Online and Offline Religion in China: A Protestant WeChat "Alter-Public" through the Bible Handcopying Movement

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Abstract: Studies of digital religion frequently take democratic regime settings and developed economic contexts for granted, leaving regime and economic development levels as background factors (Campbell 2013). However, in China, the role of the authoritarian state, restrictions on religion, and rapid social change mean that online and offline religious practices will develop in distinct ways. This article analyzes the 2019 Bible handcopying movement promoted through China's most popular social media WeChat as a way to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the publication of China's most widely used translation of the Bible. Drawing on interviews by and communication with the movement's founder, the co-authors participated in and collected postings from a 500-member WeChat group from March to August 2019. We argue that while offline handcopying is an innovation in religious practice due to Chinese cultural and historical traditions, the online group constitutes a micro-scale "alter-public" (Chen 2015; Warner 2002), a site for religious discussion, prayer, and devotion that strengthens an "alternative" Protestant identity alongside that of Chinese citizen of the People's Republic of China.

Keywords: digital religion; WeChat; China; Protestant Christianity; "public"; "counterpublic"; "alter-public"; authoritarian state

1. Introduction

Scholars of religion and media have recently embraced the term "digital religion" to describe how digital media are reconstituting religion in novel ways to create technological and cultural spaces that meld offline and online religious realms (Campbell 2013, pp. 3–4). Many studies take for granted a democratic context and an advanced industrial country setting such that it is also taken for granted that digital religion evolves largely in response to societal forces. In these settings, political authorities take *laissez faire* approaches to managing religious groups, and economic development and social change proceed at an incremental pace, and so the political context and pace of societal change are left as implicit factors. Unsurprisingly, therefore, fewer studies have examined digital religion in authoritarian contexts where the pressures from state actors can shape the interaction of electronic media and religious practices (but see Travagnin 2016). In China, the role of the authoritarian state, its restriction on religious practices, and rapid social change, including the population's uptake of social media, suggest that online and offline religious practices may develop distinctly from those in liberal democratic countries with developed economies.

In this paper, we analyze the case of a Chinese Protestant house church leader who used China's most popular social media app to launch and sustain an off-line movement to handwrite the Bible, as a

way to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the publication of the Chinese Bible.[1] Although he launched and sustained the handcopying movement entirely through digital media, the church leader was actually seeking to draw the Chinese-speaking public in China and abroad to undertake the analogue work of handcopying biblical scriptures. In the process of encouraging offline study of God's words in the Bible, the leader also created a new digital forum for religious activities. This in-between "third space" (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012) we argue, is a Protestant "public" (Warner 2002), where strangers can interact in a focused, evangelistic, and pietistic space that has characteristics that mimic those of "house" churches. This WeChat public is also an example of digital religion, where pre-existing offline religious communities are reinforced and develop new links to each other through the online WeChat group.

Frequently, studies of digital religion underscore the two distinct effects that online religious practices can have on offline religious communities, either reinforcing traditional groups or, alternatively, challenging their boundaries (Campbell 2013, pp. 4–5). By contrast, in China, scholars have typically found that pre-existing religious communities have transferred religious content to online platforms in examples of "religion online" (Xu and Campbell 2018, p. 264), but less frequently have they found religious innovation by individuals and groups who alter what is understood as religion through "many-to-many interactions" or cases of "online religion" (Helland 2000). The most likely place to find such innovation is on China's social media, such as WeChat, the site of the most diverse religious content and a vehicle for such "many-to-many" networks (Xu and Campbell 2018).

English-language scholarship on WeChat and its impact on society or religion in China is a small but rapidly growing field (e.g., Harris 2018; Huang 2016; McDonald 2016; Tarocco 2019; Travagnin 2016). Several recent articles have analyzed WeChat's role in transforming spaces for China's religions. For Uighur Muslims in China's repressive Northwest, WeChat enabled Muslim sound recordings to be shared such that a nascent Islamic "counterpublic" developed (Harris and Isa 2018, p. 11); for Shanghai's unregistered Tzu Chi Buddhists, WeChat served as a sacred "third space" for communication, bonding, and linking to the organization's global practices (Huang 2016, p. 112); and in a southeastern coastal temple, Han Buddhist disciples formed an "intimate public" (Berlant 2008, p. viii) whose heavy use of WeChat in "pious self-making" opened them to a deeper experience of their monk's charisma in daily life (Tarocco 2019).

In the Muslim case, WeChat sheltered a space from the monitoring state for religious participation that would otherwise have been impossible and fostered an Islamic identity in opposition to the offline lived reality. In the Buddhist cases, WeChat strengthened or reinforced the offline religious communities or practices. In the Protestant case under examination here, the online community was simply a byproduct of an effort to increase offline devotion, even though it in turn became its own site for prayers, worship, and religious activities. In comparison, however, the Protestant case in this study is less oppositional than the Muslim case and more an alternative to the official definitions of religious identity.

In short, the Protestant "public" that develops on WeChat is more an "alter-public" than a "counterpublic" (Fraser 1990), because although Protestants (like Uighur Muslims) share a subordinate status in China, their WeChat group is not cultivating an oppositional self-understanding. Rather, its activity of Bible handcopying and the movement's explicit goals suggest a less direct engagement with political conflict or political resistance. Thus, it promotes a different Protestant identity without casting itself and its antagonist the state in explicitly dichotomous terms. We construct the term "alter-public" by drawing from Michael Warner's discussion of publics and combining it with Chen (2015) work on literary censorship as capable of creative production. Chen coins the term "alter-production" (Chen 2015, p. 19) to capture how literary creativity under censorship may include

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1   The Chinese Union Version (CUV) Bible is viewed as a symbol of the unity of Chinese Protestants, because it was translated through the unified efforts of foreign missionaries of different denominations and their Chinese language assistants (Zetzsche 1999).

content that is counter- or resistant to the party-state but it may also include content that is not. Alter-production underscores the idea that censorship can play a productive, not just a negative, role in literary development. We add the "alter-" prefix to "public" to capture how censorship (or fear of censorship) and state intervention encourages the WeChat group organizers to cultivate a public that is not explicitly counter to the ruling authorities and its official agenda. In real terms, this alter- rather than oppositional character of the Protestant WeChat public meant that members rarely referred to offline religious persecution, and when they did, such mentions were met with silence by the WeChat group organizers.

