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China's "Christianity Fever" Revisited: Towards a Community-Oriented Reading of Christian Conversions in China

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Abstract: Chinese Protestant Christianity has been continually growing over the past three decades, with an estimated one million converts per year. A number of studies have sought to explain this phenomenon. This paper critically reviews existing studies of China's "Christianity Fever" and then outlines the role of the community as one crucial factor in the conversion process. With its emphasis on communality, as a central element of both Christian theology and the fellowship activities that are part of Christian practice, Protestant Christianity fills a gap opened up by the change in traditional familial and social structures. By discussing specific aspects relating to the communal nature of Christianity, such as familism, elitism, and dynamics at work in face-to-face evangelism, this paper offers an alternative reading of existing studies.

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Keywords: Christianity, Christianity Fever, Protestantism, community

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Introduction: Protestant Growth in the Chinese Context

“Today, on any given Sunday there are almost more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe” (Bays 2003: 488). As Chinese Protestant congregations are entering their fourth decade of unprecedented growth, this trend still catches many foreign observers by surprise.¹ Ever since the reopening of churches in the late 1970s, Chinese Protestant Christianity has been growing at a rapid pace and, especially at the beginning, grew “markedly faster than other religions” (Hunter and Chan 1993: 2). With, according to the most conservative estimates, one million converts per year (ANS 2004a), Chinese Protestant Christianity is likely to be the one of the world’s most rapidly growing religious communities to date.

Figures on the exact numbers of Christians in the country vary for a number of reasons, most notably the parallel existence of officially registered and unregistered congregations, often labelled “state-sanctioned” and “underground”, within both the Catholic and the Protestant church. Representatives of official churches are often hesitant to give figures, and no definite figures are available for unregistered congregations. Politics certainly play a role in the numbers game, with official Chinese churches erring on the side of caution for political reasons and outside evangelical sources often being overly optimistic in their reports about the “Christianization of China”.

Overall, even by the most conservative estimates, the number of Protestant Christians in China has increased almost twentyfold since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, from around one million in 1949 to at least 17 million in 2008, with the bulk of this growth occurring after 1978 (Yang 2005: 427; Bays 2003: 491; Jin 2005: 25). Most observers agree that with the number of “official” Protestants at 17 million, a total of 25-30 million Protestant Christians seems more likely. A recent survey conducted by professors (including Professor Liu Zhongyu) at the Religious Culture Research Centre of East China Normal University in Shanghai comes to the conclusion that there are up to 40 million Protestant Christians today in China (BBC News 2007; Burk-

1 The author would like to thank Karsten Giese and three anonymous reviewers for contributing helpful criticism concerning an earlier draft of this paper, Johanna Lüdde for sharing an overview of conversion theories, and Mark Prandolini for helping with the language editing of the text.

lin 2007: 2). Again, this survey done in a secular context points to an explosive growth of Chinese Christian communities.

It is true that all officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity) along with other religious groups in China have experienced tremendous growth over the past 30 years. Statistics speak of 150 million Buddhist believers, 12 million Catholics (Overmyer 2003: 312), 17 million Protestants (ANS 2004a), and more than 20 million Muslims (Wang 2003). Islam carries an ethnic dimension in the Chinese context, and to a large extent the "growth" of Muslim believers does not indicate true conversions, but rather a rediscovery and reaffirmation of a local and ethnic identity (Hillman 2004). Studies suggest similar reasons for the resurgence of folk religious practices in many localities (Dean 1998). While it is difficult to produce exact figures for China's Catholic and Protestant communities, as I will explain in more detail below, statistics for Buddhism and Daoism are even harder to come by due to the less systematically organized nature of Buddhist and Daoist adherents (Lai 2003: 423, 415). More importantly, the syncretistic nature of religious practice at the grassroots and the fact that folk religious practices do not appear at all in official statistics (but are arguably practiced by a vast majority of Chinese on occasions like Chinese New Year and *Qingming*) make such neat classifications of religious adherents unreliable. In spite of this overall increase in religious interest, the increase in Protestant believers remains disproportionately high, even if we take the pre-1949 figure of one million Protestants as the baseline and factor in the population growth. Without doubt, (Protestant) Christians form a bigger part of the population today than at any other given time in Chinese history (Yang 2005: 427; Bays 2003: 491).

Assuming that after the Cultural Revolution there were virtually no Christians left in the country, China's Protestant churches have grown much faster than their Catholic counterparts. Today, there are an estimated 12 million Catholics (including 6 million underground Catholics) (Overmyer 2003: 312), but at least three times as many Protestants. Historically, Catholic missionary endeavours had focused on converting whole villages. As a result, Catholicism became a quasi-ethnic identity for the inhabitants of these villages, to which they reverted once religious life could be resumed after the Cultural Revolution (Madsen 1998; Lozada 2001). Protestants, on the other hand, were much more scattered when they resumed their religious life. This pattern may be one reason why

Protestantism spread more quickly – the remaining believers became points of departure from which new congregations developed. As Madsen shows, the return to Catholicism was not always accompanied by pronounced religious fervour. However, a strong evangelistic fervour is one of the reasons for the marked growth of Protestantism. Others have attributed the growth of Protestantism to the greater organizational flexibility of congregations, which can be headed by laypersons if necessary, and the accessibility of Protestant practices compared to elaborate Catholic liturgies and rituals, which are not understandable to the uninitiated (personal information from Professor Chen Zemin at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, September 1999). Altogether, the conversion patterns for both churches differ markedly and do not suggest easy comparisons. Today, most Protestant believers are first-generation Christians while most Catholics come from families which have been Christian for generations.

Geographically, China's Protestants are dispersed over the whole country. The China Christian Council's official church directory lists churches in all Chinese provinces except Tibet. Provinces with particularly high numbers of Protestant believers include Henan, Anhui and Zhejiang (ANS 2010).

As a result of these different growth patterns, most research relating to the increase of Christians in China has been focused on Protestants. The term "Christianity Fever" (*jidujiao re*) usually refers to the growth of Protestant congregations, just as the term "Christianity" (*jidujiao*) most often refers only to Protestantism. In this paper, I refer to research on Catholics only occasionally (i.e. when it adds depth to my discussion). Henceforth, following Chinese usage, the term "Christianity" is used interchangeably with "Protestantism" unless otherwise indicated.

Like other religious groups, Chinese Christians – Catholics and Protestants – are subject to a significant amount of control by the government and are expected to relate to the party-state through patriotic associations. In the case of Protestants, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) serves as a liaison organization which integrates the church into the broader social and political framework. The structure of Christian Councils which govern the Protestant church on its various administrative levels is thus supplemented by a parallel structure of Three-Self bodies. In reality, the two are so intertwined that they are colloquially referred to as the "two bodies" (*lianghui*).

Besides officially recognized churches, which function legally and with little government interference as far as individual believers are concerned, an increasing number of unregistered congregations exist. The members of these so-called "house churches" refuse registration under the umbrella of the TSPM on political or theological grounds. While the house churches are flourishing as much as or even more than the official churches, their political sensitivity makes research into their growth difficult. The argumentation developed in this article would probably hold true for many house church conversions as well; however, my paper focuses on registered congregations, which have been much better studied.

