

Article

“Dual Moral Authority”: Negotiating Christian Ethics Within Confucian Kinship Frameworks in Rural China

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Abstract

The relationship between rural Christianity and the Chinese ethical conception of interpersonal relationships has long been a central concern in scholarly research. Existing studies often frame the two as antagonistic or argue that the Christian configuration of interpersonal relationships is a mere continuation of the traditional differential mode of association (*chaxu geju*). However, these perspectives often neglect local Christians' own ethno-theology and its praxis, rendering the cultural transformations brought about by conversion invisible. Focusing on the ordinary ethics of rural Christians and based on long-term fieldwork in Shui County (a pseudonym), a rural region at the junction of Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan and Anhui provinces in China, this study reveals that Christianity instantiates a dual moral authority system within believers' daily practices: “centripetal authority” and “centrifugal authority”. The former emphasizes inner sincerity, granting believers a degree of moral autonomy. The latter establishes a divine foundation for believers' social relations. Employing anthropologist Marcel Mauss's theory of gift to analyze the interaction between two types of authority in the ordinary ethics of believers, this study finds that rural Christianity both consolidates and expands pre-existing, local relational configurations. The extent of this cultural transformation is closely correlated with the depth of the divine–human relationship. Consequently, Christianity's relationship with traditional Chinese ethics transcends binary oppositions between antagonism and continuity, instead enacting a creative reconfiguration.

Keywords: rural Christianity; differential mode of association; ordinary ethics



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1. Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and China's indigenous cultural traditions has long been a central preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals. Christian intellectuals scrutinized Christianity (Protestant and Catholic) as the spiritual foundation of Western civilization, for its possibility of offering an alternative way of life and political ideal distinct from Confucianism, thus becoming a focal point of contention (Liu 2003; X. Zhang 2012). This issue has become more urgent as the restoration of China's religious freedom policies opened the way to a rapid rise in Christianity's numbers.¹ Official records counted 700,000 Christians in 1949, accounting for 0.17% of the total population (based on an estimated population of 400 million) (Lu and Zhang 2016). By 2018, the number of Christians had risen to 38 million, alongside 6 million Catholic believers (The Information Office of

the State Council 2018).² During this increase in Christianity in mainland China, rural areas became the primary stronghold for its dissemination; as some studies have indicated, rural Christians at one point accounted for 80% of the nation's total Christian population (Duan 2004, p. 571).

The background and developments mentioned above have thus made the relationship between rural Christians and traditional rural social ethics a noteworthy research topic.

Among the numerous discourses concerning the relationship between the two, one typical perspective is the “Conflict Model”. This view, often held by cultural conservatives in China, views Christian culture as a danger that could potentially erode indigenous Chinese culture. The threat of Christianity derives from those cultural conservatives' view that Christianity's institutional foundations are incompatible with the institutional basis of traditional Chinese belief systems. How the Christian institutional model of relatedness and the traditional Chinese social-organizational model of relatedness can coexist is the core question of this research.

Chinese religiosity, as C.K. Yang has argued, operates as a “diffused religion” such that worship practices are embedded within secular institutions, not organized separately with independent doctrines, organizations, and exclusive membership (C. K. Yang 2016; Lu 2019). This idea of religious embeddedness relies heavily on Fei's (2011, pp. 27–28) concept of “differential mode of association” (*chaxu geju*). Zhou (2024) summarizes this ideal-type structure with three characteristics: self-centered, identity-based, and differential treatment of others. Rooted in traditional clan (or family) systems, this model extends metaphorically to broader social relations.

In contrast, Christianity—especially Protestantism—is often interpreted as individualistic in its interpersonal model. Theorists like Mauss (1985) and Dumont (2003, pp. 31–90) demonstrated Christianity's historical role in fostering Western individualism. They both illustrate from different perspectives how Christian thought progressively disembedded individuals from social orders.

Consequently, many scholars of Chinese Christianity warn that its spread may erode traditional ethics. Historically, the Chinese Rites Controversy centered on whether converts could practice ancestor worship—a core conflict between Jesuit missionaries and Confucian literati (Ching and Küng 1997, pp. 31–32). Ethnographic studies also reveal why scholars express concern: though introduced as a supplementary belief in rural China, Christianity rapidly supplanted fundamental folk religions. As Chen (2012) documented, converts abandoned ancestral rites; incense ashes lost their symbolic meaning, clan halls were demonized as idolatrous, and gravesites were reduced to memorial spaces—severed from their sacred social function.

In contrast to the “Conflict Model”, other scholars have argued that rural Christianity in China has not fostered individualism. Instead, they find that the interpersonal relationship patterns of Christians remain consistent with their pre-conversion social structures. For example, Tan (2014) observed that believers did not fundamentally abandon ancestral worship and Confucian ethics, as these concepts had become so deeply ingrained that they were barely perceptible. The relational configuration of rural believers remains situated within the dialectic of God and ancestors. Similarly, J. Zhang (2022) contends that while Protestantism has altered the perspectives of local believers, it has nevertheless failed to instill “heterogeneous” ethics among the congregation.

However, these cultural continuity perspectives often neglect a crucial dimension: believers' own perceptions of interpersonal relationship patterns before and after conversion. Robbins (2004a) once critically summarized a prevalent view attributing Pentecostalism's African revival to the movement's purported “Black roots” manifested in features like orality of liturgy, narrativity of theology and witness, emphasis on participation,

use of dreams and visions in worship, and a model of mind/body correspondence that promotes healing by prayers. Such a conclusion overlooks both cross-cultural variations and the distinct frameworks underlying superficially similar phenomena. More importantly, it fails to recognize that Pentecostal adherents' engagement with local witchcraft cosmologies constituted transformative appropriation—not passive acceptance but strategic reinterpretation—fundamentally reshaping their relationship with tradition. These cultural dynamics are often erroneously cited as evidence for cultural assimilation based on similarity, whereas they actually constitute the distinctive mechanism of Pentecostal globalization (Robbins 2004a).

Robbins' research demonstrates that, similarly, we must focus on believers' agency and meticulously examine how believers construct the cultural frameworks of Christianity and practice the religion as a result. This approach aligns with the anthropologist Scott's (2005) concept of "ethno-theology": the reflexive production of self-representation through encounters with others (particularly Western others), as inferred and constructed by both laity and clergy. Within believers' ethno-theological frameworks and daily practices, traditional social networks and local Christian doctrines may not be inherently antagonistic. By the same token, what scholars perceive as continuity in the daily routine of believers has likely been incorporated into the believers' ethno-theological system, acquiring new meanings. In other words, the apparent similarity between the present and the past obscures the discontinuities in believers' daily lives, leading many researchers to interpret post-conversion ethics as mere continuations of the past.