In the rest of the article, we first give greater detail on the key handcopying leader, Wang Wenfeng, and explain our position in the WeChat group as we collected data. Next, we explain the offline elements of the handcopying movement, highlighting first how writing out scriptures has special significance in Chinese cultural traditions. We argue that its promotion as a religious practice is an innovation and describe how its founder aimed for it to counter the ill effects of rapid modernization on biblical attachment. Next, we provide political and historical context for understanding Chinese Protestant Christianity in the People's Republic of China, including why 2019 marks a particularly troubling time for China's Protestants. In the last half of the paper, we suggest how restrictions on traditional mass media prompt Chinese Protestants to take to social media and then we analyze the WeChat group for the Bible handcopying movement as an "alter-public." We close by discussing the merits of studying a small-scale public, its distinctions from the rational public sphere, and implications for the stability of the Chinese regime.

2. Methods and Data Collection

To study the workings of the Bible handcopying movement in the WeChat group, we joined the WeChat group as passive observers. We decided not to interact in the group to avoid influencing its development and thus to limit our role to observation of members' behavior and participation. To that end, we collected dozens of its postings over a period of six months, from March 2019 through August 2019. In addition, one co-author conducted several phone interviews and exchanged multiple WeChat chat messages with the organizer Wang Wenfeng. We also drew on an interview with Wang that was published on a Chinese QQ site (*Weixin QQ* 2019). Given the potential sensitivity of the topic, we asked Wang whether we might name him in this article and he assented. We have left all other members of the group anonymous.

Wang Wenfeng is a fourth generation Christian from Wenzhou, the city in China with the highest proportion of Protestant Christians (Cao 2011).[2] After partially completing a high school education, he began fulltime preaching work. He moved to Beijing for further education and to do ministry work with college students. There, he met his future wife, a Korean Presbyterian missionary, and together they started an unregistered theological training school that ran for a few years. He earned his PhD in Malaysia before returning to live in Beijing. Party-state authorities put him under close watch from 2013 after he organized a group of Chinese intellectuals from across the ideological spectrum with Chinese Christians in Oxford, England to produce the Oxford Consensus, a public call for pluralism and liberalism in China (*New York Times* 2013). Prior to the handcopying movement, he set out to collect all Christian-related publications in Chinese to form the *Jing Zang* (lit. Nestorian Collection, referring to the first churches in China), a giant collection of all Christian writings in Chinese. Although this project stopped after police interrogated Wang and other organizers, it revealed to Wang the importance of words, writing and word-related ministry, which served as preparation for the handcopying movement. Although he lives in Beijing now, Wang's family and extended networks trace back to Wenzhou, which explains why the most active WeChat members are also linked to Wenzhou networks. Theologically, he is a Calvinist, which influences him to be very concerned with issues in the wider public.

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[2]　This paragraph draws upon one author's personal knowledge of Wang's background.

3. Writing in Cultural Perspective: Bible Handcopying as Religious Innovation and Antidote to Modernity

Through this movement, Protestant house church leader Wang Wenfeng has created a religious innovation by promoting the collective handcopying of the Bible.[3] This act of writing and, in particular, of writing out the biblical scriptures carries deep cultural resonance in Chinese tradition. Historically, the written word, rather than speech, was the favored communication mode for imperial power (Jenner 1992, p. 184 cited on Yen 2005, p. 15). When the dynasties came to an end, the civil service exam system was abolished and Western schooling systems were introduced (Chau 2012). These two related events undermined the central role of Chinese as a written language and threatened local elites who had built careers on their mastery of it. In response, local literati, seeking to regain a sense of purpose and identity, turned to "cherishing written characters" as a devotional practice (Chau 2012). Anxious about the encroachment of Western power, they began to view in the written language a fundamental element of Chinese civilization (Chau 2012, p. 143). Written Chinese started to be understood as integral to being Chinese.

Furthermore, within spiritual realms, writing does more than just convey religious ideas or beliefs; it can become an object of veneration itself (Yen 2005, pp. 15–16). Protestant house church groups have long prized scriptures as holy, and the Bible as a touchstone for arguments about whether official churches are compromised or "false" (Vala 2018, chp. 4); individual Protestants speak of how God's words have nourished them in times of imprisonment or other tribulation. Thus, not surprisingly, the Protestant Chinese Union Version (CUV) Bible, the most widely used translation, has become a sacred object in its own right, as the key text that has sustained Chinese Protestant Christianity through more than half a century of political pressure and societal change.

That writing out the Protestant scriptures has taken on the characteristics of a new religious practice becomes even more clear from the intention and impact of the handcopying initiative. The goal of this movement, according to its founder, is to ensure public attention and Protestant church fidelity to the biblical scriptures. In a 2019 interview, house church leader Wang expressed a hope that despite the threat of new ways of thinking ("multiculturalism") in Chinese society, that the "church community will always adhere to Bible-centered beliefs" and that people in society would be directed to pay attention to the Bible (*Weixin QQ* 2019). Within the online (WeChat) group he founded for the movement, Wang frequently responded to members' comments about finishing a portion of the Bible with some variation of, "May God's words remain in everyone's hearts!" or "May everyone thirst for God's words."

