DISCERNING A LIVED CHINESE PROTESTANT THEOLOGY: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY, EVERYDAY LIFE, AND ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OTHER IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In Theological and Religious Studies

By

Easten G. Law, M.Div.

Washington, DC
October 28, 2020
ABSTRACT

This study advances a theo-social method of analysis to discern a lived theology among mainland Chinese Protestant young adults in the contemporary Shanghai and Hong Kong regions that bridges empirical research with theological construction. Inspired by abductive reasoning, a religious formation framework built from lived religion scholarship is used to analyze data drawn from qualitative interviews that identify how God’s presence is experienced and expressed in everyday life. Key findings include experiences of inner peace and ethical guidance drawn from congregational life, scripture, and personal devotion. Additional cycles of research, analysis, and theological reflection reveal how these experiences are negotiated and reformed across multiple boundaries of sociocultural diversity, inter-religious encounter, and community belonging within the different contexts of mainland China and Hong Kong.

When embedded in the larger context of modern Chinese society’s ambivalent religious history, my informants’ experiences can be understood as products of a triple negotiation of “liquid religiosity” worked out among China’s multiple modernities: a process of selective re-enchantment, the pursuit of a common or everyday cosmopolitanism, and a search for familial belonging. Relying on insights from David Tracy’s analogical imagination and the growing field of theological ethnography, this triple negotiation is bridged with the theological principles of
incarnation, revelation, and the image and mission of God via a process of “semiotic parallelism.” This process reframes observations of religious formation as a theologically framed process of Christ-like formation that understands experiences of disruption and migration as elements of an abductive Christology, adaptive missiology, and participatory ecclesiology.

To situate this argument in modern Chinese theological discourse, the lives and ministries of three important Chinese theologians (Zhao Zichen, Ding Guangxun, and Ni Tuosheng) are highlighted as examples of how Christ-likeness is formed in their experiences of disruption and negotiation. Seen through the lens of lived theology, Zhao’s Christology, Ding’s missiology, and Ni’s theological anthropology and ecclesiology provide valuable resources for negotiating Christian faith and liquid religiosity in contemporary China. In conclusion, this study’s theo-social analysis links God’s active presence with the boundary crossing experiences of my informants to articulate a lived theology of migration consistent with contemporary Chinese Christian experiences in an interconnected world and church.
Dedication:

To the many generations of faithful women who shape my life:

夏德清 Xia Deqing
夏若瑩 Xia Ruoyin
武敏 Wu Min
傅于恆 Fu Yuheng

To the future:

樓志忠 Lou Zhizhong
樓志平 Lou Zhiping

For Hong Kong

And to all followers of Christ among the Chinese peoples scattered throughout the world
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on how Christian religiosity and identity are being shaped within the ever-changing sociocultural ecology of contemporary China, asking how these dynamics ought to influence our theological thinking about God’s presence at work in the world church. To regard religion in the contemporary People’s Republic of China as a complex system is an understatement. The nation’s social, cultural, and political contexts and histories are a tangled web of fluid relationships, sorted revolutions, and imaginative rediscoveries. China’s religious landscape is a delicate balance of careful state oversight, long-standing traditions, and a diversity of popular beliefs, devotions, and practices. How Chinese Christians articulate and embody their faith in response to these contingencies contain insights into the ways in which God’s presence is being manifested in China today with important lessons for Christians all over the world. While many studies have explored the sociological dimensions of Chinese Christianity, few have examined their theological implications for Christian understandings of God’s presence in the world and the mission of the church.¹ This study is, therefore, best understood as a modest attempt to bridge the vibrant historical and sociological work being done in Chinese Christianity with theological reflection and construction.²

¹ For a recent survey of empirical work in Chinese Christianity, see Carsten T. Vala, “Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Sketch of the Field of Christianity in China Studies and Possible Future Directions” and Jianbo Huang and Mengyin Hu, “Trends and Reflections: A Review of Empirical Studies of Christianity in Mainland China since 2000.” Both published in the The Review of Religion and Chinese Society 6 (2019). Based on Vala’s review, the present study finds its beginnings in the “local anthropological studies” but expands to address larger themes of movement and hybridity that emphasizes the tensions between universality and particularity. Based on Huang and Hu’s typology, this study builds on past studies in “urban” and “college” churches, attempting to bridge a “construction and identity theory” orientation with theological reflection and construction.

² Some notable examples of theological reflection on the sociohistorical realities of Chinese Christianity that this study draws inspiration from include Kim-Kwong Chan, Towards a Contextual Ecclesiology: The Catholic
Broadly conceived, the initial goal of this project was to gather resources for discerning a lived theology reflective of Chinese Christian life that is experienced and expressed in everyday routines and relationships with others. In the beginning, three key research questions guided this study: First, how do Chinese Christians articulate, embody, express, and perform faith in their everyday lives and how do these practices shape their conceptions of self and community? Second, how do Chinese Christians conduct themselves in everyday encounters with those identified as other, as different and outside their communities, and how does this distinction shape their sense of Christian religiosity and identity? Third, how might these expressions and negotiations inform a lived Christian theology of public life & religious pluralism in contemporary China?