In recent years, scholars have undertaken relevant explorations, focusing on the ethno-theology and religious practices of said believers. For instance, Li (2013) examined the agency of rural Christians themselves: their self-understood ethical concepts and religious practices. He argues that rural Christians place emphasis on "being distinct from others," a value that manifests itself at the behavioral level. This study's findings largely corroborate Li Huawei's central arguments. However, Li's work establishes no clear theoretical framework and provides only a fragmented discussion of the believers' ethno-theology—despite acknowledging its existence. This lack of systematic analysis obscures the underlying mechanisms of Christian-driven cultural transformation in the local context. Building upon Li's foundational research, this study advances a more nuanced examination, aiming to furnish conceptual tools for the field of Chinese Christianity studies.

To elucidate the way of coexistence between rural Christianity and traditional ethics, we introduce the paired concepts of "centripetal moral authority" and "centrifugal moral authority." This conceptual framework draws on the anthropologist Jon Bialecki's ethnographic research on the language ideology within different Christian communities (Bialecki 2011). Christian linguistic practices constitute a well-established domain in ethnographic scholarship. Anthropologists examine the diverse ways language is used within Christianity (e.g., Engelke 2007; Keller 2005), delineating systemic regularities in Christian groups' linguistic practices, investigating the underlying beliefs manifested through these regularities, and analyzing their social functions—research foci that align with the framework of Christian language ideology (Keane 2003, pp. 16–17).

Bialecki categorizes the language ideologies into two types—centrifugal and centripetal. The former emphasizes the external origin of language, locating the determining factors of individual subjectivity outside the self. The latter locates language authority within the individual speaker, prioritizing the sincerity within the believer's heart over larger external networks or materialities beyond the individual. These two types of language ideologies are both evident in ethnographic data. For instance, Simon Coleman observed that the Word of Life church in Sweden operates with a centrifugal language ideology (though such advocacy ultimately becomes a means of self-discipline). Its adherents

hold a positive view of material creation; they actively engage with the world and continuously offer help to others, hoping to receive God's grace. Consequently, the circulation of material items constitutes part of the process of constructing and reconstructing an "amplified" self (Coleman 2004, 2006, 2015). Contrasting with Coleman, Webb Keane found that for Calvinist believers on Sumba Island in eastern Indonesia, sincerity constitutes the metadiscourse of the local Christian ideal moral subject. This emphasis on sincerity demands the alignment of language and thought, striving to locate the authority of speech within the speaker, which enables them to perceive themselves as unique and confident agents. Such internalized linguistic authority significantly enhances believers' autonomy relative to traditional institutions and facilitates their disengagement from ancestral moral obligations (Keane 2002).

Although Bialecki's categorization of the two language ideologies ultimately centers on language, this typology can also be applied to analyze the ethical life of Christians. Within the anthropology of Christianity, research concerning the moral values pursued by believers similarly reveals a tension between "centripetal" and "centrifugal" orientations. The former is manifested in Christian communities that pursue values leaning towards individualism, which emphasize inner sincerity of the individual and advocate the self's disembedding from the collective (e.g., Robbins 2004b; Meyer 1998). However, other scholars point out that individualism is not the sole objective fostered by Christianity (Cannell 2006). The lives of many Christian communities are embedded in various relationships both between humans and between humans and non-human entities (e.g., Mosko 2010; Chua 2012; Vilaça 2015). This latter type of pursued value can be seen as "centrifugal." Therefore, building on Bialecki's framework, this study employs the concepts of "centripetal moral authority" and "centrifugal moral authority" to denote the two distinct types of moral values pursued within believers' ordinary ethics.

The concept of ordinary ethics derives from the work of the anthropologist Veena Das. Das proposes shifting the understanding of ethics away from judgments made distant from daily practice, towards seeing ethics as a dimension of everyday life itself—a dimension where people become moral subjects not by escaping the ordinary, but by immersing themselves within it. Cultivating oneself into a desirable ethical subject possessing virtues does not necessarily require, like a philosopher, withdrawing from worldly life for spiritual exercise. On the contrary, people can forge a responsible ethical self, accountable to both self and others, precisely within the fabric of daily life. This requires nurturing a moral sensibility in daily life, an active awareness of one's responsibilities and obligations towards others (Das 2012).

The interplay between the two forms of moral authority serves as the central thread running through this entire work. In the analytical sections, we will demonstrate how these two forms manifest within ethno-theology and its practices. Furthermore, this study employs Mauss's theory of the gift to elucidate the dynamic relationship between them.

One of the central problems addressed in *The Gift* is resolving the Durkheimian dualism between the individual and society. Precisely this theoretical tension corresponds to the tension between centripetal moral authority and centrifugal moral authority. Drawing on Polynesian, Melanesian, and Northwest Coast ethnography, Mauss dissected the dialectic of voluntariness and obligation within the "give-receive-reciprocate" cycle (Mauss [1925] 2016). His framework presents society not as Durkheimian coercion, but as a realm of joyful reciprocity. Through the tripartite obligation—giving, receiving, and returning—individuals attain autonomy while society achieves reproduction (Ji 2009). Subsequent scholars extended this into religious gift theory. Tarot (2000) expanded Mauss's gift paradigm into a tripartite framework of religious exchange through applying it to Catholic conceptions of grace: (1) The vertical dimension: a gift-mediated re-

lationship between humans and the divine, which encompasses humanity's quest for transcendence; (2) The horizontal dimension: a system of gift exchange among peers within tribal communities or faith-based groups; (3) The longitudinal dimension: a gift system governed by principles of inheritance to descendants, debt repayment to ancestral groups, and fidelity—in essence, principles regulating exchanges between the living and the dead (Tarot 2000, p. 148). In subsequent sections, the analysis will draw on Tarot's framework to examine the dynamic intermingling of centripetal and centrifugal moral authorities in believers' everyday lives.

This study draws on data collected during a twelve-month ethnographic fieldwork conducted by one author of this article in Shui County, northern Jiangsu, spanning two intensive periods (November 2022–January 2023 and March–December 2023). During this fieldwork, we primarily engaged with four churches—three officially registered churches and one house church—and collected materials through interviews, participant observation, and consultation of local documents.³ Specifically, we gathered interview data from over 30 believers while achieving deep involvement in the daily lives of four participants. All contacted believers were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling (via acquaintance referrals) and convenience sampling. In the second phase, we deepened contact with Shulan's family (a multi-generational Christian family): here, the researcher ate meals, shared farm labor, and observed familial interactions. Collectively, these materials enabled a more meticulous appreciation of Christianity's influence on believers' daily lives.

Of the four churches studied, one is located in a town while the other three are situated in villages. These churches operate in close geographical proximity but draw congregants from distinct villages. They function as independent entities with no hierarchical affiliation between them. The three registered congregations operate under the oversight of the County-level Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church in China (with its office located at the county-town church).