At the broadest level, Wang is critiquing the "hollowing out [of] civilized society (*wenming shehui*)," by underlining the "anti-religious ... Enlightenment ideology" underpinning the Party-state's pursuit of a modern, wealthy society (*Weixin QQ* 2019). He argues that the foundation of modern civilization lies in the Bible, and therefore castigates the anti-religious spirit as weakening the entire "foundation" of modern civilization in China. At the same time, he warns about the impact of multiculturalism, and intends that the movement should return society's civilizational roots (and church faith) to biblical foundations.

Part of this foundation was the efforts by foreign missionaries to bring Western modernity's institutions and values to China. While the Party-state has concentrated on the military dimension of Western powers' impact on China, foreign missionaries had a far wider effect, including cultural, societal-institutional, and ideational dimensions. Thus, alongside the CCP's emphasis on foreign imperialism and gunboat diplomacy that protected missionaries, foreign missionaries also established printing presses, girls schools, women's colleges, universities, hospitals and clinics (Bays 2011; Lee 2014;

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[3] Handcopying the Bible is not unprecedented in contemporary mainland China. Catholic church members started a few years ago and several official Protestant churches in 2019 as well have embarked on handcopying, although without the organized, widespread effort examined here.

Lutz 1988). The translation of the Chinese Union Version in 1919 was also the first book translated into a new and vernacular form of written Chinese, as against the classical Chinese of imperial China (Tang 2019). The CUV promoted reading among Chinese commoners and influenced early 20th century mass political movements.[4] Thus in a time when the CCP is once again targeting Christianity for cultural attacks in its efforts to make Christianity more Chinese, the Bible copying movement may be read as a defensive movement to offer an alternative identity, with a narrative about the positive contributions of foreign missionaries to modern Chinese history.

However, the handcopying movement is more than an effort to counter state propaganda; it is also aiming to counter societal trends. China's economic growth rates have been so high that newfound wealth has sparked rapid social change and upended longstanding societal norms. Protestants frequently complain about how the love of money has made so many people untrustworthy, as they often break promises, and how widespread sexual improprieties have become (Vala 2018). In addition, individualism has undermined collective norms (Yan 2010, p. 2), while electronic media and the Internet have drawn away people's attention and energy from traditional institutions like the family and their speed has made modern life a frenzied experience. By contrast, handwriting requires sustained attention, patient focus, and slow deliberation. Hence, against the busyness of modern life, Wang hopes the movement will encourage people to slow down and focus on the Bible.

While the primary goals are thus to draw China's Protestants and non-believers into engagement with the biblical scriptures, Wang also aimed for handcopiers to see themselves as part of a historic community—both ancient and modern—of Bible writers. For more than a millennium, he pointed out, handcopying was the principal way to spread the Bible (*Weixin QQ* 2019). By participating in re-writing the scriptures, handcopiers joined "Old Testament Jewish scribes, saints of the ages, and faithful servants of God in the Cultural Revolution." Handcopiers therefore participate in several "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983): in the earliest days, as the original scribes who first put into written words the oral histories that became the scriptures; after Jesus' appearance, as members of the historic Christian community from the first century onwards; and, nearer to home and more recently, as writing alongside Chinese who furtively copied scriptures during the Cultural Revolution fifty years ago, when Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong had banned public religion and Bibles were difficult to find.

In this way, the Bible handcopying movement becomes a vehicle for 21st century Chinese Christians to see themselves through a new identity, not as the "persecuted church" of the West's imagination nor only as "patriotic citizens" who are loyal fellow-travelers to the Communist Party in the People's Republic of China (Entwistle 2016; Vala 2013). Instead, they are heirs of a longstanding religious and historic tradition that was central to recording and preserving the scriptures. Preserving the scriptures meant ensuring their survival during the Cultural Revolution period but in today's China it takes on the meaning of protection from corruption. As we explain below, the Chinese Communist Party has added new impetus to a recent effort to "sinicize" (make more Chinese) Christianity, in which one component is to reinterpret traditional doctrines and possibly rewrite scriptures themselves.

4. Protestants in Xi Jinping's China: Under Offline and Online Pressure, but Active on Social Media

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) aim to "sinicize" Christianity in 21st century China culminates a fraught relationship between the CCP, Christianity, and foreign Christians. "Making Christianity Chinese," the translation of this agenda, stems from the regime's casting Christianity since 1949 as a competitor to its ideology, a "foreign religion," and a tool of foreign imperialism to sway Chinese loyalties away from CCP rule. This agenda took institutional shape in the 1950s when the

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[4]   Chen Duxiu, a member of the New Culture Movement who became a founder of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote approvingly of Jesus's universal love and self-sacrifice as found in the Chinese Union Version Bible (Chen 2008, pp. 27–28).

CCP established an umbrella organization for Protestants, the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) association, which captured Chinese Christian support through a Korean War mass campaign that demonized foreign Christianity and presented TSPM support as a demonstration of regime loyalty. Today, all churches must be affiliated with the TSPM to receive state sanction as official churches. Unregistered (or "house") congregations are distinguished by their intentional refusal to or neglect of (or of authorities' rejection of church efforts to) joining the TSPM, for a variety of reasons (Dunch 2001; Hunter and Chan 1993).