It is impossible to answer these questions across all levels of Chinese society given the diversity of Chinese Christianity today. This study, therefore, focuses on the experiences of educated Chinese Protestant Christians between the ages of 20 and 40 years old who grew up in the People’s Republic of China and, today, live and work in professional urban settings. Protestantism is arguably the fastest growing religion in contemporary China, particularly among educated urban dwellers.\(^3\) In particular, unregistered congregations with commitments

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\(^3\) In 1980, the Christian population of China was estimated to be about 3 million. In 2011, The Pew Research Center’s report on global Christianity estimates the Christian population of China to be around 5% (roughly 67 million people). Protestant Christians make up 4.3% of this 5% (58 million people). Pew’s findings are drawn from a careful analysis of both Chinese state-sponsored and independent surveys. Estimates of the 2010 Christian population range from a conservative count of some 29,000,000 persons (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2010 Blue Book on Religions) to a high estimate of over 100,000 (Asia Harvest and the World Christian Database). According to the *Atlas of Religion in China* (based on an expanded analysis of the 2004 Chinese Economic Census, the 2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey, and the 2010 China General Social Survey and Chinese
to reformed theology have had an outsized influence on the formation of the Chinese church’s educated class in recent decades. This cohort of Chinese Protestants grew up during China’s economic reform era, benefitting from the nation’s economic rise and international connections. They are arguably the most globally connected generation in China’s modern history. Many work in professions that depend on global systems and transnational flows. As a result, this upwardly mobile middle class also represents a key demographic for China’s future.

This study began with a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with Chinese Christians based in the Yangzi river delta region around Shanghai. These initial informants introduced me to others within their network, expanding the geographical range of my study to other urban centers throughout the country. More importantly, as the study progressed, the patterns that emerged from the data led me far beyond the initial questions outlined above. What began as an investigation of individual experiences of God in everyday life revealed additional layers of social and theological complexity depending on the varying degrees of social, cultural, and geographical boundary crossing they experienced and the negotiations that accompanied them.

Census), 31% of Protestant Christians were categorized as urban dwellers with 12% having earned a college degree or higher.


The ways many of my informants experienced, embodied, and articulated their Christian faith was influenced by multiple communities and places resulting in multiple senses of God and church.

This shifted the focus of my study as new questions took center stage: how do the Chinese Christian young professionals I am engaging understand and experience God’s presence across boundaries of varying degrees? How are these diverse experiences integrated into a pragmatically cohesive sense of Christian religiosity and identity? What do these experiences imply about God’s work in their lives? To better investigate these new questions, I expanded my study to include an additional phase of fieldwork in the special autonomous region of Hong Kong, a place of unique social, political, and cultural liminality between the People’s Republic and the rest of world.

Understanding these additional layers required shifting frames and adjusting methods in order to analyze new dimensions of faith life in their larger social and historical contexts. Chinese history’s sorted attempts to define and organize religion as a modern category entangles my informants in a larger system of relating religion and society. In this context, I discovered various conceptual arrangements that framed how my informants understood their faith in relationship to modernity and the various traditions that make up Chinese society’s ambivalent sense of spirituality. These negotiations influenced how my informants experienced God’s presence in the contexts of work, family, congregational life, other religious traditions, and new cultures. As a result, I needed to retool theologizing as a grounded act of holistic reflexivity, translation, and co-construction across boundaries. The result is a pattern of spiritual formation shaped by the metaphor of migration where God’s active presence works in
and through boundary crossing experiences to mature and strengthen one’s Christian identity and religiosity.

**An experiment in theo-social method and lived theology**

The goal of this research aims to not only discern some of the theological underpinnings that direct the lifestyles of this particular group of Chinese Christians, but also to ask how their experiences of God and church ought to guide our theologizing. As a result, this study includes significant methodological experimentation at the intersection of the sociological and theological imaginations, utilizing a “theo-social” method to understand God’s presence, character, and activity through empirically grounded inquiries of social life. This method assumes that, because experiences of God’s presence are given form and function through sociocultural processes, one cannot recognize the theological without also carefully working through the social embeddedness of lived experiences. By systematically examining the multiple dimensions of Chinese Christian lives grounded in everyday behaviors and discourses, a lived theology can be discerned that is not only sourced from the outside in but from God’s presence at work from the inside out.⁶

Three distinct yet overlapping processes make up this theo-social method. First, a grounded process of abductive inquiry orients the first phase of fieldwork, collecting and analyzing data to generate new hypotheses regarding how God’s presence might be