Unlike their counterparts in Europe or the US, China's Protestant congregations do not fall into different denominations, a result of the unifying religious policies of the 1950s. Besides binding Protestant churches into the overall socialist framework through the TSPM structure (which was established in 1954), the communist government called on all Protestant denominations that existed at that time to unite. Individual congregations and believers were able to maintain liturgical practices according to their individual traditions, but designations such as Baptist, Methodist, Adventist and so on were abolished. Today, China's Protestant church calls itself post-denominational, and any overt moves to re-establish denominational identities are quickly suppressed (Kan Baoping, General Secretary of the China Christian Council, in conversation with author on 11 December 2010).

Rationale and Methodology

The development described above, for which the term "Christianity Fever" was coined in the late 1980s (Hunter and Chan 1993: 4), has gone relatively unnoticed by secular scholars outside of China. Most analyses and surveys regarding the rising number of Christians stem from Chinese researchers or Western church-related observers.

This article is based on the observation that existing studies underestimate socio-psychological factors as one cause of Protestant growth in China. In particular, personal encounters with Chinese converts point to the role of the community as one important factor that attracted persons when they first came into contact with Christianity. Something akin to "I was touched by the warmth of these strangers" is often the first sentence one hears when a recent convert recounts his or her story. Like other

researchers, at first I disregarded remarks from Chinese Christians about the “warm atmosphere in church”, the “friendly brothers and sisters in the congregation” and the “help received” while I was listening to their official conversion stories – until these remarks became so numerous that I belatedly started to realize that the communal element of Christianity is one of the important factors that induce people to convert (Fiedler 2000; informant, Hunan, May 2000, and others).

Accounts of personal conversion are subject to certain narrative dynamics. When recounting their personal “faith journeys”, new believers tend to emphasize the spiritual progress of the process. However, it seems likely that a certain amount of reinterpretation happens when established believers look back on their conversions, and that to some extent spiritual elements are overemphasized in these codified narratives (cf. Lutz and Lutz 1998 for historical conversion narratives). One notices that virtually all conversion stories also prominently feature warm and helpful Christian friends and neighbours who first welcomed the potential convert into the Christian community (cf. also Bays 2003: 498). Most observers would probably spontaneously agree to this assessment; however, it seems worthwhile to explore the mechanisms at work in some more detail.

Research on the flourishing of Christianity in China, like the phenomenon itself, by now extends over more than two decades. In this article, I first critically review existing studies of China’s “Christianity Fever”. I then offer an alternative reading of these studies by outlining the role of community as one agent in the conversion process that deserves more detailed attention.

In this paper, I argue that the communal nature of Christianity is a distinctive characteristic that sets it apart from the way China’s traditional religions are practiced today. Christianity is strongly defined through the idea of community, in both its “phenotype”, the way it actualizes itself in communal worship forms, and its “genotype”, with a theology that contains the idea of the religious community as the “Children of God” and the “Body of Christ”. Unlike Buddhism or Daoism, which offer communal life almost exclusively to religious professionals, Christian life is always congregational.

Being primarily based on a literature review, my study has certain limitations. While my research interest was sparked by personal observations in numerous Chinese churches, this paper remains necessarily limited by the fact that I have not yet done any specialized field research on

the question of communality. In this sense, this paper can only reinterpret existing studies and highlight potential areas of future research.

Most of the articles surveyed for this paper are works of Chinese scholars, although a number of important studies come from Western sources as well. Besides these academic studies on Protestant and Catholic Christianity in China, a number of non-academic sources have been used. They include newspaper articles and, more importantly, papers and manuscripts authored by observers with a certain proximity to the official Chinese Protestant church. While these articles do not offer academic analyses, they draw on significant first-hand experience of China's registered congregations and life in the Chinese countryside. Among them are Beate Engelen's article *Social Cohesion: Building Homes is Not Enough* as well as Claudia Währisch-Oblau's observations on healing conversions (Engelen 2009; Währisch-Oblau 1998, 2001a and 2001b). A more formal source is the *Amity News Service*. This bimonthly English publication features translations from the Chinese church magazine *Tian-feng* as well as articles by staff from the Amity Foundation (*aide jijinhui*), a Chinese Christian-initiated development agency with close ties to the China Christian Council.

It also has to be noted that in many larger Chinese cities a second, parallel movement towards Christian churches is happening among students and intellectuals (Yang 2005). This second – and, in its pronounced form, more recent – influx into Christian communities has only recently become an object of study and therefore does not play a significant role in the papers examined here, which are focused on rural Christianity. For many of the students and intellectuals that have lately found their way into urban churches, their spiritual quest has from the very beginning been focused on Christianity as a modern, Western religion, and their conversions harbour less “accidentalism” than many rural conversions (for an early example, see Fiedler 2000: 15). It seems likely that for the conversion processes of these intellectual “seekers”, some of the socio-psychological factors outlined in this paper will be less relevant.

Theoretical Framework: Conversion Theories

Religious conversion has been researched from a number of angles and approaches. Early theories emerged among psychologists of religion such as Edwin Diller Starbuck, whose *The Psychology of Religion* (Starbuck 1897, 1899) became one of the founding classics of research on religious

conversion, and William James, with his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902). They view religious conversion as a psychological process within the individual, often favoured by pathological factors. Typical for conversion processes as they describe them is a protracted psychological crisis which creates first a sense of passivity and then a relinquishing of the old personality followed by a radical personality change. According to those early conversion theories, conversion is almost always limited to youth between 11 and 26 years of age.

A second strain of explanations evolved around the theme of “brainwashing”, first developed during the Cold War and later reapplied to the debate of new religious movements in the 1970s (Hunter 1951; Singer 1979). Theories of brainwashing build on early theories of religious conversion in that they also see conversion as a subconscious, unintended change on the part of the convert.

In contrast, sociological theories of religious conversion do not view this process as something that happens to the convert without he or she having any possibility of control. Rather, they emphasize the fact that converts are, in the beginning, seekers – of meaning or religion. Moreover, this quest takes place against a certain cultural and social background, which may influence the search directly or indirectly – for example, by determining the social and thus religious points of contact available to the possible convert. In short, according to these theories, converts ultimately convert themselves. This active – as opposed to the earlier, passive – paradigm of religious conversion arose in the mid-1960s and has been influential ever since (Lofland and Stark 1965).

Further developments of this paradigm have continued to define the social factors that influence religious conversion. Social influence theories, for example, see religious influence as a result of social influence and the relationship between the potential convert and members of the corresponding religious group (e.g. Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1974). Role theories underscore the changed roles and forms of behaviour that converts take on as new members of a religious group (Balch 1980). Finally, sociological process models see conversion as a process influenced both by an internal disposition of the potential convert and external factors. Process theories emphasize the variety of synergetic factors that all contribute to the conversion process, which they view as a development over an extended period of time (Rambo 1999: 267).

In this article, with its emphasis on the socio-psychological factors contributing to conversion, I accept the modern conversion paradigm

that sees conversion as an active act on the part of the convert in order to fulfil certain personal needs. Specifically, I follow a process model of religious conversion. With their multi-dimensionality and their longitudinal view of the conversion process, process theories seem most appropriate to explain Christian conversions in the current Chinese context. It is my hypothesis that these conversions are the result both of individual circumstances that provoke a personal quest and of external factors. As Liang Liping puts it in her study, "to a large degree, these Christians come to believe by a chance encounter, but one can certainly not say that they adopt Christianity blindly" (Liang 2006: 76). Baptism, which usually marks the end of the conversion process in a formal way, constitutes only one possible end point of a long and complex development.