The foreign ties and institutional autonomy of unregistered congregations have periodically been a target of Party-state suspicion and scrutiny, and even a justification for state intervention, especially as unregistered groups have drawn on foreign aid (training, literature, and so forth) to develop their organizational work (Vala 2018, chp. 6). Nevertheless, within the TSPM, official Protestant church perspectives on foreign Christians' historical involvement in China and its churches has softened somewhat recently by acknowledging the positive contributions they made to modern China and contemporary Protestant Christianity (Kuo 2011). And yet, across China divisions still persist between the official churches and the unregistered churches, although the nature and existence of the differences and whether they bar leadership-level or congregational-level cooperation is a matter of enormous local variation (Cao 2011; Kang 2016).

Set in the context of these historical divisions between official and unregistered streams of Christianity, the years leading up to 2019 have been a particularly tense time for China's Protestants. Three offline and online events stand out as exemplifying the worsening context for Chinese Protestant worship. First, shortly after Xi Jinping assumed the top political leadership positions in 2012, a crackdown on Christianity was launched in one province that then has spread to the whole country. In 2013–2015, political leaders in Zhejiang Province had ordered dozens of crosses removed from official churches and destroyed large, unregistered churches (Hao and Liu 2018).[5] It turned out to be a pilot test for a wider attack on Christianity, as state forces across the country have jailed prominent house church leaders and banned their unregistered congregations, and even gone so far as to confiscate the buildings of *official* churches of the TSPM (Lu 2019).[6] This offline persecution made visible the regime's animus toward Christianity.

Along with this coercion, the Party-state revised its legal framework to further restrict religious activities and to limit online religious content. This 2018 national regulation on religious affairs bans overseas religious training and fundraising, emphasizes that Protestant activities outside TSPM locations are illegal, and also newly recognizes the importance of online religious activities, as it includes stipulations regarding approval for online religious content (Zhang 2017).

Thus, adding to the offline cross campaign and its corollaries and the increased online regulations, the aim of sinicization of Protestant Christianity compounds existing anxieties of Protestants. Unregistered church leaders fear that sinicization entails undermining historic Protestant doctrines (Vala 2018). Indeed, the TSPM has officially endorsed plans that call for churches to teach socialist values within Christian circles (CCCTSPM.org 2018). The result of all these events is an unprecedented level of pressure on Protestants, greater than any other period of the last quarter century.

In the public realm of media, CCP control of the state media and commercial media outlets leaves few venues for discussion or practice of Protestant Christianity. Major newspapers rarely report news about religion at all, apart from state policy pronouncements or brief mentions of religious leaders' ritualized courtesy calls with Party-state officials. Within Protestant institutions like the TSPM churches, the national TSPM magazine *Tianfeng* and *Ganlu* are two of the few print media publications that are openly published and widely distributed in China. And, so, it is perhaps unsurprising that Protestants

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[5] The anti-cross campaign provoked widespread resistance from Catholics and Protestants (Cao 2017; Vala 2019; Yang 2018).
[6] Catholics and Protestants are not the only religious groups to be under severe pressure. Buddhist and Daoist temples and statuary have also been destroyed, while Uighur Muslims have been detained in unprecedented numbers and sent to camps throughout northwestern China's Xinjiang Province.

have taken eagerly to China's social media apps. First, on microblogging sites such as Sina's Weibo, Chinese Protestants formed a sphere of relatively free discussion on a range of religiously related issues, such as what "patriotism" (*aiguozhuyi*) means for Protestants. On these accounts, even though only a few microbloggers actively engaged with a few interlocutors, each public account boasted millions of followers so that the microbloggers' one-to-many interactions directly reached huge audiences (Vala and Huang 2016). Until the Party-state's crackdown on Sina's microblogs in 2013–2014, Weibo had cultivated a cyberspace for rather vigorous debate.

Since then, WeChat (*weixin*) has become the most popular social media app in China, tallying more than 1 billion daily active users (Lee 2019) in 2018 as compared to Sina Weibo's 430 million active users (Ren 2018). Along with the change, the format of interaction has shifted, as Weibo's direct, "megaphone" mode enabling one person to directly message many people has been replaced by WeChat's smaller-scale venues, in which an individual can directly engage with no more than 500 others at a time (Harwit 2017, p. 317).[7] The shutdown of the most popular Weibo personalities indicates that social media, like state and commercial mass media, have also drawn Party-state scrutiny and monitoring.

5. The Bible Handcopying Movement WeChat Group as a "Public": Origins, Discourse, Tone

In the context of this widespread regime pressure, Protestant leaders in Wenzhou, the city with China's highest proportion of Christians in the entire country (Cao 2011), discussed promoting handcopying to commemorate the 1919 publication of the Chinese Union Version of the Bible. To be sure, this is not the only Chinese translation of the Bible, nor was it the earliest or the most recent version (Zetzsche 1999, pp. 47–48); however, the Union Version remains the most widely used Chinese version in mainland China and the Chinese-speaking world (Scottish Bible Society 2019). The commemoration memorializes the cooperation of foreign missionaries from multiple denominations with Chinese assistants who labored for more than 25 years (Zetzsche 1999). However, while other Protestants worried that publicizing the effort would provoke a crackdown from authorities, Wang Wenfeng was willing to risk harassment to engage a wide range of lay believers in the anniversary event (he had been questioned by security forces many times before[8] (Interview, May 2019)).

On January 18, Wang launched the Bible handcopying project on WeChat by addressing "all friends" that "the Chinese Protestant world" wishes to honor this "important historical moment" by launching a "public interest activity" of copying the Bible (*Weixin QQ* 2019). The plan was for the "Chinese public (*guangda huaren*)"[9] to participate in completing a handcopied commemorative Bible, and thus he "invite[d] Christians and friends in society at home and overseas" to sign up, complete handcopying of a book of the Bible within a set period of time, and mail the pages to Wang. In return, he would send a certificate of completion. Finally, Wang set up a large-scale WeChat group. The appeal beyond a narrow population of fellow believers to a larger public composed of non-Christians ("friends") in China and abroad is significant in his seeking to create a larger public.