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⁶ The term “lived theology” is most readily associated with the work of David Marsh as a particular method for reading social history in light of God’s active presence. For more developed articulations of this perspective, see David Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azarnarsky, *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). While this study’s use of the term builds on their definition, I associate lived theology more closely with scholarship in practical theology and theological ethnography.
experienced in everyday contexts. Abductive analysis is a qualitative research methodology that orients the researcher to surprises in data that might provide explanatory potential outside the study’s initial parameters. It attempts to chart a middle path between open ended inductive reasoning and more focused deductive reasoning. In the context of this study, the surprises I noticed in my data lead me to reconfigure my pre-conceptions of how religiosity and identity are formed, expressed, and change in response to experiences of God’s presence amidst boundary crossing circumstances.

Second, these initial findings are analyzed through a religious formation framework developed from lived religion scholarship that emphasizes both the symbolic and material dimensions of religiosity and religious identity. This framework provides a basis for organizing data in relationship with initial hypotheses. Inspired by perspectives and practices from the qualitative research traditions of phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography, a constant comparative process of action and reflection directs additional phases of fieldwork to refine emerging theories. As new data is collected, the themes and patterns drawn from earlier phases are adjusted to better reflect new findings. Subsequent phases of research are then restructured to pursue and clarify potential conclusions.

Third, these conclusions must be utilized for theological construction by building on Christian tradition to present arguments regarding how God’s eternal presence and character


8 The beginnings of constant comparison and grounded theory can be traced to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1967).
acts upon the particular settings being studied. This work requires a cross-disciplinary bridge that links the languages and logics of empirical research with theological reflection. Relying on recent literature in theological ethnography, this study experiments with a systematic application of David Tracy’s analogical imagination that I call “semiotic parallelism.”⁹ This process connects empirical findings with theological principles through resonant meanings in a mutually informative process. Once this bridge is established, the particular resources of scripture, tradition, and formal theologies composed by more traditionally trained theologians can be brought into conversation with the realities of lived experiences.¹⁰ Together, a lived theology emerges that is not only informed by textual or systematic forms of theological reflection and reasoning, but also grounded in the particularities of lives from specific times and places. All of this provides pathways for discerning how God’s presence continues to act in the contemporary journeys of God’s people.

While these three larger movements of theo-social analysis are described and presented separately, they are interwoven in practice. Each of these three movements depends on multiple cycles of disciplinary and methodological reflection to advance from one movement into the next. What begins with (1) observations of grounded experience is (2) theorized with a sociological imagination that (3) elicits methodological reflections which can be (4) explored with a theological imagination. Each cycle sets the stage for another cycle of fieldwork and analysis that begins with an adjusted lens through which to observe additional grounded

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¹⁰ This bridging of formal and lived theologies builds on methods in theological action research advanced by Helen Cameron et al, Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology (London: SCM Press, 2010).
experiences (see figure 1). As each cycle builds on the previous, a fractal spiral emerges that propels theo-social analysis across the three broader movements of abductive inquiry, constant comparison, and theological construction. Each new cycle of research takes the theoretical implications of the previous cycle as its basis for adjusting its focus and method in order to better follow the surprising leads that reveal how God works in the everyday worlds we inhabit.

![Diagram of Theo-social Cycle]

**Figure 1: Theo-social cycle of action and reflection**

**The organization of this study**

This study is organized to reflect the theo-social method outlined above in seven chapters that can be divided into two major sections. The first section (chapters one through four) presents the theories and methods that orient this study and chronologically follows the cycles of action and reflection that make up the first two movements of abductive inquiry and constant comparison. These two movements are pursued in roughly three phases over the course of twelve months (August 2018 – August 2019): an initial exploratory phase (chapter one), an intermediate second phase of investigations from emic and etic standpoints to refine
initial hypotheses (chapters two and three), and an expanded third phase set in the alternative context of Hong Kong (chapter four).

Presenting these three phases in chronological order accomplishes two objectives. First, the narrative structure of the research showcases the complexities and unexpected turns that come with qualitative fieldwork. Instead of presenting conclusions in their final form, the chapters provide readers an inside look at the messy process through which the data reshapes this study’s research questions. This allows readers to engage the rationale behind the various choices made during the research and how they influence this study’s conclusions. Second, these first four chapters illustrate how multiple cycles of grounded observation, sociological analysis, methodological reflection, and theological analysis described above identify, refine, and expand hypotheses and emerging theories. Each chapter is roughly organized along these four turns, relying on previous cycles to not only clarify empirically based conclusions but also building momentum to launch the third movement of theological construction. The following diagram maps the ways in which each of the first four chapters traverses this cycle with summaries of the conclusions from each step in the cycle (see figure 2). First, each chapter begins by articulating the sociological basis from which the data from grounded experiences are processed. Second, sociological analysis of the data articulates hypotheses from which to reflect methodologically about how to extend the research. Third, these methodological reflections give way to a creative and open space for theological reflection. The cumulative product of this cycle becomes the basis from which the next phase of research is built upon.