Among the believers we encountered, they can be broadly categorized into the following three types based on the degree of their commitment to God:

- (1) External Christians: these believers self-identify as Christians and have been baptized, yet they possess minimal knowledge of Christian doctrines. Christianity exerts virtually no substantive influence on their daily lives. A typical subcategory within the external Christians is the “nominal Christians” (*mingyi jidutu*). This term is used by local believers themselves to refer to those who, while professing conversion, exhibit an extremely low level of reliance on the Christian faith. They rarely participate in religious activities during ordinary times. Another type of external Christian is one who possesses “zeal” but lacks “faith.” Although such believers actively participate in church affairs and assist with many practical tasks within the church in their daily lives, their spiritual practice activities remain impoverished, and, like Nominal Christians, the influence of Christianity on their ethical life is minimal.
- (2) Devout Christians: these Christians have embraced the creeds and strive to internalize them, or are actively endeavoring on the path toward becoming devout believers. For them, God is not perceived as a tool for acquiring worldly material benefits; instead, cultivating an intimate relationship with God becomes the end in itself.
- (3) Christians positioned between the first and second types: These believers exhibit clear emotional attachments to God, such as feelings of dependence and a sense of belonging. However, overall, their understanding and practice of faith still predominantly reflect a utilitarian exchange between humans and the divine.

Among the believers we encountered, the first and third types were the most numerous, while the second type constituted a minority. Previous research has primarily focused on the first and third types of believers (e.g., J. Zhang 2022; Tan 2014). Researchers

argue that the ethical lives of such converts undergo no substantial transformation post-conversion. However, they have seldom explored cases of the second type of believer, resulting in insufficient attention to the ethno-theology and its practices within local Christianity. The analytical framework of this study attempts to encompass all three types of believers, thereby uncovering new possibilities regarding the forms of rural Christian faith.

Situated at the quadripartite junction of Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, and Anhui provinces, Shui County lies within the region called Huaibei (Huai River North, in terms of current administrative affiliation, it includes northern Jiangsu, northern Anhui, south-eastern Henan and southwestern Shandong). Following the implementation of religious freedom policies in Huaibei, Christianity experienced rapid proliferation, making it one of the areas with a high concentration of Christians in China (F. Yang 2018, p. 13). Based on archival materials from the Shui County Archives that we consulted, along with the literature, interviews, and observational data collected during fieldwork, Christianity in Shui County has been significantly influenced by pneumatic Christianity such as the True Jesus Church and the Lingen Hui (Spiritual Gifts Church), as well as by Watchman Nee's "Little Flock".⁴ These denominations had already taken root locally before the founding of the People's Republic of China, and their influence has persisted to the present day. The theological teachings of the four churches were largely consistent, and the influence of the various denominations manifests in a syncretized form. Most lay believers, and even many church leaders, lack a strong sense of denominational affiliation. Only some local pastors and elderly preachers could provide us with some information regarding specific denominational backgrounds. Consequently, we had to piece together the denominational influences on believers by synthesizing materials collected from multiple sources. According to our analysis, believers' views on sanctification are deeply influenced by Watchman Nee. A typical example is the frequent emphasis among believers on "being spiritual" (*shu ling*) and possessing "spiritual life" (*shuling de Shengming*).⁵ The title of one preacher's sermon—"The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit"—was identical to that of Watchman Nee's work. At the level of religious rites, however, the believers we encountered exhibited distinct characteristics of pneumatic Christianity. They actively pursued charismatic experience associated with being "filled with the Holy Spirit", such as trembling during prayer ("like an electric current"), and speaking in tongues, which they regarded as signs of this filling. Three of the registered churches we visited held their main gatherings on Saturday. These churches also advocated for baptism by immersion, though they did not reject sprinkling. These practices may be significantly related to the teachings of the True Jesus Church.

The main body of this article comprises three sections. The first section examines the "ethno-theology" prevalent among believers in Shui County, arguing that this ethno-theology incorporates two distinct forms of moral authority. The second section then analyzes the impact of this ethno-theology on the configuration of interpersonal relationships among the believers. Finally, the third section investigates the micro-level mechanisms through which this impact emerges. Drawing upon Mauss's theory of the gift, we demonstrate how the interplay of these two forms of moral authority serves to consolidate and expand the configuration of interpersonal relationships.

2. "Loving Family" as Prerequisite for "Loving God"

In this section, we primarily examine the moral system of non-believers alongside the ethno-theological teachings on interpersonal relationships within local Christianity. By comparing these two perspectives, we aim to delineate the specific cultural transformation envisioned through the dual moral authority advocated by local Christianity.

In Yan Yunxiang's ethnographic study of Xiajia Village, villagers' social relational configurations were fundamentally structured by kinship and non-kinship ties (Yan 2017, chap. 5). This pattern equally manifested among the non-believers we observed. Such configurations broadly align with Fei Xiaotong's conceptualization of the differential mode of association, where interpersonal relationships are stratified based on identities rooted in bloodline, marriage, and patrilineage. A defining characteristic of this model is differential treatment of others—the self's relational intensity with others varies according to social distance, resulting in differential treatment (Zhou 2024, p. 141). Among the non-believers we engaged with, their most frequent interactions occurred within networks of affinal/consanguineal kin and non-kin relations (e.g., friends, occupational ties, and co-villagers). These relational networks operate through dual maintenance mechanisms: moral pressure generated through reciprocal exchanges and natural affective bonds emerging from shared blood, kinship, and territorial ties. Both dimensions are ultimately subsumed within Yan's moral economy of *renqing*, wherein gift-exchange systems function as the ethical core (Yan 2017, p. 132).

Gifts constitute the operational core of the *renqing*-centric ethical system. In Shui County, long-term relational maintenance necessitates continuous gift circulation. Most gift-givers implicitly anticipate future reciprocation—when the counter-gift significantly deviates from expectations (whether excessively modest or disproportionately generous), the perceived advantaged party risks being labeled as “stingy” or a “freeloader”. The intensity of interpersonal ties becomes measurable through the frequency of gift exchanges and the value of gifts. Termination of such exchanges equates to the dissolution of *renqing* obligations. While these reciprocal acts functionally sustain social bonds, their affective significance varies across contexts. Certain gifts embody genuine affection, whereas others reflect obligatory compliance under moral rules. In Shui County, for instance, many villagers actively demonstrate moral concern and solidarity toward host families during ritual occasions—such as weddings and funerals, an infant's first-month or hundred-day celebrations, and New Year visits—through monetary gifts, material presents, and ceremonial assistance. Participants anticipate reciprocal gestures when hosting their own events. However, individuals with distant relational ties predominantly offer gifts on ritual occasions as fulfillment of perceived ethical obligations. In such cases, identical gifts may stem from diametrically opposed emotional motivations.