In addressing Christians and friends, Wang conjured up a public for the movement, fulfilling two features of Michael Warner's "publics," that they be self-organized and that they bring together strangers as an audience (Warner 2002, pp. 51–52). Clearly, the movement was not state-initiated; more

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[7] Circumvention of the 500-person limit is possible through "daisy chain" messaging in which a member of one group re-posts messages in other groups of which she is a member (Harwit 2017, p. 318).

[8] State security especially questioned Wang after he organized a 2013 international conference that culminated in a joint statement calling for pluralism and liberalism by Chinese Christians, liberals, New Leftists, and New Confucians called the "Oxford Consensus" (Johnson 2013).

[9] Wang used the term *huaren* to connote all "Chinese peoples" around the world rather than *zhongguo ren* which suggests "Chinese people living inside the country."

importantly, the online and offline realms comprised strangers.[10] Indeed, Wang and others added several people to the WeChat group in the course of the six months we observed it, and none of these new arrivals was already linked to existing WeChat group members. In total, more than half of the nearly 500 members were strangers to Wang himself (personal communication with one author, July 2019). The members in the WeChat group online were also connected to congregations and other groups in the offline Bible handcopying movement, indicating that the offline aspect of handcopying encompassed a far greater range of strangers. Within China these Bible handcopiers lived across the country: in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai; in the southern coastal areas of Guangdong and Zhejiang; the southwest (Yunnan and Guangxi); the central plains of Anhui and Henan; west to Shaanxi and to northern areas of Hubei, Inner Mongolia, and the northeastern areas. Theologically, many participants were strongly evangelical, but some would claim adherence to Calvinism while others are rooted in the Pietist tradition. At the international level, participants joined in from the United States, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, and elsewhere.

More than the membership composition of the WeChat group or its offline extent, a particular type of discourse tied these strangers together as a public. It was strongly reminiscent of discourse found in mainland Chinese house churches. In other words, the WeChat group did not endorse or permit just any kind of discourse; rather, the WeChat public was marked by a focused, encouraging, evangelistic, and pietistic discourse, whose tone was set by Wang as the founder, maintained by others who helped run the WeChat group, and then embraced by various group members themselves.

The clear focus of the group was Bible handcopying and subjects related to Bible study and research. Indeed, the most frequent posts comprised lists of the Bible books which had already been claimed for handcopying. These daily posts contained separate lists of handcopying projects for Sunday school classes, children (ages up to 14 years old), families, individuals, churches, organizations (like drug rehab centers or nursing homes), or pastors doing the handcopying. We called the person doing this posting the "administrator" of the group, as she kept track of these lists and kept discipline in the group (more on this below).

Yet far from being a mere bureaucrat, the administrator reinforced the WeChat group tone set by Wang, a tone that was warm, gentle, and encouraging. For example, after publishing the updated lists in the large WeChat group, the administrator regularly added four "stickers" (animated gifs) with short Christian text messages. (See Figure 1) The first was a picture of an open Bible with automatically turning pages that had the words, "God's words are seeking God; the life and bread of all people"; the second was a cute sheep with blinking eyes sitting at a table with an open book and the words, "pondering [the Bible] day and night;" the third was a black-and-white picture of the side of a Caucasian child's head with eyes closed and clasped hands with the words, "thankful … "; and the fourth was a cartoon of a female angel in a red and blue dress with orange hair and clasped hands, with the words, "Emmanuel" pulsing next to her.

When responding to a variety of posts, the other members of the WeChat group followed in the same warm tone with most posts consisting of short, approving, Christian-themed stickers. These included a cartoon full-body Jesus with each hand in a thumbs-up position and three characters down the side ("like, like, like"), rotating Chinese characters ("Hallelujah, praise be to God"), pages that turned from one ("thanks to God") to the other ("praise God") in endless cycle, an open Bible with words at the top ("Oh Lord! Your word is a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path!") and at the bottom (in larger letters, "Bread of Life"), or a bouquet of roses with a shower of pink rosebuds falling down the picture ("Jesus loves everyone" under the bouquet). Even non-Christian imagery also tended to be exhortatory or encouraging. One sticker included a white blob figure slapping together red and blue sticks like those found at sporting events, another was a thumbs up hand with

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10　Warner points out that terms such as "the public" or "the nation" would make little sense if only familiars comprised them, for then one would say, "family and friends." Hence, publics *must* be composed of strangers, who nonetheless may become acquainted in the course of being addressed (Warner 2002, p. 56).

the words "too awesome (*taibangle*)," and a third was a simple emoji of a cup of coffee. Through this variety of stickers and encouraging phrases, the WeChat group generated a feeling of belonging among strangers, a shared "sense of community" (McMillan and Chavis 1986, p. 9) that marks publics (Warner 2002, p. 70).

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 1. Typical postings in the Protestant WeChat group (**a**) a picture of an open Bible with automatically turning pages that had the words, "God's words are seeking God; the life and bread of all people"; the second was a cute sheep with blinking eyes sitting at a table with an open book and the words, "pondering [the Bible] day and night;" the third was a black-and-white picture of the side of a Caucasian child's head with eyes closed and clasped hands with the words, "thankful . . . "; and the fourth was a cartoon of a female angel in a red and blue dress with orange hair and clasped hands, with the words, "Emmanuel" pulsing next to her. (**b**) "Clapping for you, spurring you on"; two children singing, "Hallelujah"; revolving golden letters saying, "Hallelujah, Glory to God"; Jesus as a cheerleader with pom-poms, "Happy"; sheep with sun rays, "Encouraging you in love."