China's "Christianity Fever": Existing Explanations

Following, I offer a short overview of the "Christianity Fever" discourse between the late 1980s, when the term "Christianity Fever" first started to appear, and 2010. The explanations given for the growth of Protestantism can be grouped as follows:

The Structural and Political Framework

A number of authors point out that it is the policy of religious freedom that was reinstated in the late 1970s which made the comeback and, in fact, the unprecedented growth of Christianity possible (Yao 2004: 73-74; Zhao 1994: 43). Zhao also unconvincingly argues that the politics of suppression lent Christian activities a clandestine air which helped to make them attractive (Zhao 1994: 43). Besides, some authors point to the problem of "religious infiltration": China's policy of reform and opening brought a number of illegal missionaries into the country that contributed to the spread of Christianity (Jiang and Xu 1989: 8; Zhao 1994: 43; Zeng 2005: 57; He 2001: 92; Ye 1989: 45).

Those openly concerned with the increase in religious activities perceive "insufficient political grassroots work" to be one cause of the continuing attractiveness of religion, as corruption, economic backwardness and low educational levels push people towards seeking refuge in religion (Liu 2006: 68-69; Zhao 1994: 43; Zeng 2005: 57; Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 64; He 2001: 92).

Finally, the emancipation of China's Christian churches from foreign domination as embodied in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the case of the Protestant Church is seen as one structural factor that now makes the former *yangjiao* (foreign religion) acceptable to Chinese people (Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 63).

Overall, the arguments brought forth by Chinese researchers concerned with the structural and political framework are clearly informed by notions of political correctness. Whether they laud China's policy of religious freedom as the prerequisite for the re-emergence of religion or sound openly concerned about the latter, they always are a reflection of the restrictive political context with regards to matters of religion. Still, the relaxation of religious policies was undoubtedly one prerequisite for the increase in Christian and other religious believers (Hunter and Chan 1993).

Physical Needs and Other “Utilitarian” Motivations

Another string of explanations given for the interest in religion in general and Christianity in particular refers to physical needs and other, as some authors label them, “utilitarian” motivations – meaning religious acts aimed at concrete and tangible results. Among the “utilitarian” motivations mentioned that move people to “try” Christianity are family conflicts or a desire for financial success. Economic backwardness paired with the insecurities and hardships of rural life compel people to seek help from supernatural forces, should other help not be available. This is in particular often the case for healthcare, where the precarious situation in the countryside often renders services inaccessible or simply too expensive for rural dwellers (Jin 2005: 26; Liang 2006: 75; Li et al. 2004: 74; Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 65; He 2001: 92; Xia 1994: 60; Luo 2000: 45-48; Liang 1999: 24).

Closely linked to prayers for the sick are healing experiences. This term refers to incidents in which Christian friends and neighbours pray with a sick person and the patient recovers (or feels recovered) in the process. While the aforementioned studies and anecdotal evidence point to healing experiences as a significant factor contributing to mass conversions to Christianity in rural China – in some locations, up to 90 per cent of Christian conversions are linked to faith healings (Währisch-Oblau 2001b: 69) – these incidents are generally not explored in more detail. This may be due to the quasi-miraculous nature of some of these healing stories, which make them difficult to deal with from a scholarly

perspective. Even Chinese churches tend to downplay the role of conversions due to healing experiences. In China, "normal religious practices" are legally protected while "superstitious practices" are illegal; seeking or propagating healing experiences would therefore bring churches into the realm of the illegal. Instead, believers are encouraged to seek medical help aside from relying on prayer. As a result of this reticence to discuss healing, most scholars read the importance of healing stories predominantly as an expression of the deplorable inequalities in Chinese healthcare.

However, the healing stories certainly reveal more than just a "utilitarian" wish for recovery. Most converts also report being strongly touched by the concern of strangers for their well-being:

After the meal, they all kneeled down and prayed for my health, asking God to lead me in grace, and asking that my gallstones would be dissolved with the help of the medicine that I was taking. Kneeling there and listening to their prayers, I was moved to tears. Although I had no relatives at my side, God had provided me with so many brothers and sisters that were concerned about me. [...] After returning home from the county town, I felt truly uplifted and completely forgot that I was really still a sick person. My appetite improved greatly, my gallstones stopped hurting, and I was feeling so vigorous that I often rode my bike to visit friends and spread the Gospel (ANS 2006).

"Healing conversions" therefore also point to the importance of the community, both as a retaining agent and perhaps also as the healing agent in itself. Sick persons or those seeking healing for close relatives may well be pleasantly surprised by the unsolicited concern and warm solidarity offered by Christian neighbours and friends who pray with them; the community becomes a reason to come back for the potential believer. Besides, the warmth encountered in these Christian networks with their visits to the sick may in itself spur on the healing process of those affected.

Psychological Factors

Moving on from the potentially tangible results of conversion to Christianity (as some "utilitarian seekers" envisage them) to the realm of psychology, many authors identify a number of psychological push factors that have contributed to the growth of Christianity. Among the forces mentioned are feelings of hurt, loneliness and meaninglessness, often

triggered by personal crises such as problematic personal or work relationships. Both in the cities and in the countryside, individuals are subject to increased psychological distress due to the breakdown of family networks, traditional values and social security systems. As a result, the chances of encountering unsettling situations increase, while the ability to cope with them decreases. For all those suffering from various forms of psychological distress, Christianity offers an outlet for anxieties and spiritual relief (Liang 2006: 75; Yao 2004: 74f; Li et al. 2004: 75; Hunter and Chan 1993: 6).

While those authors concerned with psychological factors mostly emphasize the spiritual role of Christianity for the converts, it is worth pointing out that pastoral counselling is tremendously sought after in Chinese congregations and forms a significant part of the workload of most church workers, evangelists and pastors. However, many of them feel daunted by the complex psychological problems they encounter, a situation to which the Protestant church leadership has responded by enhancing the role of pastoral counselling in the formation of aspiring theologians (Amity News Service 2004b). Personal observations confirm that in most congregations there are one or two persons with severe mental problems, aside from more ordinary “seekers” who come with the wish to “have somebody to talk to” (see also Jin 2005: 26). While the spiritual relief factor may play a role, and more so the more “seekers” learn about Christianity and its belief system, it is safe to assume that in the initial contact phase the fact that Christian congregations offer at least a warm community, if not semi-professional counselling, is a reason to return in the conversion process (Liang 2006: 81; see also Yao 2004: 76).

A Quest for (Christian) Values

Being exposed to the dizzying speed of social change and, linked to this, the demise of traditional values, many Chinese suffer from disorientation. In some instances, it is therefore a personal quest for values that triggers the initial interest in Christianity. For many of the urban-based, conscious “seekers”, Christianity is a relatively new player on the religious market and it is perceived to be a Western religion. It is therefore assumed to be suitable for a modern lifestyle, and some of these urban “seekers” consciously seek out Christianity (Yang 2005: 439; Yao 2004: 73). However, many others and especially rural believers seem to come into contact with Christianity less through active curiosity and more

through coincidental encounters or peer guidance (Amity News Service 1999).

Looking at the various explanations given for the attractiveness of Christianity, the role of specifically Christian values certainly seems to be one of the most plausible explanations when trying to discern the difference between the general attractiveness of religion and the unprecedented increase in Christian believers in particular. However, the fact that many, especially rural, converts only discover the basic tenets of Christianity through their process of conversion means that the quest for Christian values cannot have initially sparked the interest in Christianity. In this sense, explanations for the interest in Christianity which focus on Christian doctrine point to a later point in the conversion process. Among the values and beliefs that converts cite as reasons they became attracted to Christianity are the equality of all, tolerance and love for the neighbour (Ye 1989: 45; Li et al. 2004: 75), and the equality of men and women (Yang 1994: 32).

