New Developments in Christianity in China

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Christianity's rapid expansion in China in recent years has attracted much attention from scholars, China policymakers, local and international media, and the wider public. Many Christian groups throughout the country are harnessing the tremendous power of new media such as the internet and mobile apps to share religious messages, participate in rituals, access information, create online communities, and to evangelize. As communications infrastructure continues to improve across China and with the country's deepening linkages with the rest of the world, Chinese Christian networks are spreading both within and outside the country. These networks link and crisscross at multiple scales and localities in China as well as deepen interactions with overseas Christians and global Christianity. Chinese Christians have also begun exerting their influence outside China through activities such as proselytism, charity work, and development projects. Debates, contestations and negotiations have proceeded on issues such as the divide between "official" and "unofficial" churches; the affinity between Christianity and Chinese culture; whether China is becoming Christianized (and over the exact number of Christians); the influence of foreign Christian groups; and the role of Christianity in international politics. Further, the close ties between some Christian groups in China and those based overseas (such as American and South Korean Christian organizations actively cultivating ties in China), and the Chinese Catholics' complicated relationship with the Vatican, have contributed to the party-state's intense suspicion over foreign interference in the country's religious and political affairs.

Protestant Christianity in particular has attracted huge numbers of new believers in both rural and urban areas. As Lian Xi notes in his book, *Redeemed by Fire*, one important reason is the transformation of Christianity "from an alien faith preached and presided over by Western missionaries into an indigenous religion of the masses" (Lian 2010, p. 2). According to Sun (2017), the main reason behind the rise of Protestantism in Post-Mao China is the intricate interplay between state actions and the institutional features of Protestantism. These institutional features comprise of zero-sum evangelism, congregational structure, insistence on church autonomy, a polycephalous structure, glorification of martyrdom, and global support network. In themselves, these institutional features are unable to fully explain the rapid expansion of Protestantism in China. The role of the state, specifically the unintended effects of its actions during Mao and post-Mao eras, shaped the crucial socio-political context conducive for Protestantism to gain a stronger foothold in China. On the one hand, a series of state's anti-superstition and anti-feudalism campaigns between 1950s and late 70s undermined the traditional normative and institutional orders of Chinese popular religion that had historically strongly opposed Christianity at the grassroots level. On the other hand, the state's pursuit of market-oriented economic development during the post-Mao era has resulted in relative weakening of political control in the local society. Local officials were much more interested in demonstrating their capabilities in spurring economic development than controlling religious activities. In addition, the understaffing of relevant bureaucracies such as the local Religious Affairs Bureau meant that implementation of religious policies was not effectively carried out. According to Sun, it is a combination of the institutional features of Protestantism and the (unintended) state actions that has resulted in the rapid rise of Protestantism over the past four decades.

On the legal front, one of the most significant developments with regard to the party-state's regulation of religion is the promulgation of a revised Regulation on Religious Affairs in 2008. Comprising of 9 chapters and 77 articles, this document covers a broad range of religious activities, including fund raising, the use of online platforms, and relationships with foreign entities. The new Regulation and its impact on the state-supported China Catholic Patriotic Church is the subject of Magdaléna Masláková and Anežka Satorová's contribution to this journal special issue. The authors interviewed members of the clergy mainly from the Zhejiang province with the aims of soliciting their views on how their work and relationship with the authorities have been impacted by the new regulations. Some of the interviewees readily acknowledge that the open Church has little choice but to follow the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party; they consider the Regulation as part of the party-state's broader attempt to "sinicize religions". More specifically, it is the direct result of President Xi Jinping's attempt to further bend religion in China to Chinese-style socialism under the direction of the Communist Party. For the religious leaders, including those in the official Catholic Church, this latest development represents a decades' old effort by the party-state to control religion, and many of those interviewed already have a stock of strategies to deal with deal with it. At the everyday level, local Catholic clergy are mostly "playing according to the rules" so as continue to cultivate good relations with local governments, avoid the suspicion of authorities, and to protect their own communities. The Catholic clergy seek to foster a public image of patriotic Christians while surreptitiously safeguarding their own religious agenda.

Meanwhile, as China opens up to the world from the early 1980s onwards, even village religious life in seemingly remotes areas has been inexorably shaped by translocal and transnational processes. In the book, *God Above Ground*, Lozada (2001) examines how the church of "Little Rome", in a predominantly Hakka village in Guangdong province, has been rebuilt with flows of funds from the Hakka diaspora. In the villagers' desire to pursue 'development' and 'modernity' in the new market economy, Catholic rituals have played a significant role in integrating other aspects of the villagers' engagement with transnational processes such as economic migration, consumption and nation-state building, part of their interpretation and experience of being 'modern' in the contemporary world. In a similar vein, Cao Nanlai's contribution in this special issue seeks to go beyond the current scholarship that tends to focus on church-state relations to suggest a transnational framework for studying Chinese Christianity in the context of globalized networks and flows. In "A Sinicized World Religion? Chinese Christianity at the Contemporary Moment of Globalization", Cao wants to correct a "Western-centric view on Christianity's one-way penetration of Chinese society and culture" through an empirical study of how a Sinicized version of Christianity is spreading in the Schengen region of Europe, mainly via the extensive business and social networks of Chinese traders and merchants. In this article, Cao argues that Chinese Christianity is an emergent form of world religion and identifies diasporic Chinese Christians as agents of religious globalization.