Fieldwork observations of this research on non-believers' relational configurations in Shui County are basically consistent with the three dimensions of the moral order of *renqing* in Han society, summarized by Yan Yunxiang: rational calculation, moral obligation, and emotional connection. The dynamism of *renqing* emerges from fluid configurations of these dimensions. While these three dimensions coexist in all social interactions involving *renqing*, the actual emphasis in a given situation may be on any one of them—one individual might prioritize cost-benefit analysis, another emphasizes ethical duties, while others act on sentimental impulses. Notably, situational adaptability also prevails: the same person often recalibrates behavioral emphasis according to circumstantial demands (Yan 2017, p. 158).

On the other hand, for Christians we interacted with in Shui County, a paramount ethical objective is to bear the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23)—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. This virtuous conduct is fundamentally other-oriented, embodying the desire to establish meaningful relationships with others, and is encompassed within the believers' ethical framework of love. According to local religious leaders, the ethical concept of love requires believers, empowered by God, to strive against the self-centeredness, deceitfulness, and hypocrisy inherent in human nature due to sin. This aligns with what many believers frequently expressed:

to embody Christ's love necessitates "*sheji*(self-denial)". On a practical level, self-denial entails relinquishing selfish inclinations and emphasizing sincerity in serving others.⁶

The emphasis on sincerity aims to enhance believers' moral autonomy. Yet such sincerity does not advocate disembedding believers from their existing interpersonal networks. On the contrary, ethical concepts of local Christianity provide sacred legitimacy to the pre-conversion social structures. This legitimacy can be understood in two dimensions: first, many believers regard the current social order—including their roles and obligations in various relationships—as the optimal arrangement ordained by God. Consequently, believers are called to fulfill differentiated obligations derived from these roles. This resonates with early Christian theology that integrated the Sermon on the Mount with Stoicism, a synthesis Dumont (2003, pp. 48–49) termed "individual-outside-of-the-world (individ-hors-du-monde)". Such a perspective demands that believers focus on the Kingdom of Heaven while conforming to the "natural law" in earthly life—a law that obligates individuals to submit to the harmonious processes of nature and perform their societally prescribed roles.

Among the Shui County church members we encountered, many of their doctrinal expressions reflected this ethno-theology. Former church leader Shulan once told one of the authors:

*"All that we do today is not for humans, but for the Lord. We are making a spectacle—performing for whom? For God and for angels. [Cf. 1 Cor. 4:9.] We are all part of this play and must coordinate harmoniously, so the entire performance may be good... Whatever role God assigns you, that is the role you shall play."*⁷

The second aspect of local Christianity's sacred legitimization of interpersonal relationships lies in their role as essential mediums for cultivating love. The ethical principles of love in Christianity are inherently other-oriented, and thus must be realized through social relationships—a process that cannot be achieved overnight but requires continual practice in daily life. This self-cultivation technique within social networks is what believers often described to us as "*jingli shen*, experiencing God)". Such a notion bears significant influence from Watchman Nee, the founder of the Little Flock, an indigenous Chinese Christian denomination. According to Nee, all circumstances encountered by believers are meticulously arranged by the Holy Spirit for their ultimate benefit. Believers are called to submit to the Holy Spirit's discipline in every situation, which constitutes the primary means of receiving divine grace throughout a Christian's life. Through varied experiences, the ultimate outcome is the submission of the believer's will to the Holy Spirit (The above propositions concerning Nee's theology are synthesized from D. J. Wu (2016, chap. 5)).

Generally speaking, followers significantly influenced by Nee's theology—though many lack conscious denominational identity—universally recognize diverse relationships within secular life as divinely ordained. Within these relationships, they consistently restrain selfish desires, gradually learning virtues such as humility, endurance, and obedience—core lessons of loving others in actual life.

Consequently, within the ethical framework of believers in Shui County, the connection with others remains unbroken; believers must navigate their relationship with God through the identities and roles embedded in social relationships, as these social bonds themselves constitute a vital conduit to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Under such doctrinal influences, the pre-conversion "differential mode of association" largely persists in believers' daily lives. This continuation becomes evident in their acceptance of *sang fu zhi du* (mourning dress system) during death rituals. After the death of immediate family members, Shui County believers still *pi ma dai xiao* (don hemp garments and mourning clothes), with varying styles symbolizing their positions within the kinship network.⁸ Furthermore, believers actively uphold *bei fen* (generational hierarchy)

within the kinship system. These phenomena collectively demonstrate local Christianity's doctrinal accommodation of the differential mode of association formed through blood, marriage, and territorial ties.

Simultaneously, the fundamental mechanisms of renqing—which sustained pre-conversion interpersonal relationships—remain preserved among believers. First, individuals retain their varied moral obligations toward others within relational networks, as many regard these as divinely ordained responsibilities. Second, pre-conversion gift-exchange practices persist intact. Believers universally acknowledge the ethical imperative to reciprocate received gifts, which aligns seamlessly with local Christian teachings on love that advocate “building sound relationships with others.” In daily practice, gift exchange serves as a vital means for believers to establish and maintain social bonds. As many Christians expressed: “Christians must also observe renqing and renqing cannot be bought with money”.

Beyond doctrinal compatibility, believers' adherence to renqing ethics is also driven by pragmatic necessity. Close relations(neighbors, family members) constitute essential social support networks for individuals during both daily life and crises. Consequently, renqing-based obligations function as context-bound ethical imperatives that believers must observe in specific situations.

However, it would be simplistic to regard post-conversion interpersonal relationships among believers as mere continuations of traditional ethics. While recognizing the differential mode of association and retaining basic forms of reciprocal exchange, local Christianity in Shui County has also systematically incorporated pre-existing relational patterns into its ethno-theology, endowing them with new religious significance. First, as previously discussed, the moral obligations within believers' social networks are now veiled with a “sacred canopy” (Berger [1969] 1990)—these daily duties are reinterpreted as divinely ordained acts that contribute to cultivating Christian moral personhood, which establishes a new ontological foundation for traditional ethical obligations. Second, such sacralization has transformed how believers forge interpersonal bonds, with the Christian ethic of love accentuating the primacy of sincerity of heart in human connections. For devout adherents, fulfilling relational duties becomes an act of aligning human will with divine will, prompting them to prioritize agape-inspired compassion as the governing principle in interactions. Therefore, though reciprocal gift-exchange persists as an observable practice, devout believers consciously diminish instrumental calculations and the compulsory dimension of conventional renqing ethics. Instead, they emphasize voluntary generosity and sincere care—thereby amplifying the affective dimension embedded in these exchanges. This transformation, as the next section demonstrates, concurrently facilitates the expansion of boundaries within traditional relational configurations.