Christianity as a Communal Pastime

Apart from Sunday services, most Chinese Protestant congregations offer a number of regular communal activities such as Bible studies, youth fellowships and prayer meetings. In some cases, literacy classes are offered with the aim of enabling elderly women believers to read the Bible on their own. As some Chinese observers point out, these and other church activities serve as "leisure activities" for a number of converts, especially in the countryside, where entertainment options are rare or too expensive for many who live there (Li et al. 2004: 75; Bi 2001: 54; Yang 1994: 34; Jiang and Xu 1989: 8). Interestingly, this factor goes virtually unobserved by non-Chinese scholars, perhaps because indigenous researchers are more aware of the boredom and monotony that can be part of rural life in China. From the side of Christian observers, there may also be some hesitation to see Christianity downgraded to an entertainment factor. I discuss Christianity as a leisure option in more detail below.

A Critical Appraisal

To sum up, the explanations given for the rapid growth of Christianity in China can be grouped into the following categories: (a) the structural and political framework that allows religion to happen, (b) physical needs and other utilitarian motivations of seekers, (c) psychological factors that push people toward religion and/ or Christianity, and (d) the quest for (Christian) values. There are also indications that for some potential converts, Christianity is (e) an attractive leisure option. In other words, apart from the structural and political framework, all these factors represent needs and their fulfilment. With this view, the explanations given tacitly follow modern conversion theories with their focus on needs and the active role of the individual seeking fulfilment of these needs. In line with these theories, conversion is not seen as an unconscious and perhaps even pathological act on behalf of the convert, but a needs-driven, active quest.

By listing a variety of conversion factors regardless of their relationship to the converting individual, the existing studies also mix various sociological levels of analysis. While the political framework clearly points to the macro level, factors such as personal distress fall into the category of micro level. It is clear that the tremendous changes in the overall social and political framework play a significant role in the current resurgence of religion because the macro-level social and cultural context paves the way for the individual propensity for conversion; however, since a religious conversion ultimately takes place on the level of the individual, I suggest that a strictly individual-centred reading of conversions in line with modern conversion theories is the most appropriate way of understanding the growth of Protestant Christianity in the Chinese context. As a phenomenon of “mass conversion”, i.e. “the phenomenon of religious conversion happening to many individuals in a society within a relatively short period of time” (Tamney and Yang 2006: 126), the tremendous growth of Christianity in mainland China is therefore the combined product of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors (Tamney and Yang 2006: 126).

Looking chronologically at the debate, the following trends are discernible: There has been an increase in field studies, probably linked to greater research opportunities; the overall quality of the papers has markedly improved; and the tone has become more sympathetic. Later articles also are more open regarding politically sensitive issues, and psychological factors find more attention – again, this is both a tribute to

greater openness and a sign of the changing social fabric. Overall, with its increasing diversification and ability to differentiate between different religions and the push-and-pull factors that lead towards them, the debate about the growth of Christianity is also a reflection of both the increasingly open scholarly discourse about religion and the enhanced understanding of Christianity among Chinese scholars.

Perhaps the biggest weakness of existing studies, even when they address only the growth of Protestant Christianity, lies in the fact that the reasons given for conversion are not specifically targeted at the Christian religion. The arguments brought forward thus explain what makes people religious seekers and what structural factors enable them to come into contact with Christianity; yet, the question of why Christianity is growing disproportionately is not addressed. Whether this is due to a certain reticence to discuss specifics of Christianity because they are deemed politically sensitive, or due to a lack of understanding of Christian tenets remains unclear.

Linking the aforementioned explanations to the overall process of religious conversion, the explanations given seem to point to different parts of the conversion process. If we imagine the process of conversion as a continuum between two points – “A” being the first personal contact with Christianity and “B” the formal conversion usually marked by baptism – the factors mentioned above refer to different points in time. Looking at conversion as such a continuum, the political framework that offers a certain religious freedom would be close to point A, and the search for Christian values would be closer to point B. Linked to this is the fact that early on in the contact with Christianity, the specifics of that particular religion may play only a minor role, while a conversion motivation closer to point B makes it appear likely that Christian values and ideas played a decisive role. In this sense, the various elements on our imagined continuum also point to a deepening understanding of Christianity that is part of the conversion process, and there is a certain chronological element to the order of the factors as they are presented above. The discourse in itself partly reflects that deepening understanding of Christianity.

Towards a Community-Oriented Reading of Christian Conversions in China

Many of the conversion factors listed above point toward the role of community, yet the element of communality is not examined in more detail even in the cases where communality is an obvious factor (Jin 2005: 26; Liang 2006). Especially for some of the Chinese scholars, there seems to be a certain inclination to be concerned with external conversion factors, or, the “phenotype” of religion. Analysing the role of community is an approach that links both the “phenotypical” and the “genotypical” aspects of the conversion problem, as the Christian religion is communal both in its outside appearance – specifically, worship forms – and its doctrine’s emphasis on the communion of believers. Furthermore, as I will show, it is the role of the community that links a number of the explanations given in existing studies. Whether we look at “healing conversions” or psychological distress, the communal aspect of Christianity always plays a role in the way “seekers” encounter the alien religion.

Below, I explore the communal nature of Christianity from a variety of angles to analyse its role as a factor that contributes to the growth of Protestant congregations on the Chinese mainland. As I will show, the studies examined above support such a reading. Besides, personal observations underline these findings which would have to be corroborated through further research.

Accessibility

First of all, the communal character of Christian activities greatly contributes to the accessibility of Christianity for non-Christians. Regular group activities lend Christian congregations a certain visibility that other religious groups of the same size most likely would not enjoy, be they small groups coming together for Bible study or crowds coming together for a Sunday service. In that sense, Christians enjoy a disproportionately high level of visibility compared to adherents of other religions. Visibility, perceived as popularity by outsiders, probably inspires confidence and interest in this unknown religion. Ironically, the recent trend to build so-called “mega-churches” that hold several thousand people, a concession to limitations from the government’s side on the number of churches allowed per city, only contributes to this visibility (Yang 2005: 429).

Another important factor that heightens the accessibility of Christianity as opposed to traditional Chinese religions is the evangelizing attitude of Chinese Protestants, who for the most part are actively engaged in spreading their faith among family members and friends (Cheng and Liu 2007: 13). Most seekers would not have come in touch with Christianity without a Christian mediator or gate opener (Liang 2006: 76; Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 64).

In her study, Liang Liping comes to the conclusion that social networks serve as an important gate opener for a first encounter with Christianity, as well as a motivating force to come back throughout the conversion process (Liang 2006: 77). However, the social network is not perceived by the converts themselves to be the decisive factor in the conversion process. Most of her converts recounted "mystic experiences" during the conversion process which to them showed that "Christianity worked". While the occurrence – or non-occurrence – of such incidents is hard to prove, it is also possible that the perception of "mystical incidents" is shaped by expectations, those of both the seekers (and their new peer groups) and the researchers. As has been shown elsewhere, group expectations shape both religious experiences – such as speaking in tongues – and the behaviour of new converts in a group.

