

Hong Kong's last English bishop. The life and times of John Gilbert Hindley Baker. By Philip L. Wickeri. Pp. xvi + 196 incl. frontispiece and 30 ills. HK\$480. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021. 978 988 8528 71 4
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Philip Wickeri's excellent introduction to the life of Bishop Gilbert Baker (1910–86) also offers insight into China's twentieth century and into the Anglican Communion.

Wickeri is our most accomplished academic studying and living in the Chinese-Anglican context. He has been at work for four decades, and he crossed paths with Bishop Baker in 1984, early in Wickeri's time in Hong Kong and late in Baker's. At times, Wickeri's entrenchment in the Anglican tradition shows, but his research is highly readable to outsiders. This book will interest anyone who wants to know more of Hong Kong's history; Christianity in China; and shifting theories of misology, social engagement and ecumenism in twentieth-century Christianity.

Though Wickeri claims 'no overall theme' (p. 4), he circles symphonically around several motifs and approaches Baker from a consistently sympathetic vantage point. Wickeri portrays Baker as a good man and an effective 'servant leader' (p. 161). He argues that Bishop Baker, far from being merely a 'place holder' (p. 2) between two charismatic bishops, was in fact the right man at the right time.

Wickeri carries the reader efficiently through the chronology of Baker's life, devoting approximately half the book's length to the fourteen years of Baker's bishopric (1966–81). The account of Baker's youth is brief, but sufficient. The author is sparing with vivid details, but he effectively paints a portrait of an average, earnest Christian boy destined to become a dedicated church leader. We read of young Baker's nascent awareness of the world outside England and how he is enthralled and set on a path toward missionary work by R. O. Hall, soon to be bishop of Hong Kong, who would, at another crucial moment in Baker's life, call the priest back to China.

Baker experienced the Sino-Japanese War firsthand. He worked in Canton during the Japanese invasion and later travelled with refugees to unoccupied Kunming. Wickeri notes that Baker did not experience the war as the Chinese did. He describes the tension between the foreigner's empathy with the embattled Chinese people and his privileged separation from the local population. Foreigners remained generally unmolested by the Japanese invaders (p. 31). This tension becomes a recurring theme. The balance of church power in greater China had been shifting toward local governance ever since the early twentieth century; Three-Self principles had been discussed since the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, however, the crown colony of Hong Kong in this post-colonial age was the last Chinese territory to put a Chinese bishop in the chair. Wickeri comes back to this theme throughout his work: was Baker able to share an authentic Chinese perspective (pp. 24, 27, 47)? Did Baker acquire sufficient Chinese language skills (pp. 26, 41–2)? Why did Baker hesitate to appoint a Chinese assistant bishop (pp. 87, 135)? At other moments Wickeri is more sanguine about Baker's cross-cultural facility and his comprehension of 'Chinese ways' (p. 76). Wickeri describes Baker as an important 'bridge figure' (pp. 47, 77), a man with one foot in each culture, comfortable in both, but in some ways

never fully a part of either. Baker quietly advocated for a Chinese successor, and in 1981 he brought the dynasty of foreign bishops to an end.

Wickeri skilfully uses foreshadowing to keep the narrative moving. The third chapter closes with an exciting moment of dramatic irony and suspense. We wonder how Baker could possibly rise from the position of being unemployed, but about to begin a one-year contract as acting director of a small Christianity study centre in Hong Kong, to the bishopric within a matter of months. How did Father Baker become Bishop Baker? The answer is key to his entire story: Baker maintained lasting relationships with colleagues and friends. The reader is left with an indelible impression of Gilbert Baker as a man who lived a life rich in human contact, a man with a deep commitment to caring for the people around him, and a man constantly engaged in working with those people to accomplish countless tasks, large and small, that he believed were important.

Considering Baker's busy life, the biographer has difficult choices to make. Wickeri points his camera toward a coherent selection of events that reflect Baker's values and goals. Baker had a vision for ecumenical cooperation among all Christians, for a unified community of Christ that would reach out to all areas of life, with the goal of improving conditions for everyone. There were significant achievements in those areas: Baker presided over a high tide of Anglican-Roman ecumenism (pp. 97, 112–13); he worked with Billy Graham on his 1975 crusade (pp. 121–2); he responded with compassionate action to Hong Kong's 1967 riots and to continuing economic inequity in the colony (pp. 83–4, 133); he ordained the first four women priests in the worldwide Anglican Communion, though the international debate over the issue of women's ordination would continue for years to come (pp. 88, 98–101, 122); he called the Church to action when thousands of Vietnamese refugees arrived in Hong Kong after the war (pp. 106, 117–18, 142); and he succeeded in bringing Hong Kong's Chinese and foreign clergy together under the same governance structure, equalising their work conditions and their relative power (pp. 81, 112, 115–16, 118–19).

Wickeri begins the biography by minimising his own accomplishments and expressing the hope that complementary research will follow (pp. 4–5). Future biographies might make more use of 'oral history' resources. Wickeri limits his reliance on those sources in favour of Baker's personal writings. On questions concerning the mainland Chinese Church and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, we should note that Baker's liberal attitudes toward the 'post-denominational' unification of the Church in China were born out of the information blackout of the Maoist era and flowered in Deng Xiaoping's honeymoon period. The years since Baker's death in 1986 have given rise to complex conversations about the Chinese Church, and those difficult conversations might play a greater role in future portrayals of this intriguing figure, the last English bishop of Hong Kong.

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