In this section, we primarily explore the local Christian ethno-theology concerning love. Within such a framework, two moral authorities are concurrently advocated: it both denies the selfish nature of humanity, emphasizing inner sincerity in interpersonal relationships (Centripetal moral authority), and stresses the sacred foundation of the sociality of human life (Centrifugal moral authority). The combination of these two moral authorities aims to inject the existing social bonds of believers with a renewed spiritual dimension, defined as the sacred legitimization and the sincerity of interpersonal connections. The subsequent analysis will closely examine the manifestation of this new spirit within the practice of the ordinary ethics of the believers.

3. Reinforcement and Expansion of Relational Structuration

In this section, we shift our focus to the everyday lives of believers, examining the transformative effects of the dual moral authority inherent in the local Christian ethics of

love. We will delineate these effects along two dimensions based on relational intimacy: “family-based love” and “extra-familial love”.

As previously discussed, local Christian doctrines in Shui County affirm the divinely ordained nature of believers’ graded affections toward family members based on blood/marital ties, along with their domestic moral obligations. Within this framework, believers are called to fulfill these duties through Christian love. Compared to pre-conversion patterns, the most distinctive trait that agape-infused familial bonds exhibit is that God’s love places greater emphasis on the emotional aspects of family relationships, requiring persistent, non-reciprocal giving. Through this self-denial ethic, believers consciously suppress resentment and practice forbearance toward family members’ shortcomings.

Within the Christian family we studied, diverse kinship relations exist. This section focuses specifically on the daughter-in-law’s duty to care for her parents-in-law—a critical dimension of affinal kinship in Shui County. Local norms dictate that upon marriage, a woman becomes part of her husband’s lineage and shares his filial obligations. Yet mother-in-law/daughter-in-law tensions frequently erupt. One of the important reasons is that their bond lacks blood ties: the daughter-in-law remains an outsider in the family, making affective reciprocity difficult and conflicts over domestic interests inevitable. As the domestic sphere constitutes women’s primary domain (cooking, childcare, etc.), caregiving labor—including elderly support—falls disproportionately on daughters-in-law. For many, sustaining such care for a non-kin elder with whom they share strained relations proves profoundly challenging. However, the ethical concept of love demands transcend this transactional logic: daughters-in-law are called on to replace resentment with Christian love in caring for mothers-in-law, transforming duty into sacred practice.

The transformation of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship discussed in this section is exemplary of the changes experienced by female Christians after conversion. Many women possessed strong qualities of care and endurance even before their conversion. Embracing Christianity, however, provides a new interpretive framework through which their pre-existing behavior is reconceived as the fruit of the Spirit, rather than merely stemming from personality traits or gendered roles. This enhances their moral autonomy in undertaking family responsibilities.

The story of Chunlan and her mother-in-law exemplifies how Christian love reconfigures affinal kinship tensions. Chunlan recounted that post-marriage conflicts arose primarily from her deficient domestic and farming skills—deemed by her mother-in-law as failing the ideal daughter-in-law archetype. Their mutual confrontation escalated due to Chunlan’s dominant disposition until her religious conversion induced behavioral transformation. Now, as her aged mother-in-law requires round-the-clock care (rotated among siblings from both families), Chunlan consciously draws on Christian love to perform caregiving willingly. Our key informant Shulan has a good relationship with Chunlan, and the two families live in the same village. Shulan confirmed that although Chunlan still experiences many drawbacks in getting along with others, her care for her mother-in-law shows palpable improvement. During the interview, Chunlan emphasized: “It’s only through God’s love that I can serve her [mother-in-law] without bitterness.” She further told one of the authors:

“Honestly, it’s because I stopped keeping score... I’d never farmed or cooked—she [mother-in-law] looked down on me. I’d been spoiled at home, like a pampered princess. After marriage, I couldn’t do anything, and she refused to help. We were both stubborn. Now with God’s love, I am willing to take care of her. She’s sick and can’t move now, but she still often bothers me. She demands attention every minute—sometimes insisting on being fed even though she’s capable. How could I endure this without God’s love? When my brother-in-law or sister-in-law won’t buy what she wants, she pressures only me. So

I comply. Without Christian love, there'd only be hatred... She constantly provokes me, yet I persist loving her because the Scripture commands honoring parents (Ephesians 6:2–3)—biological or not.”⁹

The case of Chunlan demonstrates that devout believers, as reflected in the scriptural passages Chunlan cites, strive to transform moral obligations rooted in consanguineal and affinal kinship into the ethics of love. This ethical demand encompasses the distinct duties arising from kinship—all understood as divinely ordained—thus imbuing existing domestic relationship networks with centrifugal moral authority. Simultaneously, Chunlan’s narrative clearly reveals that the ethics of love also confer centripetal moral authority upon believers, urging them to shed self-centeredness and proactively extend love to family members. The convergence of these two moral authorities empowers believers to transcend self-interest and emotional impulses during familial interactions, thereby significantly enhancing their moral autonomy. This heightened autonomy ultimately reinforces family bonds.

Regarding extra-familial relationships, the ethics of love similarly emphasizes interpersonal bonds, thereby reinforcing existing social ties. Let us consider the case of Xianzan, a male Christian. Xianzan is the current person in charge of Niuzhai Church (which is the registered church we encountered in the town center). Before becoming involved in churchly work, he worked as a migrant worker in the construction industry. After assuming his role as the person in charge, he gave up many work opportunities and switched to working as a security guard at a middle school in the town (a role with significantly lower income than construction work). This job allows Xianzan time to devote to church affairs. Prior to Xianzan, the person in charge of Niuzhai Church was Wang Hai, with Xianzan assisting him in various tasks. Xianzan and Wang Hai knew each other before, but their relationship grew increasingly close through their shared commitment to matters of faith. Before 2016, Niuzhai Church held its gatherings in rented premises. In 2016, the church acquired a newly constructed building. Xianzan (who was not the person in charge at that time) played a crucial role in the construction process due to his previous professional experience. However, during the construction phase, a rift emerged between them after Xianzan learned that Wang Hai had complained about him to others. As a result, Xianzan stopped being responsible for church matters. Later, the two men reconciled. Xianzan described the process of reconciliation as follows:

When we built the new church building, after the main structure was completed, there was also the work of the devil, Satan. I had a bit of a falling out with the former person in charge of the church, Wang Hai. I went back home and completely disengaged from church affairs. Later, many believers from the church came to my home to visit me, hoping I would return to the church. I had given up opportunities for profitable work to help build this church. I was feeling deeply hurt and sorrowful in my heart. After this happened, I wept before God, saying, “Oh God, why did you choose me? I don’t want to believe in you anymore! I believed in you, and you placed this huge trial right in front of me.” Then the Holy Spirit also began to urge me. God placed a word in my heart: “You ought to know whom you have believed in”.¹⁰ I don’t believe in Wang Hai; I don’t believe in any single person. I came here looking at Jesus, looking at the cross, looking at God. God is my hope, God gives me eternal life. After that happened, I returned to the church. I still serve God.¹¹

