community among *Dengta's* readership, leading to a new practice of seeking pen friends through *Dengta*. In his letter to the magazine, a reader from Sumatra in Indonesia called Chan Kim Pong asked the editor to see if he could introduce him to Christian pen

⁸⁸The Chinese verse is 四海之内，皆兄弟也。Brian Bruya, trans. *The Analects* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 127.

⁸⁹"Malaiya duli dui huaqiao de yinxiang" 馬來亞獨立對華僑的影響 [The Impact of Malayan Independence on Malayan Chinese], *Dengta* no. 17 (November 1957): 2, 25.

⁹⁰The articles were based on the work of Edward Hunter titled *The Story of Mary Liu*. See Chao Yong 超庸, "Liu Meili de gushi" 劉美麗的故事 [The Story of Liu Meili], *Dengta* no. 21 (March 1958): 4–5; Chao Yong, "Liu Meili de gushi," *Dengta* no. 22 (April 1958): 8–9; and Chao Yong, "Liu Meili de gushi," *Dengta* no. 23 (May 1958): 6–7, 9.

⁹¹"Dengta xinxiang" 燈塔信箱 [Dengta Letterbox], *Dengta* no. 26 (August 1958): 30.

⁹²"Dengta xinxiang," *Dengta* no. 15 (September 1957): 30.

friends to exchange postage stamps, scenic pictures, and Christian books. The magazine included Chan's address in the issue and a few more requests in the following issue.⁹³ A combination of readers' letters and readers' information continued to be published until 1959. In the first issue published in 1960, the Reader's Letter Box was comprised of readers' requests for pen friends only. The name for the column was later changed to Seeking Friends (*zhengyou*) in April 1961. The list of readers seeking friends increased in later years and the number of readers whose information was published in the column once reached seventy-seven in February 1967. An overview of these seventy-seven readers' addresses shows diverse profiles, with a majority coming from the Asia-Pacific region such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Vietnam, Laos, and Korea. Three were from England, Canada, and South America. Some wanted to make friends with other Christians, and some wanted to exchange their collections with people who shared similar hobbies.⁹⁴ By providing this communication platform to its readers, the magazine formed a global community across Chinese diasporas.

A common way for readers to connect with one another seen in the Reader's Letter Box and later the Seeking Friends column was through the exchange of postage stamps. It was first mentioned in a letter published in May 1957 when a Taiwanese reader wanted to exchange stamps for stamps from different countries.⁹⁵ When the magazine published readers' requirements for pen friends, many wished to exchange postage stamps with others. While a semiotic reading of readers' stamps is impossible, as stamp images were not printed in *Dengta*, the exchange of stamps engaged readers in the forming of a broader diasporic community. For example, when a young reader from a Chinese church in Vietnam received hundreds of letters with stamps for exchange, he had to ask the editor to publish his letter to explain his situation. As a primary school student, the reader was unable to reply to all the letters at once without spending up his parents' living expenses. He asked for the patience of readers who mailed him stamps and would respond to them in turn.⁹⁶ The case reflects the vibrant connections among overseas Chinese communities fostered by *Dengta*.

In its efforts to reach the non-Christian diaspora, *Dengta* created a platform centered on the shared concerns of overseas Chinese, incorporated readers' suggestions, and evolved over time. This reader-focused approach was well-received, as evidenced by the active responses from readers to the editorial board. An exploration of the Reader's Letter Box and the Seeking Friend column demonstrates that a sense of collective identity manifested in several ways: some readers formed communities of stamp collectors, while others established Christian fellowships with believers in different countries. At a time when the notion of Chineseness was contested within the narrative of "bifurcated homelands" between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party,⁹⁷ *Dengta* facilitated the development of a spontaneous, reader-based community driven by individual interests across the Chinese diaspora. The magazine provided readers with a sense of

⁹³"Dengta xinxiang," *Dengta* no. 14 (August 1957): 30; "Dengta xinxiang," *Dengta* no. 15 (September 1957): 30.

⁹⁴"Zhengyou lan" 徵友欄 [Seeking Friends Column], *Dengta* no. 128 (February 1967): 32–3.

⁹⁵"Dengta xinxiang," *Dengta* no. 11 (May 1957): 30.