Group Dynamics and Perceptions

While no systematic research has been conducted on group dynamics and their role in Chinese Christian conversion processes, there are indications that such dynamics do exist. In an unpublished study of healing stories told by Chinese Christians, Claudia Währisch-Oblau recounts the group dynamics that often are at work in Christian grassroots groups with many recent converts (Währisch-Oblau 1998). She observes strong peer pressure to adhere to a number of norms within these groups, including the pressure to convert to Christianity after other group members have gone to the trouble of praying for a sick seeker. Here, traditional Chinese ideas of favours and obligations also play a role. Not surprisingly, this gratitude factor resulting in the pressure to convert to Christianity becomes even more prominent should a healing experience have actually occurred. Likewise, it is not uncommon for Chinese Christians to introduce friends, family members or "seekers" with the words "He/ she does not believe *yet* [emphasis mine]," making their expectations clear (cf. also Hunter and Chan 1993: 175). Many congregations also cultivate rituals such as public testimonies in their worship services.

These stories not only recount individual instances of faith and salvation, but also reinforce the Christian identity of both narrators and listeners. Sometimes, guests and newcomers are invited to give testimony. Thus, public testimonies firmly establish believers as part of the Christian group, and “seekers” may after a while feel compelled to also give testimony so as to meet the unspoken expectations of their Christian hosts.

Once converts have committed themselves to their new faith and are stable members of a church group, a number of mechanisms are at work within the individual that enhance the feeling of belonging to a special group and thus strengthen group cohesion as a whole. For example, by addressing fellow church members as “brothers” and “sisters”, Chinese Christians not only express their sense of togetherness, but also establish clear boundaries between the Christian “in-group” and non-Christian “out-groups”. By embracing a minority religion that is still perceived to be of foreign origin, converts manoeuvre themselves into a minority situation. While this often results in conflicts with family members or colleagues outside of the church sphere, it also brings about a heightened sense of solidarity among church members. In other words, the common phenomenon of external pressure and the resulting improved internal cohesion is at work; the socially marginalized position of Christian churches and their members establishes a sense of “in-group” and “out-group” among new converts. In many instances, for example when facing conflicts created through the tenets of their new faith, fellow church members become important sources of reference and support; they become a new peer group for recent converts (Jin 2005: 28).

Advancing the above sense of “in-group” and “out-group” even further in theological and sociological terms, many Chinese Protestants develop an elitist attitude towards non-Christians. As I observed in a previous study, in personal conversations many Chinese Christians exhibit a sense of elitism, i.e. of belonging to a morally and spiritually advanced and select group of people. For example, adherents of traditional Chinese religions are perceived to be merely “going through the motions” and are considered to be spiritually superficial, while Christians relish the feeling of having found the “real” truth. Many Protestants claim high(er) moral standards for themselves and report being perceived as overly scrupulous or stupid for putting their faith above material gain (Fiedler 2000: 152-153, 183-185). This sense of elitism is perhaps the strongest indicator of the group awareness-building dynamics described above. For “seekers” first coming into contact with Christianity, this

sense of elitism may add to the attractiveness of it, as joining an elite group promises high status rewards, and the self-confidence exuded by many Christians regarding their faith likely inspires trust in newcomers. Theologically, this sense of elitism is founded in

doctrines stressing individual salvation and exclusiveness of the Christian community which were characteristic of the theology brought by Western missionaries in the first decades of the twentieth century (Bays 2003: 494).

In a recent interpretation of this elitism, Wenzhou's "boss Christians" (Christian entrepreneurs who propagate a business-friendly theology and manage the church according to business principles) have taken up the government discourse on *suzhi* (personal quality) and "consciously re-fashion themselves as 'high *suzhi* believers and citizens'" (Cao 2011: 106). By claiming to be of high personal quality, believers belonging to the Wenzhou (male) church elite set themselves apart not only from ordinary citizens, but even from other Christians of perceived lower *suzhi*.

Christian Gatherings as a Leisure Option

The literature review above has already touched on the importance of Christian gatherings as a leisure option or communal pastime. Unlike cultures shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition, Chinese culture does not have a traditional weekly "Sabbath" marking the passing of a week and allowing some regular rest. While urbanites may have one or two weekly days off as part of their work schedule, work in the countryside follows the necessities of farming. A regular "Lord's Day" with a worship service, perhaps even in a neighbouring town that would normally only be visited on market days or before special holidays, creates an exciting weekly break that converts can look forward to. "On Sundays, on Sundays, on Sundays I go to church" is one simple hymn sung by Christians in Anhui Province that expresses this kind of joy (personal observation, Tunxi, June 2000). Apart from offering entertainment, Christian gatherings are also a way of exchanging information and catching up on local news. Yang Hongshan observes that the increased flow of information due to regular Christian gatherings has a positive effect on local economies (Yang 1994: 36). Regular meetings, regardless of the religion concerned, would probably all have this effect, yet Christian congregations with their weekly gatherings offer more such opportunities than the occasional temple festival. Correspondingly, Yang Fenggang reports a

decreased interest of believers in attending church services when churches reduce the possibilities of fellowship interactions (Yang 2005: 429). Along these lines, other authors point to boredom as one cause of interest in Christian fellowship activities (Jin 2005: 26; Cheng and Liu 2007: 13, 16).

In the context of Christianity as a form of entertainment, one important retaining agent that draws potential converts back to their local church after an initial contact is the marked musical culture of many Protestant congregations. Even small congregations will normally have a choir, and many “seekers” recount that one of their first and most beautiful impressions of church life was the singing. Again, this singing culture among laypersons sets Christianity apart from China’s traditional religions and is only possible because of the communal nature of church life (Jin 2005: 28; Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 64, 65; Yang 1994: 34).

Finally, Bays points to yet another important role Protestant Christianity can play for converts through the possibilities for volunteer work in congregations:

Socially, it provides fellowship in a wide variety of organizational forms, from small home groups to large congregations. Yet it also offers personal affirmation and, especially for women and young people, an outlet for their energies and development of musical, organizational and preaching skills (Bays 2003: 15; see also Jin 2005: 26).

In other words, Christian congregations play a role similar to clubs and associations, both in building social networks and in cultivating skilled volunteers. The fact that rural women and young people have only limited access to similar development possibilities elsewhere probably adds to the attraction of Christian congregations.

The Role of the Family

Historically, family ties worked both as an impediment to and a cause of conversion in China. Often, family concerns were a hindrance to Christian conversion because it meant the end of ancestor worship (Cheng 1998: 191). Occasionally, strong family ties created a domino effect and thus were conducive to Christian conversion, as described by Lutz and Lutz for Hakka Chinese communities in nineteenth-century Guangdong (Lutz and Lutz 1998: 10). While the conversion of individual family members to Christianity is still a source of conflict in many families,

today the family often plays a positive role in the context of conversion to Christianity.

First of all, there are Christians that become believers due to family influence, either as children or later as a result of evangelism within the family (see, for example, Ye 1989: 44; Cheng and Liu 2007: 13). Cheng also points out the existence of "family lines" when it comes to running congregations (Cheng 1998: 191-192).

In an indirect and certainly unintended way, life crises, including problematic domestic relationships, are an important factor that causes people to be interested in Christianity. Problematic domestic relationships feature prominently among the reasons given for the initial interest in Christianity (Jin 2005: 26-27; Liang 2006: 75). Such problematic relationships may have always existed, but the solace some converts find in their new religion is a new way of dealing with it.