For example, chapter one reviews the basics of abductive reasoning and explains why it serves as the guiding orientation for this research. This posture of abductive inquiry unearths
some initial themes from my first set of interviews. In this exploratory phase, informants were interviewed long distance through internet video chat platforms such as Skype, Zoom, or WeChat. Through this analysis, I identify three patterns shared across multiple interviews for further investigation: experiences of peace, the impact of living out one’s faith across regional and national boundaries, and their differentiation between faith and superstition. Reflecting methodologically on these findings, I draw from studies in lived religion to construct a religious formation framework as an analytical tool for understanding the interrelations of religiosity and religious identity observed in my participants. The chapter concludes with a survey of Nancy Ammerman's proposal regarding the existence of a “sacred consciousness” embedded in religious formation that might serve as an entry point for later theological reflection.

**Figure 2: Theo-social cycles in chapters 1 through 4**

The second and third chapters follow an intermediate second phase of research where I draw inspiration from three qualitative research traditions to further investigate the emerging
patterns identified in the first phase. Phenomenology encouraged me to focus more closely on the emic perspective of my informants while grounded theory challenged me to adopt an etic perspective to identify patterns in my informants’ discourses and practices. Ethnographic methods also reminded me to be mindful of the importance of larger factors embedded in my informants’ sociocultural environments. These orientations were deployed in a series of in-depth follow-up interviews with eight of the original nineteen participants. In addition, four of these eight participants were recruited to participate in a month-long journaling and photovoice activity to provide alternative data points for analysis that gestured toward larger sociocultural dynamics.

Chapter two explores this data from an emic perspective focused on my informants’ experiences of God’s presence as a form of peace and guidance as the basis for further research. To analyze the data, I combine abductive reasoning’s use of semiotic chains with grounded theory’s conception of axial mapping to link my informants’ inward experiences of God’s peace and guidance with their expressions of faith in everyday life. This operationalization of the religious formation framework provides a means to discern how my participants negotiate their experiences of God across various situations from a sense of personal peace to ethical action and community life. This chapter concludes by associating these experiences of God’s peace with the activation of my informants’ sacred consciousness. In order to build a biblical base from which to begin theological reflection, I examine a series of bible passages to root these observations in the testimony of Christian scripture.

Chapter three adopts an etic perspective to analyze the ways in which my informants’ experiences expands on the initial themes of negotiating faith amidst multiple cultures and
religious/ideological traditions. Through this analysis, the image of boundary crossing becomes an increasingly influential frame for understanding my informants’ religiosities, encompassing their experiences in different cultures as well as their life-long negotiations with communist ideology and Buddhist practices. The constant comparison of new trends in data with existing themes also produces a third hypotheses: my informants’ negotiations of belonging along lines of familial-like bonds with both the local and world church. These refined hypotheses are theologically engaged as inner dialogues with God via Peter Phan’s conception of everyday life as summit and source of theological construction. My informants’ negotiations of faith across situational boundaries are then compared with the Federation of Asian Bishops Council’s recommendations to advance a triple dialogue with the poor, culture, and other religions as a basis for constructing Asian theologies.

Mindful of the larger influences of society and culture, the fourth chapter recounts an expanded third phase of research based in the alternative context of Hong Kong with twenty-five new informants. This unexpected shift in context builds on the study’s emerging focus on boundary crossing as its chief theme by investigating how everyday religiosity and identity is negotiated among mainland Chinese Christians in a completely different set social, cultural, and religious contingencies. In the Hong Kong context, the same themes voiced in the mainland setting take on different emphasis because of the region’s religious freedom and comparatively more individualistic culture. Experiences of God’s peace and guidance shift from a register of collective belonging and high ethical expectations to individual calling and everyday senses of grace. In Hong Kong’s open market of religions, my informants can also find congregational homes among Mandarin speaking brothers and sisters from the mainland, local Hong Kongers,
or in international English-speaking churches. Each setting provides different resources for spiritual growth that intersect with a range of previous experiences in mainland China and abroad. Hong Kong’s vibrant religious ecology also gives my informants a different sense of Buddhism and other popular beliefs. These expanded themes elicited a sense of God’s compassion across journeys of adaptation and change in my informants, leading me to theological reflect on their experiences through C.S. Song’s conception of the “transpositional” gospel. Song’s framing of God’s movement to transform the church through accompaniment and dialogue across different cultures and narratives provides an intercultural foundation for Asian theology across boundaries that is resonant with my informants’ experiences.