While consolidating existing relational networks, the ethics of love also facilitates their expansion beyond traditional boundaries. In Chinese rural societies, the wu fu system (five-grade mourning dress system)—defined in villagers’ daily usage as encompassing five generations of patrilineal kin from great-great-grandfather to the self—traditionally

governed everyday relations through particularistic trust. This framework simultaneously constitutes the fundamental metric for determining relational proximity among agnatic lineage members sharing the same surname. Relationships falling outside this system were assimilated through fictive kinship mechanisms. Strangers unassimilable into these structures—especially those from outside the village—faced suspicion from communities (Li 2013, p. 205). This wariness toward outsiders became palpable during the fieldwork. Another key informant Wang Su advised one of the authors to present himself as *gan erzi* (son based on ritual kinship) of her younger brother.¹² She explained: “Villagers here distrust outsiders. Had you come as a stranger, no one would host you. But as a ritual relative, you’re accepted.”

However, the Christian ethics of love expands believers’ pre-existing interpersonal networks, making abstract trust possible. Primarily, through conversion, adherents acquire a new type of social relationship—*ling bao* (spiritual kinship) among fellow believers. Shared faith fosters intimate gift-exchange relationships between believers within and beyond village boundaries, drawing them closer through collective religious identity. In daily life, they practice mutual aid, offering consolation and visitation during hardships. While structurally similar to secular gift-exchange practices among non-believers, these interactions are imbued with greater sincerity and selflessness due to their religious dimension, forming a tightly bonded community grounded in Christian love.

A case in point involves female congregants like Lingxiu and Xiali from Qu Village. As active members of the same church choir, they maintain close personal ties marked by frequent mutual assistance. As their children or grandchildren attended the same township-level primary school alongside offspring of fellow congregants, these women collectively decided to rotate student commuting duties. As Xiali explained, reciprocity in their daily life stems entirely from “God’s love.” When the county church organized its annual month-long spiritual training for believers throughout the county—an opportunity intended for Lingxiu, a relatively young (in her early forties) believer, by church leader Chunlan as a developmental opportunity—her domestic responsibilities (including caring for her children, mother-in-law, and husband’s grandmother) initially posed an obstacle. Xiali suggested proactively to Lingxiu that she could resolve this by caring for Lingxiu’s children during her training period. Lingxiu customarily addressed Xiali using the fictive kinship term “*Shenzi*” (aunt), and they resided in the same village as neighbors without direct kinship. However, such Christian “gift” exchange stems fundamentally from the ethics of Christian love, differing qualitatively from the *renqing* reciprocity prevalent among many non-believers. Our fieldwork materials also documented numerous cases where shared faith generated cross-village enduring relational bonds among believers.

Furthermore, the Christian ethical imperatives of forgiveness and compassion facilitated villagers’ relationships with strangers. Our informant Shulan once temporarily adopted Liu Bei, a nearly blind young man in his early twenties from the same village, between 2003 and 2005. Liu Bei’s family, consisting of his parents and an elder sister, resided in the western section of Wanglou Village. Although his father shared the same surname and clan lineage with Shulan’s husband(Tongguang)’s family, they had exceeded the traditional *wu fu* and their residences are in different parts of the village, meaning that they were not considered close relations.¹³ Liu Bei’s mother retained only peripheral vision due to congenital blindness, a condition shared by his sister. Remarkably, Liu Bei maintained normal eyesight until age 18, when he developed identical symptoms while working as a migrant laborer. After becoming completely blind, he returned to his hometown. With three visually impaired family members, the household struggled under the father’s sole support, driving them to contemplate collective suicide. After the Shulan’s household established a home church, Liu Bei’s mother became a congregant. Upon learning of

their plight, Shulan—motivated by Christian compassion—raised Liu Bei for three years (2005–2007), providing full subsistence. Later, a house church in southern China arranged his theological training, and he now serves there as a preacher.

We learned that Liu Bei addressed Shulan as “Mom” during his adoption. Though initially uncomfortable with this appellation, Shulan eventually accepted it. When recounting the story to one of the authors, she described treating him “as my own child” during those years—a level of intimacy comparable to her relationships with her biological children. However, this does not suggest that spiritual kinship among believers can transcend consanguineous ties in secular life.

The dynamic between Liu Bei and Shulan constitutes a special case. Shulan primarily perceived Liu Bei as a divinely sent “sojourner” requiring extended hospitality rather than a permanent familial obligation. Her care emerged from practicing Christian love through caring for him with innocence and earnestness during his stay. After Liu Bei left for theological training in southern China, Shulan’s emotional investment diminished significantly. Now, during village visits, Liu Bei resides with his birth family, maintaining limited contact with Shulan, including only occasional visits and shared holiday meals. Thus, their relationship represents a kind of intimate fictive kinship, fundamentally distinct from blood-based filial bonds.

This case demonstrates how divine love mediated the transformation between Shulan and Liu Bei—previously acquainted yet largely strangers—into intimate fictive kinship ties. It reveals that God’s love (manifested here as Shulan’s compassion) enables extending fictive kinship beyond wu fu to unfamiliar individuals. As Shulan articulated during our interview: “Caring for him through my own strength was impossible. Had his parents not believed in Jesus, we’d have remained strangers.”

The aforementioned ethnographic data demonstrates that the dual moral authority inherent in the Christian ethics of love also plays a crucial role in consolidating and expanding believers’ interpersonal networks beyond the family. Centripetal and centrifugal authority are inseparably intertwined during devout believers’ interactions with others. As evidenced by the cases of Xianzan, Xiali, or Shulan, the believer’s inner sincerity (centripetal authority) necessitates expression through the medium of the interpersonal network (centrifugal authority). Conversely, the consolidation and expansion of these interpersonal networks are themselves sustained by the believer’s inner sincerity.

This section has demonstrated that within both family and extra-family relational networks, the dual moral authority motivates believers to restrain selfish desires, thereby cultivating altruism-oriented interpersonal bonds. This emergent relational paradigm consolidates and expands believers’ interpersonal networks, enabling them to establish trust beyond the traditional wu fu framework and form intimate fictive kinship ties. While the dual moral authority does not fundamentally restructure existing relational configurations, it differs substantially from pre-conversion interaction patterns, which operated primarily through reciprocal exchange contingent upon others’ attitudes.