On a supra-individual level, the breakdown of family structures because of migration feeds into the same vein. After the demise of the commune, the extended family has taken over again as the dominant social and organizational force in the countryside. Whether it is building a house or borrowing money for a business enterprise, all essential forms of business are conducted within clan boundaries. However, in day-to-day life the extended family is not often available. Migration often leaves behind rudimentary families that can only partially fulfil their functions, and village structures that would take over are only slowly emerging. Chinese aid workers in charge of implementing development projects in conjunction with villagers echo this observation when they report a lack of social structures: "When we noted that there were no spaces, both physically and socially, for village members to come together, we started to incorporate community centres into our development projects," recounts He Wen, Assistant General Secretary of the Amity Foundation, a Chinese charity close to the Protestant church (personal information, May 2004; cf. Engelen 2009).

It is into this double gap of dysfunctional family structures and lacking alternative social spaces that Christian communities can move. Historically, the extended family used to be an economic, religious and social unit (Cheng 1998: 172). With the urban trend towards the nuclear family, the migration-induced disruption of families and the rural trend towards the "left behind" (Ye 2010, on the change of family life see also Yan 2003), many families can fill the aforementioned roles only partially. Congregational life fills these religious, social and, to some extent, eco-

conomic gaps. Besides responding to members' religious needs, Christian congregations offer emotional support through a sympathetic peer group. Occasionally, congregations act as regular social service providers by initiating projects such as homes for the elderly or small church-run clinics. On a smaller scale, even the poorest congregations will provide services such as visits to the sick or support for the destitute. No matter what kind of practical support they are able to offer, they are always solidarity networks (Yao 2004: 76; Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 64; Cheng and Liu 2007: 13).

The elderly poor, who feature prominently in many rural Chinese congregations, embody all of the aforementioned economic, religious and social needs in a particular way. Like elderly people elsewhere, they are concerned with "ultimate questions", often suffer from bad health, and are particularly affected by migration and the trend towards the nuclear family (Bi 2001: 54). For many of them, the congregation is the only family at hand, as one respondent tells Liang: "I do not receive any warmth in my own life, the church is my warm family" (Liang 2006: 81). As an economically and socially marginalized group, they are particularly susceptible to the status rewards Christianity has to offer (Yao 2004: 74). Finding a new peer group where they are unconditionally accepted offers emotional and status rewards hardly found elsewhere.

It is not only the rural elderly, however, who consciously appreciate the role of congregations as a "family outside the family", as the following story shows:

A story typical of the many I heard this summer is that of a professional woman who works for China's government-owned television network. She told me that she became interested in Christianity after getting to know an American with whom she practiced English. Later, influenced by a Chinese Christian professor at her school, she joined an underground Christian Protestant church. He introduced her to a 'sister' in his congregation whose kindness very much impressed her. She had felt that her life was rather empty at that point. 'So you get good grades', she said, so what? So you can buy things, so what? So you have a good husband and child, so what? Christianity offers something more in life, something of value. The people in the church are like a family to each other. They are also a source of comfort (Moore 2007).

While Protestant congregations partially take over the role of the traditional Chinese family, they also revert the relationship between religion and group membership traditionally prevalent in China. Unlike many

traditional societies where ethnic and religious identity correlate, Christian communities are independent of ethnic identity. (The exceptional case of Catholic communities in China, where religious and ethnic identity correlate, was already mentioned above.) Traditionally, being born a Han Chinese meant the participation in religious rites such as ancestor worship and possibly other Buddhist or folk religious rites; that is to say, the family that one was born into decided one's religious affiliation. What is more, to a certain extent the family also constituted a religious entity in itself. Christianity reverts this relationship by creating community through the religion. While it is not necessary to be a born member of the community, the community is an inherent element of the Christian religion. Given the fact that in China, the notions of family and religion have traditionally been intrinsically linked, it is not surprising that the Christian ideology of church members as "brothers and sisters in Christ" is readily accepted and contributes to the role of Christian congregations as successors of the extended family. In this context, the attraction of Christian congregations for the childless is particularly noteworthy (Yang 1994: 34).

In China's Christian congregations, members address each other as "Sister X" or "Brother Y". In this custom, rooted in Christian doctrine which sees believers as "brothers and sisters in Christ" and the "children of God", the role of churches as a quasi-familial entity finds its theological and linguistic expression. As Li puts it, "here, he or she can enjoy the warmth of a family" (Li et al. 2004: 75). Almost certainly, this rather informal and homely way of addressing each other will be one of the first things newcomers notice in a church group, and this form of address helps to establish a strong sense of a "we group" among fellow Christians (cf. Liang 2006: 79).

In a country where titles and formal addresses have replaced the communist "comrade", the use of the terms "brother" and "sister" in a Christian context also highlights a remarkable lack of hierarchy. Chinese authors mention the custom of addressing one another as "brother" and "sister" as going along with the Christian idea of equality (Bi 2001: 54). With their emphasis on lay leadership (often borne out of sheer necessity), participation of all, and the existence of democratic structures like parish councils and parish committees, Christian congregations are grassroots organizations that offer an emerging proto-democratic space, where church members can engage in democratic practices (cf. Madsen 1998: 59).

The role of the Protestant congregation as a new form of family has been noted both for historic conversions (Lutz and Lutz 1998: 192-194) and for contemporary ones (Hunter and Chan 1993: 169). By transcending existing, but weakening, blood and social relations in favour of “adopted relatives”, Chinese Protestants show a remarkable flexibility in their quest for spirituality as well as practical, social and emotional support. This flexibility with the possibility of including non-blood relatives into the family has a long tradition in China, where various forms of adoption have historically been practiced to provide families with descendants as providers of practical and ritual support (Wolf 1974). Christianity and the kinship terms used become a functional equivalent to traditional adoption practices. Though the needs that reinforce converts’ interest in Christianity are conservative or traditional in nature, the way they cope with them is modern.

Conversion to Christianity not only replaces family structures and thus reshapes the available social framework, it also overthrows the pattern of the social interactions that happen within this framework. In a study on Chinese Christian converts in the northeastern US, Abel notes a change of social obligations and interactions in comparison with traditional patterns of behaviour. He comes to the conclusion that favours and gift-giving play an important role in the conversion process. As he points out, the way these social interactions are practiced in the congregation he studied differs from traditional Chinese patterns of gift-giving and doing favours in that they are performed anonymously, to perfect strangers, to persons of lower status and with no expectation of reciprocity. This pattern inverts not only the common pattern of Chinese social interactions, but also that of religious interactions, which are usually shaped by expectations of reciprocity (Abel 2006: 172; Yip 2002: 37f). Along with the notion of a Christian family, these new behavioural patterns widen the potential of social interaction. Social interactions that involve favours and gift-giving become possible without immediate obligation to the giver (but come at the cost of obligation to the social group); at the same time, the patterns of social interaction follow the norms for family rather than for strangers (Abel 2006: 173). With this, the congregation studied by Abel goes against established Chinese norms, and as his converts point out, it is this going against established norms that they found refreshing (Abel 2006: 174). Again, we find a modern response to the need for belonging and to the way it was traditionally fulfilled.

One remarkable aspect of the increase in Protestant Christians is the fact that the overwhelming majority of China's Christians are women. While women all over the world have been shown to be more religious than men, the fact that China's rural congregations are not only largely made up of but also run by women is a departure from traditional structures, within both the Christian church and perhaps more importantly within traditional gender images, with their heavy emphasis on the role of men. Some Chinese scholars therefore view the embracing of the Christian religion as an intended act of emancipation from the side of rural women believers (Yao, Wang, and Liu 2003: 65; Li et al. 2004: 75).