These days, many Chinese people no longer consider Christianity a "foreign" religion and a tool for Western imperialistic expansion, but as a prestigious religion that symbolizes modernity and cosmopolitanism. Yang's (2005) study of conversion to Christianity in urban China finds that the crucial contexts for the rising numbers of new converts in the 1990s in the cities were China's increasing embrace of the globalizing market economy under circumstances of tight political control and suppression of dissent. This combination of circumstances prompted some urban residents disenchanted with Communist ideology to turn to Christianity as a viable source of religious and moral certitude. Many of these believers also viewed Christianity positively as signifying liberalism, democracy, modernity and cosmopolitanism. New Christian converts, especially in the cities, increasingly hail from the elite strata of Chinese society consisting of successful businesspeople, university students, and professionals (Gao 2005; Cao 2011). Their accumulated social, cultural and economic capital in turn empowered them with greater organizational and mobilization capacities in the pursuit of religious aims. In the cities, many independent Christian groups are renting commercial premises for conducting their religious activities, even when this is often illegal. Christians' increasing willingness to take an assertive

negotiating position vis-à-vis the authorities was clearly seen in 2001, when the Shouwang church members, after being forced to vacate their original premises, held outdoor services and strove to stake out a prominent presence in the public sphere.

Jie Kang's article for this special issue, "The Rise of Calvinist Christianity in Urbanising China", examines the spread of Calvinism as an integral part of China's urbanization process and resulting from the rising numbers of high-educated Chinese in the cities. In spite of the state's close monitoring of and restrictions on independent churches, Kang's study illustrates the important role played by overseas Chinese and foreign (especially Korean) missionaries in the dissemination of Reformed theology in China. As it localizes, Calvinism has taken on certain Chinese features. First, unlike the early Calvinists in Europe, Chinese Calvinists tend to express certainty of their salvation, regarding "their lives as predestined by God alone". In addition, believers are disciplined and generally obedient to their pastors. Thirdly, seeing nothing wrong in combining religion and business, some Calvinists have become entrepreneurs in the business of religious tourism. Lastly, Chinese Calvinism lays strong emphasis on morality and personal piety while discouraging overt political expressions. Kang's paper thus further adds to our overall picture of the urban (independent) Church which is showing vitality and increasing confidence. At the same time, it is also experiencing incessant fragmentation as members break away from existing groups due to personal, institutional and theological disagreements.

In contrast, detailed anthropological studies of Christianity in the rural areas paint a more ambivalent picture. Over the last two decades, many Christian village communities have witnessed the re-opening of local churches and much greater freedom to practice their faith (e.g., Liang 1999; Lim 2009). In his research in Wu village in the Gansu province, Huang (2012) finds that both official Catholic and Protestant churches had benefitted initially from the reforms and new religious policies in the 1980s. However, since the late 1990s, the village churches have experienced a marked decline, precisely because of the village's deepening integration into translocal and transnational flows. One of the most important factors behind the decline is economic migration, as the young in the village, especially men, join the millions of migrants from other parts of China moving to the cities in search of jobs and a better life. The result has been the gradual hollowing out of the rural Christian community. According to Huang's informants, there were almost no new converts in the five years since 1997, and the churches these days are no longer as "vibrant" as they used to be. Huang observes that the numbers of people attending church events are always far lower than what the church leaders claimed to be the size of the local Christian community. The village church seems like an "Old Folks' club" or a "Women's club".

Michel Chambon's article looks at a group of Christians which have not been the subject of much research in the recent scholarship on Christianity in China—the Catholic nuns. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork among Catholic communities in Nanping and extensive interviews with Catholic nuns and other clergy members in China and elsewhere, Chambon provides us with a fascinating account of how Catholic nuns seek to model themselves and their religious works on two distinct modes of Catholic religious life, that of the consecrated virgins (or beatas) and the missionary congregations. Besides drawing on these two models of religious life for inspiration, the congregations and lifestyle of Catholic nuns in China are also shaped by their encounter with various local and foreign Church actors and China's specific socio-historical realities such as religious persecutions and economic change. Resilient, adaptive and creative, Chinese Catholic nuns have forged a path that does not fully conform to what the universal Church expects them to embark on. At the same time, they continue to rely on the rich traditions and historical experiences of the Catholic Church to overcome challenges in their pursuit of their religious calling in an often hostile and unpredictable environments.