In total, this study includes sixty-five in depth interviews with forty-one informants. Out of the forty-one informants, sixteen reside in mainland China and twenty-five in Hong Kong. Of the sixteen mainland Chinese informants, seven call Shanghai home, five live the greater Yangzi River delta region, and four reside farther afield. The twenty-five informants who currently live in Hong Kong are from different province of mainland China from Sichuan to Shandong, Guangxi to Liaoning, and many of the regions in between them. In Hong Kong, participant observation was also conducted at a total of twenty-two events including church services, bible studies, and social outings. Nearly all of my informants arrived in Hong Kong for higher education and many now work in the region. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese as the primary language, though English was often also used for clarification. Nearly all of my interviewees understood a moderate amount of English. Those who had studied abroad were highly competent or nearly fluent, switching between English and Chinese with ease when the terms or concepts discussed needed clarifying. Translations of quotations cited in this study
are my own and have been edited for clarity to reduce the fragmented nature of spoken conversation. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all my informants. When possible, I also anonymize other identifiers, including the names of places or institutions such as hometowns, universities, and congregations.

By the end of the part one, the key themes of recognizing God’s presence and negotiating the implications of faith and dialogue with this presence across boundaries of culture, religion, and community are solidified. In the second part of this study (chapters five through seven), the third movement of theo-social analysis begins: embedding these conclusions in larger sociological, methodological, and theological contexts in order to construct a Chinese lived theology that addresses experiences of everyday life and encounters with differences. By framing chapters one through four as a collective inquiry into the grounded experiences of my informants, chapters five, six, and seven respectively provide the critical sociological, methodological, and theological analysis needed to propose an empirical theology resonant with both heaven and earth (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Theo-social cycle of chapters 5 through 7
Chapter five is an expanded sociological analysis of the data. Building on the work of Thomas Tweed, I adopt the metaphor of migration as crossing and dwelling to frame my analysis.\textsuperscript{11} This leads to the identification of a “triple negotiation” taking place within the lives of the Chinese Christians in my sample. The first negotiation is that of “selective re-enchantment,” a process of discerning the degree to which spiritual presences and powers can be active in a modern lifestyle led by logics of material rationality. The second negotiation is the search for an “everyday cosmopolitanism,” the attempt to embody a particular lifestyle that can be grounded in a universal sense of Christian ethics across the multiple quotidian contexts from the home to the workplace. The last negotiation is that of “familial belonging between heaven and earth.” For many of my participants, church life is best described as an intimate yet alternative family – the family of God. But adoption into the Christian family requires constant and sometimes tortured negotiations with other types of families, from fathers and mothers to the modern idea of the nation-state itself. This triple negotiation provides the backdrop from which nearly all of my informants negotiate their Christian religiosity and identity as they cross multiple boundaries.

In order to understand my informants’ personal negotiations, the larger context of Chinese culture’s relationship between religion and modernity must also be accounted for. Chapter five thus positions these three negotiations within the larger context of modern China’s religious history, focusing on how processes of globalization, modernity, and secularism have transformed Chinese conceptions of religiosity and identity in the past three hundred years.

years. This history exercises a powerful influence over my informants’ everyday lives in a dynamic that I label “liquid religiosity,” a persistent set of negotiations on spirituality, ethics, and belonging that ebb and flow across the multiple modernities that make up contemporary China.

The sixth chapter is an expanded methodological reflection that lays the groundwork for this study’s theological ends: bridging the language and logic of religious formation and qualitative social sciences with theological principles to build a foundation for lived theological construction. Surveying some of the theoretical pitfalls involved in theo-social correlations, this study proposes a method I call “semiotic parallelism” for linking sociological conclusions with theological principles. Building upon the theological reflections of previous chapters and the growing use of ethnographic methods in practical theology, I propose semiotic parallels between the triple negotiation of liquid religiosity and theological principles of the incarnation, revelation, and the image and mission of God. These parallels build pathways for the embedded logic of these theological principles to reshape this study’s analytical frameworks and methods from a focus on descriptions of religious formation across boundaries to missional formation where Christlikeness is forged through boundary crossing experiences. This provides a way extend the theological dimensions of this study from the particular settings and experiences of my informants to the church at large, arguing for the importance of migrative experiences as part of God’s nature and plan to bring all of creation to reconciliation and wholeness. The chapter concludes by lifting up Todd Whitmore’s study of Christ-like mimesis
among the Magwi people of northern Uganda as an exemplary case of the lived theology of migration being proposed here.\textsuperscript{12}

The seventh and final chapter of this study is a preliminary theological analysis that brings the fruits of this newly constructed Christ-like formation framework into dialogue with migration theology via three of China’s most important modern theologians: Zhao Zichen (T.C. Chao), Ding Guangxun (K.H. Ting), and Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee). By reframing migration as a both a literal process of geographical and cultural boundary crossing as well as a metaphorical process of individual emergence and active becoming that is rendered by movement and change, questions of how God’s migratory nature and presence work in the migration experiences of the individuals and communities to shape Christian religiosity and identity take center stage. It is this question that frames the chapter’s analysis of Zhao’s, Ding’s, and Ni’s writings and ministries as lived theologies. Recognizing a variety of theological types and positions in each person, I argue it is in boundary crossing experiences of disruption that their lived theologies can be recognized.