5.1. Reassuring Participants of the Spiritual Rewards from Bible Handcopying: Two Testimonials

More than just mere electronic stimulation, the group's encouragement to each other to copy the Bible took more substantial forms as well and suggested lifelong benefits to the activity. This was illustrated by links that members posted to two stories of people who had copied the Bible. In the first case, a group member posted a link to a story about the member's father who was a poor, rural carpenter. Unable to afford a Bible, he returned again and again to the home of someone who owned a Bible to copy scriptures for his own reading. Over five years, he had finally copied the entire New Testament. Because he had accepted faith in Christ quickly and immediately refused to carry out traditional funerary rituals in his home area, his fellow villagers had initially taken offense at his life change. However, according to the storyteller, his strong work ethic and honesty eventually gained him their respect. Thus, handcopying for this new convert had been a necessity to have access to reading the scriptures, but it also implied that those handcopied sheets helped deepen his convictions to reject non-Christian religious practices and to act in upright ways.

Shortly after this link was posted, another WeChat group member linked to a photo essay of a middle aged, homeless man in southern China who loved to read and handcopy "a classic." Born in

the poor inland province of Henan, the man's parents both died when he was young, and so he roamed the country until he settled under a bridge in Fujian Province more than ten years earlier. The original photo essay leaves out a few details: it only states that he has enjoyed "reading classics" the past two years, that he has spent much time copying them, and that he enjoys going to a local "meeting place" (*huisuo*) where he has met young people. However, the group member who linked to the photo essay claimed to know a key detail, "the classic is of course the Bible," suggesting that the meeting place was a local church, too.

Reactions by group members were swift and full of praise. The administrator followed with typically encouraging remarks such as, "Peace! So thankful! God bless! Hallelujah! Emanuel!" and a Bible verse about contentment in every situation by relying on God (Phil. 4: 12–13).

Another group member then posted photos of a shelter that he built for copying the Bible, stressing that his material conditions were "much better" than that of the homeless man, adding, "I am really grateful." The administrator responded with, "Grateful! At all times and in all places! God bless you! Go for it!" while another group member added a sticker depicting three cartoon angels singing and playing instruments with "Hallelujah" printed in large letters and confetti twinkling all around.

These stories, together with the speed with which other group members and the administrator responded to and validated them, function as testimonials that suggest the impact that Bible handcopying and thus Christian faith can have on individuals. In one story, Bible handcopying bolstered the integrity of a lone Christian isolated from non-Christians around him by his rejection of their community rituals, while in the other story it gave solace to someone who appeared to have lost all relational ties and earthly comforts. Bible handcopying in these instances helped reassure the Protestant Bible handcopying public that their efforts were not merely time-consuming and laborious but would reap greater rewards than accumulating sheafs of copied words.

5.2. Beyond Protestants and into the Offline World: Training Scholars, Sharing Personal Stories

Although this Protestant public is directed towards Bible handcopying, it is focused on more than just completing a task and satisfying its own spiritual needs. In two examples, the WeChat group illustrated the evangelistic dimension of the discourse as it reached out in two senses: first, from the online to offline worlds, and second, beyond Protestants to influence others. The first example illustrates one-on-one personal evangelism, which is an abiding feature of China's conservative Protestant house church Christianity (Bays 2003, p. 502; Koesel 2013, pp. 580–82; Vala and O'Brien 2007). A middle-aged member explained, in a longer post, how he had told a former middle school classmate about the handcopying project. She soon began to copy a Bible book with her first-grade daughter. "This is the Lord's special grace and mercy," relayed the member to the larger group, "allowing this primary school teacher and her daughter to learn of the gospel through this way." Neither the teacher nor her daughter had ever heard the Christian message before, claimed the group member. The group member also sent her a new Bible, asking permission to inscribe its frontispiece, which he did with an evangelical verse about salvation (1 Tim. 1: 15–16). To the large group, the member asked for prayers that "the Lord would elect them to become his daughters," and for himself to finish copying the entire Bible in the next eight months. Rather than merely explain all this through words, the member sent screenshots of his entire WeChat conversation and a photo of his inscription (apparently without the teacher's knowledge).

The second example illustrates an institution-building approach to reaching society with the Christian message. The organizer Wang introduced a documentary film on an effort to build up the academic study of the Bible in China. He explained that he was making an exception to the rules about allowable content in the WeChat group because the documentary filmmakers, who were married to each other, were WeChat group members themselves and because this installment of their documentary concerned the Hebrew Bible. Wang then described the documentary as tracking a world-renowned Chinese Old Testament Bible scholar as he established Bible study classes in mainland

China's universities. Wang encouraged group members to pray for this to come about, so that "God's words may long remain in everyone's hearts forever, amen! [thumbs up and thank you emojis]."

One member of the filmmaker couple seized the opportunity to publicize the filmmaking challenges. She thanked Wang for his prayers and support, humbly explained that their film was quite limited in its achievements and expressed hope that God would complement their efforts. Then she explained that ten Old Testament PhD scholars had already been trained and were working as professors at mainland universities. No doubt aware that the members of the WeChat group either included (or themselves knew) wealthy Protestants who might be potential donors, she underlined the high cost of training a single Old Testament scholar (roughly US$175,000).

This exchange sparked praise by Wang and experience-sharing by others on Bible classes and the Bible's impact. Wang expressed delight and gratitude for the ten scholars, and then asked that all pray that China's universities would one day have departments of Bible studies so university students could take Bible classes. He added a request for prayers for the filmmaking couple who had funded the film despite a difficult financial situation, ending with the exhortation that "Doing work for the Lord never returns empty!" and added "thank you" emojis. One group member then related that when a church "sister" opened a public Bible class in her school, it immediately filled up, suggesting that there indeed is a great thirst in society for learning about the Bible. Another WeChat group member promised to transmit Wang's message further, onto another WeChat group, and then recounted a story about a former classmate's return from the US with her high school aged son. The son had studied the Bible in his American school and quoted its words in normal conversation, even though neither the classmate nor the son were Christians. The conclusion for the WeChat group member was that "the influence of the Bible on them is great" and that "they are all in God's plan."