One of the most remarkable social trends in China in recent years is the explosion of mobile internet and social media usage. This can be seen by the widespread use of the micro-blog platform Weibo, the mobile chat app WeChat, and video sharing site Tudou, among many others. In 2017, WeChat alone has around 494 million individual users in China, and hit one billion user accounts worldwide (Financial Times 2018). In addition to its social messaging function, WeChat is also a

popular platform for e-commerce, mobile payments, and blogs. Recently, there has been increasing scholarly attention on religion and media in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Travagnin 2017; Lim and Sng). Carsten Vala and Jianbo Huang's contribution presents a case study of the offline Bible handcopying movement that had been initiated online via the WeChat app. As the authors point out, studies of digital religion are predominantly carried out in liberal, democratic countries with developed economies. The picture of digital religion presented through such studies tend to show how new media technologies have enabled the formation of innovative religious expressions, new communities, and new theologies. These technologies also allow existing religious groups to reformulate and reconstitute their relationships with the wider public and to promote their own versions of orthodoxy. Some scholars have thus argued that digital religion is an example of a new public sphere that allows for discussion, debates and contestations between different social groups, state and non-state actors concerned with religious matters. Vala and Huang argue that in an authoritarian context like China's, digital religion does not constitute a public sphere where debates and contestations with various authorities may occur. Rather, Chinese Protestants' religious engagement through the WeChat online space represents an 'alter-public', a space where state censorship or fear of censorship "encourages the WeChat group organizers to cultivate a public that is not explicitly counter to the ruling authorities and its official agenda." Protestant participants in this alter-public assiduously avoid open and direct confrontation with the state while cultivating multiple identities as both loyal Chinese citizens and pious Christians.

While Vala and Huang's study examines the cultivation of Christian piety through the Bible handcopying movement, Steve Cheung and Khun Eng Kuah approach the matter through an ethnographic study in Hong Kong of Christians' understanding and practice of external giving, i.e., giving outside the church. Taking the rational choice approach as a point of departure, Cheung and Kuah argue that external giving should not be understood as primarily a rational choice decision. Their ethnographic data and interviews with respondents show that giving is a "dynamic and transformative act" that allows individual believers to "reflect upon and enact their sacred selves". This cultivation of the Christian sacred self is regarded as enacting the work of Jesus Christ and an expression of God's love to the needy. In short, the interiority of Christian piety is inextricably intertwined with the exteriority of social concerns and engagement. Ultimately, Christian external giving facilitates the construction of a tripartite sacred moral economy involving three key actors, namely, the Christian givers, God and the recipients of the giving, with their social relationships underpinned more by moral norms and expectations than economic considerations.

Continuing with the topic of Christianity and social change, my article, "'Serving the Lord': Christianity, Work and Social Engagement in China", suggests that we need to look beyond overt religious mobilization and civil society activism to better understand how Christianity manages to spread in China and its potential to be a force for social change in the country. This is especially pertinent in the current context of ever tighter state regulations and deepening political suspicion over religious groups, especially those with close ties with their co-religionists overseas. I examine a domain which is not usually conceptualized as belonging to civil society, that of the workplace. While existing scholarship tends to focus on the activities of Chinese Christian entrepreneurs or bosses, I analyze the motivation, beliefs and activities of Christian professionals employed in non-Christian workplaces. Using the frameworks of everyday religion and unobtrusive social engagement, I demonstrate how these Christian employees practice their religious faith in the secular workplace, subtly change the workplace culture, and ultimately engage in a kind of unobtrusive religious social engagement. Many of them do not see a clear boundary between a 'secular' workplace and a separate domain of religion. Just as the respondents in Cheung and Kuah's article who tend to regard the act of giving as enabling them to live out their faith and be truly Christian, the mainly Evangelical Protestant employees in my study interpret work as a kind of service to God that necessarily entails spreading Christian values in the workplace and to their colleagues. The ultimate goal is the moral transformation of China via Christianity.

Given the tremendous diversity of the Christian experience in contemporary China, it would be prudent to avoid making sweeping generalizations about the faith in China. One thing is clear, though: just like Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, folk religion, and other forms of religiosity, Christianity over the past couple of decades has experienced an efflorescence of such a degree that would have been unimaginable at the tail-end of the Maoist era. One explanation is that the government's policies on religion have been constantly evolving, and unevenly implemented by the various local authorities, often resulting in inconsistency and the creation of spaces for negotiation between the local state and religious groups. This, however, is a partial, statist perspective concerning the effectiveness of policy implementation. It is equally important for us to understand how individual believers and Christian groups, with varying degrees of agency, creativity, and autonomy, have either accommodated, resisted, or co-opted the party-state through innovations in theology, organization structure, technology, ritual practices, and transnational social networks.

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