Moreover, I argue that elements of their lived theologies provide resources for working out the triple negotiation my informants struggle with. Zhao’s evolving Christology lends itself to a bi-directional form of discipleship animated by both Christ’s humanity and divinity, the very essence of Christ’s presence. Ding’s life and ministry portrays an adaptive missiology that balances universal convictions with contradictory particularities, resonant with Christian cosmopolitan ideals. Ni’s pneumological anthropology and locally rooted ecclesiology both signal the importance of belonging to the Holy Spirit and the church as fundamental to Christian

\textsuperscript{12} Todd Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology} (London: T&T Clark, 2019).
life. In conclusion, it is not Zhao’s, Ding’s, or Ni’s systematic theologies or final confessions that matter most. Instead, it is the journey their faith lives took and the evolving theologies that emerged from them that are of most value to Christ-like formation.

When viewed as a cohesive whole, the seven chapters of this study provide a complete example of the fractal nature of theo-social analysis (see figure 4). The multiple cycles of action and reflection that run through chapters one through four does more than ground this study in lived experiences. They also spiral outward to build momentum for the expanded analyses that make up chapters five through seven. The three movements of theo-social analysis tested here can, therefore, also be visualized as a fractal spiral. The first movement, evidenced in chapter one, begins the spiral through a posture open to the abductive experiences of God in the data. The second movement, expressed in chapters two through four, critically refines and extends research into how these experiences are processed and expressed in different situations and contexts. This completes one rotation of the spiral. The third movement, advanced in chapters five through seven, creates a new rotation that encompass greater sociological and theological resources in its analysis to articulate new insights into God’s activity in the present world.

![Figure 4: Theo-social fractal spiraling based on chapters 1 through 7](image)
In theory, the implications of this theo-social study can continue to expand and spiral on. Represented by the dotted rectangle in the above figure, the conclusion of this study suggests a new agenda for a lived theology of migration that addresses larger trends in practical theology, ecclesiology, and world Christianity. It argues for the importance of migrative experiences as an imperative for Christ-like formation and sanctification. This is closely aligned with contemporary studies in Christianity and migration and resonant across many Christian traditions. As a result, I advocate for an increased application of theological ethnography in the multiple contexts of world Christianity to enrich and expand lived theologies as witness to God’s work in the migrating faithful.

**The disciplinary tension and ecclesial burden of theo-social work**

I am mindful that the empirically limited nature of sociological fieldwork can appear ill-suited for the transcendent aims of theology. Any attempt to bridge these two fields, each with their particular histories and academic expectations, is to risk falling miserably short of both standards. The seasoned sociologist reading this study will undoubtedly find numerous methodological inconsistencies and elementary conclusions that require further explanation. The veteran theologian is also likely to find the theological reflection of this study lacking in depth, leaving many of Christian doctrine’s most difficult questions unaddressed. Such are the tensions and risks of multi-disciplinary work. One can only hope that the conclusions that emerge from such studies will be substantial enough to connect but a few theological gaps in the larger story of the church in the world.
The conclusions of this study are, therefore, not about identifying social facts or
generalizations that can be quantified or replicated. Neither do they suggest a larger
systematic or historical theology about how God works within different cultures and histories.
It is, rather, a modest attempt to articulate an empirically credible but theologically open
hypothesis about how God might be working in this small corner of the church universal, in the
lives of a few individuals seeking to be faithful in the ordinary and extraordinary dynamics of
life that move Chinese culture and society today.

This project is pursued with empirical method as well as theological imagination, but its
aims are ultimately grounded in a larger sense of ecclesial devotion: a heart for understanding
God’s work through Christians living together as the church in the world. While the study is
focused primarily on individuals, the ultimate ends of such work is a clearer picture of God’s
relationship to the church in all of its diversity. It is, in the words of the late Gerard Mannion,
the first steps of a larger “ecclesiological investigation.” My prayer is that this study offers
resources for constructing what Roger Haight calls an “ecclesiology from below” and an
attempt at describing what Nicholas Healey has termed the “concrete church” in the context of
contemporary China.\(^{13}\) Moreover, this study is animated by the interdisciplinary spirit of world
Christianity, itself a radical reconfiguration of traditional studies of ecumenics, missions, church