On the other hand, women were traditionally responsible for daily religious rituals in the family, and continue to play an active role in folk religion (Dean 1998: 281). The strong role of women in Protestant congregations can therefore also be viewed as a continuation of traditional role models. Hunter and Chan observe that in many families, the woman will convert first, while the husband saves his active participation in the congregation for the time after his retirement, when political repercussions may be less likely (Hunter and Chan 1993: 174f).

In any case, it has to be noted that in the Chinese countryside, the revival of religion coincides with a general widening of the female gender role, notably the "feminization of agriculture" (Song et al. 2009) as a result of male migration, and an increase in the psychological pressures many women are facing (Hunter and Chan 1993: 174). At the very least, the strong notion of "sisterhood" prevailing in many rural congregations must make Christian churches particularly accessible for women in distress, reinforcing the tendency towards female-dominated Protestant churches in the countryside. The dominance of women in many congregations may also be linked to the generally stronger orientation of women toward maintaining social networks.

Community, Communality, and Religious Revival

Both the flourishing of Protestantism and the overall religious revival against which it happens touch on matters of community and communality, albeit in different ways and to differing degrees. In his analysis of rural Catholicism, Madsen analyses the potential of Catholic communities to become breeding grounds for civil involvement (Madsen 1998). Although the communal aspect is central to his question and the ensuing line of argument, there are a number of factors that make his observa-

tions inapplicable to Protestant communities and their growth. Madsen shows that for the Catholics in the villages where he conducts his research, Catholicism is an ascribed and ethnic identity, which means that it is not chosen by the individual and cannot be shed without severe social ostracism and without leaving one's home location (Madsen 1998: 53). The majority of Protestants in China, on the other hand, are first-generation converts with a clear sense of having chosen their religion, they are often isolated cases within their families, and the conversion is often a source of social conflict with family members and the wider non-Christian community.

Other accounts reaffirm the ethnic nature of Catholicism in many Chinese locations (Lozada 2001), where it is a source of social identity and strong cohesion on the village level; similar structures could probably be found in predominantly Muslim villages in China's west. Because in these cases adherence to Catholicism is inherited, the aforementioned descriptions of "ethnic Catholicism" offer little relevance for the discussion of conversion. Like Protestant Christianity, Catholicism here is a source of belonging, yet membership in the Catholic community is only maintained by, but not triggered by, the need to belong.

However, Catholic villages highlight other aspects of the relationship between religion and the local community. In the villages examined by Madsen, Catholicism as the social mainstream has come to play the role traditionally played by folk religion, including its functions for lineage organization and identity (Madsen 1998: 51). Similar developments have been noted in the countryside around Wenzhou, one of the few areas in China where Protestantism is close to being the social mainstream (Yip 2002: 40).

The replacement of folk religious practices and social customs by Christianity in these instances corroborates the interrelatedness of the dominant religious culture with social and local identities, and confirms the ongoing rebuilding of community identities "around clan, lineage and religious affiliation" (Hillman 2004: 53; Dean 1998) noted elsewhere. In many Chinese localities, the resurgence of religion (including ancestor rituals and other folk religious practices, but also Islam) has been tied to ethnicity and the local dominant culture. As a minority religion, Christianity plays a less significant role in the reassertion of local identities. In most cases, the Protestant communities that served as the basis for the studies cited here are not mainstream communities in their locale. Conversion to Christianity therefore does not constitute the return of the

local traditional religion but the advent of a new religion. However, Christianity does have the potential to replace traditional forms of religion and ethnicity and to offer alternative ways of establishing cultural, local and social identities if it becomes the dominant culture.

As Dean has described for the flourishing of the "Three in One cult", in those places where religious revival, local, and social identities are closely knit together, religion becomes a "vector of local cultural transformation" (Dean 1998: 273). For Protestant Christianity as a minority religion, this is currently the exception rather than the rule. With their refusal to participate in ancestor veneration and other rituals that reinforce family and community ties, individual Christians become a source of conflict and upset family cohesion rather than strengthening it (personal information by Ma Jianhua, Tunxi, June 2000). This upsetting of family cohesion concerns the ritual aspect of family cohesion more than the practical aspect. In daily life, Christian converts are often perceived to be less quarrelsome than before, and especially the notorious relationship between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law is reputed to improve after conversion of one of the protagonists (Hunter and Chan 1993; Yip 2002: 36).

Still, conversion to Christianity redefines the relationship between converts and their non-Christian environment. Most converts therefore have to balance the social costs related to their conversions with the benefits derived from belonging to a new community. Historically, communities with weakened internal cohesion were more susceptible to Christian mission efforts than their stronger counterparts (Lutz and Lutz 1998: 261). This seems likely to be the case today as well. Communities whose cohesion has been weakened through migration or increasing social stratification not only offer fewer incentives to their members to affirm their communal identity, but also have less power to apply sanctions to those who – at least ritually – renounce their membership in that community. Localities with a strong sense of community and, tied to it, religious identity, probably make a less fertile breeding ground for Christian conversions. Further research that attempts to geographically trace the various forms of religious revival that have taken place in China over the past three decades – the resurgence of the Mazu cult in coastal areas, the strengthening of folk religious practices, the spread of the Three in One cult in the southeast, but also an urban phenomenon like the Falun Gong – would be helpful in testing this correlation.

The religious revival as described above centres around the interrelatedness of the local community and religious adherence. Protestant Christianity abolishes this interdependence between locality, community and religion by providing a community that is separate from the local community. The religious revival as described above is actualized through religious practices, especially rites of passage and ceremonies and festivals as they occur over the course of a year (or, in rare circumstances, in regular intervals over longer periods of time). While the impact and scope of single ceremonies may be much more impressive than that of Christian ceremonies within a small and isolated congregation, such festivities bring people together only occasionally, whereas Christian congregations offer communal activities almost on a daily basis and allow fellowship interaction. As folk religious practices, the rituals and ideas that form the basis for the religious revival are an amalgamation of Daoist, Buddhist, and other influences. Given that the communitarian potential of folk religious rituals for everyday life is limited, to what extent would it be thinkable that Daoism and Buddhism in their purer forms could also fulfil the need for communality that manifests itself in Christian conversions?

Daoist thought and practice fall into different forms: the monastic, the mystical, the philosophical, and the liturgical. This last form of Daoism is often performed by Daoist masters living a married home life, the *huoju daoshi*. These forms constitute the link which binds together common practitioners of Daoism and specialists such as monks, nuns, and *huoju daoshi*. Unless they are *huoju daoshi*, Daoist life for most adherents is limited to ceremonies and rituals performed by specialists (Lai 2003: 425). Rituals and festivals, however, do not offer a stable communal form of everyday life to laypersons comparable to Christian communities. Also, performing and observing rites constitutes a hierarchical form of religiosity while life in Protestant congregations is characterized by its remarkable democratic nature. In line with this understanding of laypersons who are occasional “clients” as opposed to the specialists who serve them, there is even no common definition of what it means to be a Daoist believer (Lai 2003: 415). Altogether, Daoism as it is practiced today offers no stable and established community outside of monasteries.

While Buddhism have always offered communal life forms and activities for religious personnel such as monks, nuns and priests, communal worship forms for laypersons were historically weak, a pattern that continues today. Hunter and Chan observe that even where several

people participate in prayer or in other Buddhist ceremonies with a fixed beginning and end, these occasions bring believers together simultaneously rather than collectively. As they explain, the introduction of communal Christian prayer in missionary times was a major, and initially not easy, departure from established Chinese prayer forms (Hunter and Chan 1993: 145). In this context, it is interesting to note that even today, prayer meetings in many Christian congregations consist to a large extent of loud individual prayer of the believers, with only the Lord's Prayer as a truly communal effort. However, with the active participation of believers through praying and singing, rather than assigning them the role of observers, as would be the case in Buddhist temples, Christian congregations offer their members a much stronger sense of involvement and achievement in their ritual practice (Hunter and Chan 1993: 172f). In consequence, the identification of Christian believers with a certain congregation is much stronger than Buddhist believers' sense of affiliation with a certain temple (Hunter and Chan 1993: 233).