4. The Incarnation of Christian Love in Everyday Practice

Having examined how Christian notions reconfigure believers’ ways of life, we now probe the micro-level mechanisms through which the macro-level value of agape translates into tangible cultural transformations in daily practice. Our analysis begins with Shulan’s narrative of her decision to quasi-adopt Liu Bei.

“At that critical moment, I heard God’s direct voice within me. I was struggling at that time. What should I do? Their family is broken, and no one wants to raise their child. With New Year approaching while others celebrate, they’re contemplating suicide. How dire the situation is for this family! When I told God that I had compassion for their

*family! the Holy Spirit prompted me: love them. I responded, 'Lord, so be it, I choose to love.' I proposed, 'If you ((Liu's parents) cannot raise him, I'll bring him into our home.' Yet such radical hospitality requires divine guidance. Without God's leading, one could never take this step."*¹⁴

Shulan's spiritual narrative finds resonance among many congregants. When practicing the ethics of Christian love, believers universally undergo the process we term "divine interaction" — corresponding to the believers' expression "being guided by the Holy Spirit (or by God, the words being used interchangeably)". In the religious life of Shui County congregations, such guidance from God manifests in diverse ways: as direct divine communication, intuitive promptings, or sudden recollection of scriptural teachings. Regardless of form, this sacred mediation through the Holy Spirit directs human agency toward divinely ordained purposes, thereby catalyzing strengthened interpersonal bonds across relational networks.

The relationships mentioned above can be analyzed through the religious gift theory proposed by Tarot (2000), as elaborated in the Introduction. In the daily lives of Christians in Shui County, the vertical and horizontal dimensions dominate, and it is their synergy that confers legitimacy on the social structure in which believers live. The tripartite gift-exchange cycle (giving, receiving, reciprocating) between believers and the divine operates as a spiritual discipline that enhances both the frequency of interpersonal reciprocity and the cultivation of inner sincerity. This reflects the profound influence of Watchman Nee's Little Flock tradition, which inherits the Pietist theological emphasis on personal spiritual experience — particularly the concept of continuous, intimate communion as a form of sacred communication (Huang and Xiang 2025). Within this theological framework, devout believers maintain that divine grace cannot be attained through external rituals or doctrinal knowledge alone, but rather through inner illumination, with spirituality being fundamentally a matter of subjective sincerity beyond external measurement (Asad 1993, p. 47). Field observations reveal how various spiritual practice activities, especially prolonged prayer sessions (some lasting hours), deepen the divine-human relationship through reciprocal dynamics: as believers' devotional "giving" (e.g., time, obedience) intensifies, so does the Holy Spirit's "reciprocation" through heightened spiritual influence. This interactive process brings believers three transformative effects: (1) enhanced sensitivity to divine presence, (2) strengthened inner sincerity that curbs self-interest, and (3) increased resolve to exchange gifts with others and then establish harmonious interpersonal relationships.

In addition to God's will, the process of divine interaction also relies on the will of individuals and evil spirits (the demon). In other words, whether or not one ultimately carries out God's guidance depends on one's personal will — a will that can also be influenced by evil spirits seeking to draw people away from God's law. It is precisely through believers' interactions with the spiritual agency (including God and the Devil) and fellow humans that abstract ethical principles of love are manifested. Concretely, this manifestation takes shape within the lifeworld through divine grace generating sincerity. This sincerity enhances the believer's willingness to engage in Christian gift exchange with others, thereby perpetually constructing communal order through ongoing reciprocal gift-circulation.

When reframing the aforementioned relationships between believers, others, God and the demon through the framework of centripetal/centrifugal authority, we can conclude that the deepening of divine-human relationships thereby enhances the centrality of centripetal authority within believers' ordinary ethics. The consolidation of centripetal authority, in turn, augments moral autonomy in forging interpersonal bonds — consequently elevating the significance of centrifugal authority within their ethical life.

To illustrate the aforementioned arguments, let us examine the case of Yuanrui, a female believer we encountered during fieldwork. She recounted a personal experience that epitomizes the transformative power of divine interaction:

“Truly, to live out the teachings we hear requires the Holy Spirit’s conviction—it’s nearly impossible by human nature alone. This conviction is like a writer’s inspiration: intangible yet undeniable, difficult to explain yet profoundly real. The Holy Spirit can really reshape one’s character. Once, when my father-in-law was hospitalized, my elder brother-in-law was unavailable, leaving only my husband to care for him. I feared contracting an illnesses at the hospital and grumbled, ‘Why must my family bear this alone?’ Then the Holy Spirit prompted me. A verse suddenly emerged in my mind: ‘Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you and that you may live long’ (Ephesians 6:2–3). I then realized caring for the sick wasn’t a punishment but a blessing. Another line from Scripture also echoed in my head: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). So I chose to act in goodness without resentment.”¹⁵

Yuanrui is an active member of Wanglou Church, serving in the choir and participating consistently in congregational gatherings. Her close spiritual fellowship with Shulan (mentioned earlier) extends beyond material gift-exchange to frequent mutual exhortations on matters of faith. It is precisely through such high-frequency spiritual practices that Yuanrui attunes herself to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Thus, gifts originating in the divine sphere enable her to cognitively apprehend and voluntarily enact God’s moral imperatives, thereby forging active solidarity with others.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the gift framework proposed herein implies gradated intimacy between devotees and the divine. Those with a weaker connection to God tend to demonstrate less initiative in practicing the ethical principles of love. As we mentioned in the introduction, our fieldwork documented adherents across a spectrum of religiosity, many exhibiting nominal commitment—manifest in negligible spiritual disciplines, perfunctory participation in gatherings (e.g., inattentive sermon listening, persistent drowsiness in rear seating zones, and habitual side conversations). Christianity’s ethical impact remains limited among such adherents, resulting in incomplete internalization of agape’s transformative potential for relational reconfiguration.

We now turn to analyze the story of Yanhong, a female believer. Distinct from the devout and external believers, Yanhong belongs to the third category of adherents I outlined in the Introduction. Yanhong’s daughter informed one of the authors that her mother’s character had changed significantly since embracing Jesus. This was evident in the fact that before her conversion, Yanhong had a bad temper and frequently scolded people. After conversion, however, she made great efforts to control her temper when interacting with others. If she failed to control it, she would confess to God. On one occasion, after an argument with her daughter-in-law, she hit her daughter-in-law on the head with a spoon. This filled Yanhong with deep remorse, and she repeatedly muttered, “I’ve sinned again.”

Yanhong engaged daily in spiritual practices such as prayer and listening to sermons. Being illiterate, she could only learn doctrine through listening. She often tuned in to the sermons on Radio Liangyou Tongxing Channel (a Hong Kong-based Christian gospel broadcasting station) in the evenings. She told one of the authors that she sometimes could feel the “guidance of the Holy Spirit.” For instance, sometimes the Holy Spirit would urge her to get up for morning prayer. When encountering unpleasant situations, she would also communicate with God internally, hoping He would remove the burdens from her heart.