In these exchanges, WeChat members reinforced convictions that Chinese society is in need of biblical study, as seen in the quickly filled class, and that Bible study can shape the thinking and behavior of even non-believers, such as the high school aged son. Furthermore, the WeChat public could collectively imagine a future in which their current struggles, whether the documentary couple scraping together money for filmmaking and the scholar's years-long efforts to train the next generation of scholars, would result in personal reward and societal transformation.

5.3. Maintaining a Focus on Bible Handcopying through Discipline and Purposeful Ignoring

So far, we have seen few, if any, references from the WeChat Bible handcopying public to the currently existing challenges and pressures of practicing Christianity in China. This is remarkable, given that the term "digital religion" (Campbell 2013, pp. 3–4) as a concept developed to emphasize the deep integration of online and offline religious spheres. However, in the authoritarian Chinese context, the discourse in the WeChat group was remarkably divorced from discussion of the practical realities of life that did directly relate to Bible handcopying. When mention of regime pressures on Christianity did surface, they occasioned little comment and discussion returned to the Bible handcopying, perhaps as a way to reduce the chance that the state might scrutinize it as a site of oppositional politics or perhaps to avoid the possibility that Bible handcopiers' conflicting theologies, church positions, or attitudes toward state policies might provoke sharp disputes.

For example, one WeChat member began a post by expressing how much her family was gaining from copying the Bible and "also hold[ing] onto the precious words of God," precisely the goal of the project. She continued, "In my hometown, the government is now confiscating church property and burning Bibles and other spiritual literature." The administrator quickly replied, "Peace! Only look to God! Seek God's absolution! Ask God to have mercy and protect our churches! May God's words remind and protect us every moment not to forget the Lord's grace! At any time we can realize the Lord's intention a little more! Give it over and look to God! Emanuel [God is with us]!" followed by praying-hands symbols. When the member responded, "Amen," another group member directed her to "encourage the church to distribute Bibles" to the church members, to which the original member

replied that everyone already had Bibles, and then posted photos of a young girl copying a Bible, explaining that she brought her daughter to copy the Bible.

Rather than address the state harassment, ask for prayers for the church under attack, or suggest survival strategies such as dispersal into small groups, the organizer and administrator and others purposefully ignored the chance to better understand the political situation and instead focused on encouraging the mother in her and her family's copying of the Bible. Similar inaction or silence met the posting of a link to a half hour podcast that criticized the authorities' recent demand for church leaders to earn government "preaching certificates" (and that preachers concentrate 70% of sermon time extolling socialism's benefits rather explaining biblical themes).

In contrast to digital religion's integration of off- and online realms, here we see a sharp divide between the realm of Bible handcopying, where diligent manual copying work and congregational celebrations for completed handcopies form an idyllic image that excludes offline harassment. The authorities are invisible, presumably acting in a realm beyond the cultivated image of Bible handcopying.

The strict focus on Bible handcopying was maintained through light reprimands and a reiteration of the group norms by the administrator, the one who daily posted the latest lists of the various Bible handcopying categories. Over the course of our six-month observation of the WeChat group, every one or two weeks some group member would post a link to an unrelated topic, behavior that violated explicit group rules.[11] Whether the content was Christian themed or not, the administrator frequently, though not always, chided the violator.

For example, one member posted an advertisement for a music class in guitar, piano, and other instruments, and then, several weeks later, reposted the information. Another person posted a message about a marriage devotional by a famous American evangelical (John Piper). A third person posted a 5-min video clip from a TV talk show about a miraculous healing technique with no Christian reference at all. After each of these instances, the administrator reminded the group of its purpose.

In these reproaches, the administrator typically began with, "[WeChat handle of offending member] Jesus loves you! The Lord bless you! Thank you for your understanding and support" and then posted the "Bible handcopying rules" which were to promote churches and family members to copy the Bible. The rules indicated that the WeChat group only welcomed posts, questions, experiences, and photos related to handcopying the Bible. They also included the goal to "promote a deeper understanding of the true way, life growth, and steadfast service." Infrequently, the censured members responded with contrition.

The WeChat Protestant public, despite being mostly focused on Bible copying themes, also was a site for information that was lightly or not at all related to the activity, just as public spheres are not always single-issue settings. These miscellaneous postings did not always prompt reprimands from organizers, such as a single-page advertisement for a free Bible dictionary and a link to a song praising Jesus ("Ah Lord, you're the most beautiful"). An even odder posting also received no comment: a video contrasting childrearing in the US and China with the aim of encouraging Chinese parents to raise their children to be more self-reliant, as American parents supposedly do. Stranger yet was the link to a five-minute news report about a traffic accident. Perhaps because the group members were known to the organizer, or otherwise posted relevant information (the traffic accident was posted by the person who sent daily devotionals) or their posts were judged to be sufficiently related to the core activity (e.g., the Bible dictionary) and therefore merited no censure. Interestingly, however, other group members did not engage or comment on the posts either, as if the group norms to focus on Bible copying had taken hold among them.

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[11]　In general, the original host of a WeChat group sets its rules and is the only one capable of expelling a member, although any existing member can add a new member into the group.