In recent years, the congregational nature of Buddhist life seems to have been strengthening. In many urban locations, Buddhist temples have begun to offer communal activities. These include both worship activities and social activism. Community-oriented Buddhist life of this nature reached China via Taiwan, where historically it was inspired by the successful communal life of Christian congregations. However, even so identification of individual Buddhist believers with a specific local community is usually weak. In her case study of contemporary Buddhism in Nanjing, Alison Denton Jones comes to the conclusion that Nanjing Buddhism is "weak on the formation of local, horizontal communities" (Denton Jones 2010: 209), and characterizes the relationship between lay Buddhists and organizations as a "producer-consumer relationship" rather than "membership" (Denton Jones 2010: 212). Organized community activities do not exist in all Buddhist temples; also, they tend to be more prevalent in the bigger cities, given their organizational capacities. It may be that the rise of Protestant Christianity is related to the fact that communality is a central element of *all* Christian life wherever it exists, and that especially in many rural locations, Protestant Christianity may be the only communal religion "on offer".

It is interesting to note that the closest equivalent to Christianity with regard to the intensity of communal life and the involvement of laypersons are China's sectarian traditions (Bays 2003: 496; Hunter and Chan 1993: 265). In that sense, Christianity re-introduces already familiar

forms of organization. Chinese researchers echo this argumentation, saying that one reason for the attraction of Christianity is that it offers a way to be devout and yet “in the world” that is not matched by Chinese traditional religions (Zhao 1994: 42). Looking at the appeal of Christianity from a historical perspective, Lutz and Lutz also note the similarities in the appeal of unorthodox Chinese sects and Protestantism:

Both promised personal solace and salvation within the group context. Like the religious sects, Christianity recruited members on an individual basis, though subsequent recruitment often followed family and lineage lines (Lutz and Lutz 1998: 186).

They also emphasize the fact that Christianity, like China’s heterodox sects, welcomed women as active members (Lutz and Lutz 1998: 194). As they conclude, the communal factor has once again become one of the attractions of Christianity (Lutz and Lutz 1998: 259).

The proximity of Christian congregational life to China’s sectarian tradition is an aspect which the church is understandably not keen on emphasizing, given the ambiguous link of sectarian traditions to heterodox tradition, in general, and political uprisings, in particular. At the extreme end of this trend, we find new sectarian movements such as Eastern Lightning that are based on both folk religious and Christian ideas.

In a seeming reversal of the central argument on communality brought forth here, one possible explanation for the growth of Christianity as opposed to China’s traditional religions is the strong and intense individual relationship with God typical of the Christian faith. It allows believers to unashamedly bring forth personal needs and concerns before the background of a tradition

where only the emperor as Son of Heaven had the prerogative of worshipping Heaven, where ordinary citizens only dared address themselves to the minor deities of the city, the locality, or the household (Ching and Küng 1993: 217, cited in Lozada 2001).

These observations by Lozada explaining the growth of the Three in One cult in southern China, which aims to establish a personal relationship with heaven, would also hold true for Protestantism. In this sense, the rising individualism in China is echoed by the growing interest in a strongly individual-oriented faith. In this context, the argument that the communal experience contributes to the growth of Christianity in China may seem like a contradiction. In fact, the desire for both a strong rela-

tionship with God and peer support are rooted in the same need for belonging. In a culture shaped by a strongly community-oriented traditional culture as well as by socialist forms of social organization, the current demise of established social networks opens a gap which Christian communities can fill.

Conclusion

No matter what "guesstimates" we base our observations on, a strongly dynamic trend can be witnessed in China's Protestant church. Even though in relative terms the percentage of Christians within the whole population remains small, an increase of this magnitude is not negligible as a social force. However, given the lack of reliable statistics regarding the number of Chinese Christians, speculations about the impact that this trend will have on the whole of Chinese society are difficult to make. As Bays has pointed out, the "social magnitude" of a group of 15 million is very different from that of a group that is 75 million strong (Bays 2003: 491). In other words, at this point in time it is the dynamics of this development more so than the absolute figures which make the growth of China's Protestant communities an arresting phenomenon worth further probing.

The communal character of Christianity has the effect that to a certain extent the whole is more than the sum of its parts: In spite of their relatively small number, Christian communities enjoy high visibility due to their regular gatherings, they offer a strong sense of community to newcomers, and are bound together by a community-centred doctrine. Of course, this disproportional social visibility adds to the political sensitivity of China's "Christianity Fever". As the surge and suppression of movements such as the Falun Gong show, it is a high degree of social organization that makes religions a threat in the eyes of the Chinese government. Ordinary Buddhists, in contrast, who are estimated to include at least 150 million people in China, receive much less political attention than the Christian communities.

In this paper I have argued that the communal nature of Christianity as well as the sense of community and the group dynamics at work in Chinese congregations are important factors contributing to the increase in Protestant congregations in the country. In spite of the increasingly congregational nature of temple life in the cities, the congregational nature of Christianity is one core element that sets it apart from China's

traditional religions. Communality, as one under-appreciated factor in the discussion, furthermore joins several of the existing explanations that are linked to the communal experience – specifically, healing experiences, the role of psychological support, and the role of church-related activities as a pastime. All these experiences would be impossible without the human encounters which frame them.

While there are theories of religious conversion that view conversion solely as the result of social influence such as social pressure and group dynamics, my preliminary observations do not suggest such a pure social influence model of religious conversion in the Chinese context. Conversations with recent converts suggest a high degree of autonomy throughout the conversion process. As the studies examined in this paper show, social aspects such as communality are not the only reasons that motivate people to accept Christianity. Besides, communality and the community do not propel conversion in a unilateral way. Rather, the individual, the Christian community and the wider locality interact in complex and contradictory ways in and after the conversion process. Group dynamics and social pressure from Christian peers are possibly counterbalanced by opposing forces and cannot account alone for the conversion of a person. Therefore, a mix of approaches to conversion will probably be necessary to cover the various routes China's rural and urban Christians take to Christianity. However, the exact extent of the role of communality is something that would have to be determined by further research.

In contrast to China's traditional religions, Protestant Christianity offers a community separate from the local community and its related social and religious identities. Protestant Christianity extends beyond the local *community* to offer *communality*, i.e. joint (rather than only simultaneous) worship, and regular fellowship interactions intent on establishing strong personal bonds.

The existence of functional equivalents between rural popular Christianity and Chinese folk religion has been noted elsewhere (Yip 2002: 40). As the family-like relationships in Christian congregations show, this functionality goes beyond the purely religious realm and includes the restructuring of personal relationships. Unlike the revival of folk religion, which constitutes a return to and a reaffirmation of traditional identities and roles, both religious and social, Protestant Christianity fulfils the same social and emotional needs, but offers a modern interpretation of the same roles and obligations. As an increasingly popular, as well as

modern, adaptation of traditional patterns of religiosity (Hunter and Chan 1993: 169, 171), Protestant Christianity also points to the continuously changing nature of popular religious culture in the Chinese context.

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