\(^{13}\) See the three-volume work of Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History* (London: Continuum, 2004,
2005, 2008); Gerard Mannion’s introduction to the Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network in Gerard
and Nicolas Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge, UK:
Cambridge University Press, 2000). While the present study cannot be considered a work of ecclesiology given its
lack of attention to the theological nature of the church as a whole, it presumes the study of lived religion and
theology of individuals and their experiences of particular Christian traditions as foundational building blocks for a
truly universal church capable of accounting for the diversity of the world’s diverse ecclesial expressions.
history, and interreligious relations. As Dale Irvin has argued, “[World Christianity] continues to pursue a threefold conversation, across borders of culture (historically the domain of mission studies), across borders of confession or communion (the domain of ecumenics), and across borders with other religious faiths (historically the domain of world religions).” I am interested in the Chinese dimensions of faith at work in these boundary crossings and the many social and cultural contingencies that give this branch of the church its unique values and worldview. In turn, I pray the lessons gleaned from this particular community can provide the world church insights into the endless facets of God’s presence among and through us.

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CHAPTER 1: Discerning the abductive presence of God in religious formation

Abductive inquiry: Oriented toward the surprising presence of God

When one hears the term “abduction,” pictures of spaceships lifting away unsuspecting victims may come to mind. To be abducted is not simply to be surprised but also to be led to places one cannot imagine. Can abduction apply to Christian experience? Jesus did say that his kingdom was not of this world.¹ This study begins by arguing for the adoption of abduction as a starting point for strengthening the links between qualitative research and theological inquiry. The Latin root for the term abduction, abdūcere, implies the act of being “led away.”² If God’s presence contains an abductive dimension then one criterion for identifying God’s work in the empirical world is to orient one’s analysis toward experiences where God surprises followers with unexpected experiences that linger and re-align their perspectives and values. By following the empirical effects of one’s abductive experience of God, new pathways emerge for discerning lived theologies.

Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans describe abductive analysis as a systematic way of generating new theories based on surprising findings that lead the researcher to new insights.³

¹ John 18:36


When priority is given to this process of discovery and generation, one’s mode of reasoning is best described as abductive rather than deductive or inductive. Abductive reasoning operationalizes the goals of grounded theory method by providing a specific process for orienting one’s theoretical sensitivity. What differentiates abductive analysis from more open-ended inductive approaches is its reliance on semiotic chains as the vehicle for teasing out new theoretical possibilities. Inspired by Charles S. Peirce’s pragmatist theories, the study of semiotics is concerned with how meanings are generated and passed on through various symbols. Abductive analysis thus focuses on how the meanings associated with specific symbols can change over time dependent on multiple situational contingencies. If an experience cannot be understood in one situation, possible explanations can be generated by following the chain of meaning associated with the experience across different contexts to uncover the variables that may be causing shifts in interpretation.

Inspired by the mechanics of abductive analysis advanced by Tavory and Timmermans, this study begins with a posture of abductive inquiry, a broad openness to surprising sociological dynamics that are not explicitly articulated in of research questions or design. Moreover, this posture of abductive inquiry also orients this study’s theological sensibility.

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4 See Barney G. Glaser and Judith Holton, “Remodeling Grounded Theory,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 5, no. 2 (2004) and Barney G. Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press, 1978). Theoretical sensitivity is an important concept in grounded theory that helps orient researchers toward discovering categories in the interview data without a pre-existing hypothesis. These emerging categories should be substantial enough to organize and code data and yet open and flexible enough to be reshaped by additional data.

5 Tavory and Timmermans, *Abductive Analysis*, 27-34.

Assuming God’s presence is real and active in human experience, it prioritizes experiences of God that my informants identify as surprising and unexpected. Following the logic of semiotic chains, I attempt to trace the ways in which these experiences of God are subsequently negotiated and expressed in different situational contexts.

In the first phase of this study, I rely on long-distance interviews conducted via internet video chats with a snowball sample of nineteen urban professional Christians (ages twenty to forty). Sixteen of them reside within mainland China and three in Hong Kong. Each interview lasted between forty to eighty minutes. This first phase was conducted from November 2018 to February 2019. The initial focus of these interviews was on participants’ experiences of the presence of God in everyday life. I used the following list of questions to guide my conversations.

1. Could you describe a typical day of yours? A typical week?
2. What type of activities do you most enjoy during the week? How often do you do them?
3. What is the most difficult task you have each day? Week? How do you get through it?
4. Who do you regularly spend time with during the week? What do you do together?
5. When and where do you feel closest to God?
6. Do you feel God is active in your everyday life? How so?
7. Do your parents know that you’re a Christian? (Co-workers? Friends? Siblings?) What do they think of it?
8. What has been the best part of being a Christian?
9. Do you find being a Christian difficult? If so, why? If not, why not?