Similarly, discordant postings provided fresh opportunities for the group to reaffirm its shared identity and Christian focus. One day, a violent sticker appeared that depicted a cartoon pig firing bullets from a machine gun with the words, "[I] beat you to death (*dasi ni*)" from a WeChat handle with a woman's name (it turned out to be a joke by the child of a group member who the organizer did not know.) The organizer responded with a puzzled sticker and, before long, other group members criticized the posting and defended the organizer by chiming in with Christian scripture references. First, an image of a handwritten page was posted with a scripture verse, "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense" (Psalm 11: 22). Five minutes later, another person posted a Bible verse, "Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city" (Psalm 16: 32). Both scripture verses seemed to criticize the posting member and quickly received approbation from others. The violent moment thus passed, and the administrator once more turned to posting the daily lists of handcopiers. In this way, the group norms of the WeChat public were reaffirmed, and the public setting once again return to its focus.

6. Bible Handcopying Movement as Protestant "alter-public" and Implications

The 2019 Bible handcopying movement in China originated from an online call to expand a new form of offline religious devotion in handcopying the Bible and sparked the development of a small-scale public in a 500-member social media group on China's WeChat app. Its grassroots origins, group membership including strangers, shared awareness of subordinate status, and its peculiar forms of discourse mark this WeChat group as a type of public, similar in character to evangelistic and pietistic conservative unregistered "house churches" in China, but also highly original in prompting nationwide—even international—participation of Chinese Protestants without reference to denominational or house church network groupings.

Unlike studies of digital religion in liberal democratic regimes in advanced economies, this analysis focuses attention on the character of the state and its influence on society. The threat of authoritarian Chinese regime intervention circumscribes the range of topics aired in the WeChat public and underscores the importance of a narrow focus. Given these limitations, it is best understood as an "alter-public," rather than a full-blown public sphere or an example of Warner's "counterpublics" (2002), drawing on Thomas Chen's work on how online censorship reworked the content of a novel posted online to produce a new text (Chen 2015). By recognizing the possibility of oppositional outcomes without reducing the effect to a binary struggle between state and society or domination and resistance (Chen 2015, p. 21), the alter-public term encompasses the possibility of state opposition without singling it out. So even without state intervention, *fear* of state intervention shapes the nature and content of the discourse circulating in the WeChat group.[12]

For Protestants, the "alter-public" WeChat space promotes another identity that empowers a modus vivendi for Protestants living under a powerful Party-state. Chinese Bible copiers can thus be loyal citizens *and* also members of an eternal community, that of "the saints" of the universal church. In this way, the WeChat encouragement through electronic stickers and the envisioning of the community through photos and videos of Bible copiers employs a virtual community online to draw participants into another unseen (but not virtual) religious community that must be imagined across time and across space, that of the communion of the saints. Protestants can understand themselves through the lens of multiple identities: loyal Chinese citizens subordinate to the Party-state and also Bible scribes who composed the Bible.

Methdologically, in conceptualizing the Bible handcopying movement as a Protestant alter-public we argue that even micro-scale publics or public spheres of hundreds of people are important to study (Keane 1998, p. 170), because they provide insight into larger phenomena, such as how citizens react to

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12 It may also be that Wang Wenfeng set up the WeChat group rules in such a way to avoid endless, fractious disputes *in society*, between the range of Protestants engaged in copying the Bible.

the Party-state, and their existence suggests that the state permits (or is unaware of) "bubbles" of partial autonomy where religious practices of subordinate groups can percolate (McCallum 2011, p. 184). By contrast with the Habermasian concept of public spheres, however, this Protestant alter-public is most assuredly *not* a space of rational-critical debate (Habermas 1962). Instead, it functions like a performative "poetic" space (Warner 2002), which means that the political concerns of its participants are almost completely invisible, because popular encouragement for religious practices displaces rational-critical debate of political issues.

By contrast with scholars of democratic regimes who argue that the concept of multiple micro public spheres helps illuminate religious groups' interactions within and beyond their communities (McCallum 2011), in an authoritarian context the Protestant alter-public acts as a micro structure that discourages broader discussion, because it hives off any mention of political issues into smaller scale settings. This closure is apparent, as others have noted with WeChat (and in contrast to Weibo microblogs) (Harwit 2017, p. 318), in that it is a more intimate venue because only someone who knows a WeChat group member can gain admission to the group. So rather than being fully open to strangers, the Protestant WeChat alter-public is only partially open.[13] Second, it implies that by sequestering dialogue or discussion of religious practices into smaller venues and casting it as having an alternative rather than oppositional character, alter-publics may well stabilize the Party-state, because if alternatives were to develop into opposition, such nascent critiques would still be somewhat cordoned off from wider society.[14]

Studying the 2019 Bible handcopying movement and its WeChat alter-public helps answer the call for investigation of online religious engagement in China (Xu and Campbell 2018, p. 254) and, more broadly, it offers an example of how one religious group has sought to use online religion to bolster offline religious practices and communities. In the process, the movement and its micro-public are emphasizing a Protestant identity to coexist alongside a Chinese citizenship identity and as an antidote to the side effects of rapid social change in China.

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13 The public concept still holds, however, as Warner's original conception of publics had similar limitations in that not everyone knew about the existence of the She-romp counterpublic.

14 "Somewhat," because daisy-chain messaging can spread ideas from a 500-member group to other groups, again and again, thus reaching a larger group of people. Also, the Bible handcopying movement does claim public goals to reach out to wider society, for example, with a number of memorializing efforts. In the WeChat group, Wang Wenfeng repeatedly mentioned his plans to establish a Bible handcopying museum to discuss the history of the Chinese Bible and display the handwritten pages and scrolls he has received from individuals and congregations in China and abroad. In addition, individual church congregations have begun publishing their handcopying sheets as bound volumes to serve as a memoriam for the effort.

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