⁹⁶"Jiyou pengyou qing tongqing rennai" 集郵朋友請同情忍耐 [Stamp Collectors, Please Be Patient and Sympathetic], *Dengta* no. 66 (December 1961): 25.

⁹⁷Beiyu Zhang, "Performing 'Bifurcated Homelands': Touring the Chinese Diasporas in Bangkok and Singapore, 1945–1960s," *China Perspectives* 132 (2023): 61, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.14654>.

“individual agency” that contributed to their collective effort to maintain an “imagined community.”⁹⁸

V. Conclusion

This article revisits a crucial period of Chinese Christian literature when debates about the Chinese diaspora became increasingly politicized during the Cold War. As Chinese Christian literature shifted from mainland China to Hong Kong around 1949, an evangelical effort emerged to Christianize overseas Chinese. The case of the Protestant magazine *Dengta* exemplifies a religious rhetoric of Chineseness aimed at reaching non-Christian Chinese diasporas. The magazine synthesized a wide range of themes, including the presumed dichotomies of tradition/modern, Chinese/Western, native/foreign, material/spiritual, and science/religion, into a harmonious narrative underpinned by an evangelical vision. It suggests diaspora moments were characterized by the interplay of multiple influences shaping and reshaping readers’ own experiences. At the same time, readers were invited to navigate these complexities through a Christian lens, with the magazine promoting the centrality of Christian faith in addressing both personal and social challenges. In this process, evangelical literary work conceptualized an imagined community to be approached and proselytized. Overseas Chinese across various regions were connected through this evangelical concern and a shared language, reflecting a religious dimension within the contested realm of cultural identity and ideological influence set against the backdrop of the Chinese diaspora and the broader tensions of the Cold War.

The evangelical discourse of *Dengta* stood in contrast to the religious ethnocentrism that became prevalent among transnational Chinese evangelical institutions after WWII, especially from the 1970s.⁹⁹ As part of the expanding OMF literature program that aimed to evangelize East Asia and other new mission fields, *Dengta* was missioned to reach Chinese-language readers worldwide by employing a religious-cultural framework within the discourse of Chineseness. By decentralizing the concept of the nation-state, the magazine advocated for a notion of Chineseness that integrated cultural identity, mission history in China, and modernity within a global Christian narrative. Rather than merely adhering to an ethnocentric perspective, *Dengta* emphasized collaboration between Chinese and foreign missionaries, portraying them as fellow workers in a shared evangelical mission. This inclusive vision was mirrored in the magazine’s production process, which also involved Sino-foreign collaboration in shaping the landscape of Chinese Christianity.

In a war-torn world, *Dengta* sought to engage with overseas Chinese populations and bring them into a shared religious fellowship. The magazine facilitated the conversion of readers and contributed to the growth of local churches, as those who encountered Christianity through *Dengta* may have been converted. Readers’ letters to the editorial board reflect the magazine’s significant impact on their spiritual journeys. For example, a reader’s testimony sent to Ron Roberts, the OMF literature superintendent in 1965,

⁹⁸“Individual agency” is an essential dimension commonly discussed in digital communication studies. See Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu, “Introduction,” in *Wechat and the Chinese Diaspora: Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China’s Rise*, ed. Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 5.

⁹⁹Sim, “The Formation of Global Chinese Christian Identities,” 285–286.

mentioned that he began reading *Dengta* while at a military hospital in Taiwan and later converted to Christianity. Despite being wounded, having lost one hand and an eye, the reader witnessed that he found peace and happiness in his faith.¹⁰⁰ While the circulation of these testimonies served both outreach and fundraising purposes, the promise of peace and spiritual uplift through evangelical literature provided comfort to many during that time. Circulating in the early years following the 1949 political divide, *Dengta* exemplifies a globally oriented evangelical endeavor, marking a pivotal moment when Chinese Christian literature embraced a world Christian vision.

Yun Zhou is a lecturer in Chinese Language and Studies at ANU, with a research focus on the history of Christianity in China. Her recent projects explore evangelical literature for Chinese women, as well as the history of theological education among Chinese Christians in Australia.

¹⁰⁰Ron Roberts, "Six Thousand Miles in Eight Minutes," *East Asia Millions* (October 1965): 131.

Cite this article: Yun Zhou, "Reaching Chinese in the World—Christian Literature in Post-war Hong Kong," *Church History* (2025): 1–21. doi:[10.1017/S000964072510187X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072510187X).