Although Yanhong experienced a transformation in her interpersonal relationships after conversion, the motivation for this change was not primarily rooted in the ethical concept of “love,” but rather stemmed mainly from a fear of sinning and a desire for worldly

well-being. Despite her deep emotional dependence, Yanhong lacked a systematic understanding of the local Christian ethical framework. Once she told one of the authors, “As long as you don’t sin, everything in your life will go smoothly. If you give 1000 yuan to God, He will give you 2000 yuan in return.” Yanhong’s understanding of “sin” remained at the level of isolated ethical prohibitions such as “don’t scold people, don’t hit people, don’t steal.” Violating these prohibitions would incur divine punishment, while avoiding specific transgressions would earn God’s rewards. Supported by such beliefs, the moral autonomy in Yanhong’s ethical life was not primarily manifested in the proactive enthusiasm for connecting with others, as seen in the cases of Xiali and Shulan mentioned earlier, but rather more in the suppression of committing various specific sins. Consequently, her conversion resulted in little substantive expansion of her interpersonal network due to her faith. Although she met many believers at church, she did not form deep friendships. Thus, while Yanhong’s level of moral initiative in connecting with others did increase after her conversion, a discernible gap remained compared to that of devout believers.

In this section, we primarily examine the mode of interconnection between the two moral authorities within the daily lives of believers. Drawing upon the theory of the gift, we argue that the depth of the believer’s connection to God constitutes the core element of this mode. The intensification of this connection increases the possibilities for believers to forge ties with others. Such agentic impetus translates the abstract value of love into lived ethical praxis in everyday existence.

5. Conclusions

This study introduces the theoretical framework of dual moral authority and its mode of interconnection to address a long-debated question: Is Christian ethics undermining traditional rural social ethics, or is it merely assimilated by them? Based on the data of this study, we argue, first, that rural Christianity does not erode the ethics of the rural society. As extensively demonstrated in the main text, the centripetal authority emphasizes believers’ inner sincerity, which can enhance their moral autonomy. At the same time, the centrifugal authority aims to imbue the believers’ interpersonal networks with sacredness—these networks are not only regarded by devout believers as divinely ordained but also serve as crucial media for cultivating desirable subjects. Both authorities and their integration contribute to activating traditional rural ethics. Second, the combination of the two moral authorities also signifies that the ethics of the believers is not a simple continuation of tradition. As previously indicated, rural Christianity infuses the believers’ existing configurations of interpersonal relationships with a new spiritual dimension, which facilitates the expansion of their interpersonal networks. Thus, on the basis of embracing traditional ethics, rural Christianity creatively transforms it.

Simultaneously, drawing upon the theory of gift, we also demonstrate that the gradation of the aforementioned cultural transformation varies across different categories of believers. A clear correlation persists between the depth of the believer’s connection to God and their proactive initiative in establishing connections with others. The deeper the divine–human relationship, the more significantly it contributes to enhancing the believer’s moral autonomy and hence strengthens their proactive interpersonal engagement.

Also, this study illuminates a pathway for Christianity’s cultural adaptation within rural Chinese society. This pathway may offer insights into how Christian communities can constructively engage with social transformations in rural China. While our case study cannot be generalized to all contexts, it nonetheless reveals a significant possibility: Christianity may not necessarily undermine existing rural social relationships but rather serve as a spiritual resource for stability. This finding suggests that future research should examine the historical trajectory and contemporary significance of this resource.

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Notes

- ¹ Unless otherwise specified, "Christianity" in this article refers to Protestantism.
- ² However, Lu Yunfeng estimated that China's Christian population had already reached around 39.97 million by 2016 (See [Lu et al. 2019](#)).
- ³ The ethnographic data for this study were collected solely by one author; however, the other author remained aware of and guided the fieldwork throughout its duration. Both authors participated in the subsequent data analysis. Therefore, this article uses "we" to denote the collective agency responsible for collecting and analyzing the ethnographic materials.
- ⁴ The True Jesus Church, Lingen Hui and Little Flock are all indigenous Christian denominations originating in China. The first two can be classified as "pneumatic Christianity" due to their emphasis on the Holy Spirit and charismatic elements—manifested through external phenomena such as Spirit possession, speaking in tongues, ecstatic experiences, trance states, and divine healing (See [T. Yang 2002](#), p. 7).
- ⁵ Shu ling is a central concept among Christian communities influenced by Watchman Nee's Little Flock. It refers to a Christian's assessment of whether oneself and others are in a state of divine grace. This concept is deeply rooted in the Pietist theological tradition and manifests differently across various Christian communities (see [Huang and Xiang 2025](#)).
- ⁶ This article employs three distinct concepts—agape, "Christian love," and "divine love"—to articulate the notion of "God's love." Among these, the first two terms (agape and "Christian love") are largely synonymous and functionally interchangeable, referring to the ethics of love recognized by local Christians and its enactment in daily practice. The latter concept, "divine love," specifically denotes God's love for humanity within the divine–human relationship.
- ⁷ Date: 29 May 2023; Location: Wanglou Church; Participants: Researcher and Shulan. All interview materials in this article have been edited for clarity and conciseness without altering the original intent.
- ⁸ In many rural areas of China, both Christian and Catholic believers participate in the funeral ceremonies of both believers and non-believers, and they all recognize and practice the mourning dress system (See [F. Wu 2001](#), p. 155; [Xiang 2023](#)).
- ⁹ Date: 10 September 2023; Location: Wanglou Church Chapel; Participants: Researcher, Chunlan.
- ¹⁰ This statement bears a striking resemblance to the scripture found in 2 Timothy 1:12.
- ¹¹ Date: 30 March 2023; Location: Niu Zhai Church Chapel; Participants: Researcher, Xianzan.
- ¹² Locally, ritual kinship custom bonds families without blood ties or with distant consanguinity through fictive kinship. This bonding obligates both parties to mutual support in daily life.
- ¹³ Wanglou Village, a natural village, comprises four village groups. These groups rather than patrilineal kinship networks serve as primary mutual-aid units for weddings and funerals. Group 3 in the east has approximately 50 households (300 villagers) practicing intra-group ritual cooperation, while groups 4–6 in the west demonstrate similar population sizes and mutual-aid patterns—a configuration reflecting the historical weakness of lineage organizations in the region.
- ¹⁴ Date: 10 December 2022; Location: Wanglou Church Sanctuary; Participants: Researcher, Shulan.

¹⁵ This interview excerpt synthesizes two sessions conducted on 3 March and 24 May 2023, both at Wanglou Church.

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