The interview data was then coded incident by incident. These incidents were organized along two criteria. First, following a logic of abduction, I gave special attention to experiences my informants described as surprising. Second, I paid attention to the situational contexts that precipitated and/or followed these surprising experiences with an openness to new themes for expanding inquiry. By relating these surprising experiences with the situations in which they emerge, I begin to assemble the semiotic contours from which these experiences are associated with God’s active presence. This process sets a stage for analyzing other similar situations with an eye toward the semiotic chains that might shift the meaning of the experience dependent on other contingencies that might require further investigation.

Discerning experiences of God’s peace

Based on a preliminary analysis of the interview data, experiences of “peace” or the lack thereof was a recurring topic. A number of my interlocuters identified a feeling of peace, sometimes using the term, anxin (安心), pingan (平安), or pingjing (平静), as a signal of God’s presence. In this section, I present three examples of how experiences of peace were associated with God’s presence and the different situational contexts in which this peace emerges: during moments of prayer, stress, and community.

For many informants, experiences of prayer were often described as being accompanied by a sense of peace. Cassi explains her sense of God’s presence as such:

I think it is a kind of feeling (the presence of God). I know some have literally heard God’s response, like audibly hear “I promise” or specific things, like a feeling of assurance when asking for God’s help. I haven’t had these experiences. But after I pray, I feel a surprising sense of peace. It’s not about answered prayer requests. It’s not always very dramatic. I
used to wonder if experiencing God is very dramatic, but I’ve never had those experiences. But there is this peace that comes. I know that for sure.\textsuperscript{8}

Another one of my interviewees used the same language to describe a feeling of peace coming over her in an unexpected and surprising way during a stressful event. Alison was in the middle of an important work project when her Apple Macbook keyboard stopped working. In addition, she had recently broken a toe on her foot, making it difficult to walk. The official Apple store told her they would not be able to see her to diagnose the problem until next week. Desperate to complete her work project, she began to walk from computer store to computer store throughout the city for assistance.

... and it’s raining outside, and I’m holding this computer, and my foot is not working but I still have to walk to all these places, multiple floors in these big shopping malls. These two days were very frustrating. And yet, when I was walking, I suddenly realized: if this happened to me when I was in college I would not only be frustrated, I would be furious. I’d ask “why me?” and I’d be super angry with everyone... but during these two days I actually felt a surprising sense of peace. At times I was even happy. Like a happiness that came from nowhere. So I think this is a reflection of how God has been with me and changed me these ten years of being a Christian.\textsuperscript{9}

Alison associated God’s presence with feelings of peace and joy that reshaped her character when faced with everyday challenges.

A third interview provided yet another window into the ways God’s peace can emerge in Christian life. For Stanley, a young man in his third year of university, the presence of his Christian fellowship is foundational to his experiences of God. Stanley estimates he spends nearly fifty percent of his free time with his fellowship participating in early morning prayer

\textsuperscript{8} Interview with Cassi, November 2018.

\textsuperscript{9} Interview with Alison, December 2018.
meetings, singing in the choir, or just meeting together for lunch on a regular basis in the university cafeteria. When asked about how he experiences God’s presence he shares,

When I am spending time with my fellowship, particularly among my classmates – that’s when I am able to bring some peace into my heart. That’s when I can get a glimpse of what God might desire for all of us. It actually comes about in a very simple way. As long as we are together – even if it’s just chatting about mundane everyday things – I can get a sense of that peace. Just sitting and watching my brothers and sisters happily going about activity – I can get a sense of peace. I don’t even have to be participating – I can just be watching them.¹⁰

For this young man, closeness with God came in the form of rich community. This close-knit fellowship is so deep that just by being in one another’s presence comes a sense of God’s peace.

Each of the three examples noted above carries certain latent theological assumptions. In the first example is a question of whether experiences of God ought to be dramatic and the nature of prayer. In the second, my participant makes the point that her experience of peace comes after many years of faith, a formation of character over time that has changed her responses to stressful situations. In the third example, an eschatological comment is made referring to how the feeling of peace in community being experienced must be an example of what God wants to bring to fullness in the future. In each case, experiences are closely tied to theological reflections. Built into these feelings are also rational processes for making sense of these experiences in a larger sense of Christian faith and life. As research continues, the question of how particular experiences are processed and integrated inwardly, as a means of

¹⁰ Interview with Stanley, December 2018.
understanding one’s growth as a Christian is also important to note. What theological resources are drawn upon by my informants to navigate this process?

These three examples of God’s peace in the lives of my participants occupy different situations: from a personal time of evening prayer to the middle of a stressful errand to community with other Christians. They provide three different windows into how God’s presence is experienced in everyday life. Drawn from my initial interviews, situations like these serve as signposts for subsequent research phases. In what other ways is God experienced and how do those experiences continue to move outward to shape new experiences that take place in other contexts and situations?

These examples of God’s surprising peace were articulated directly by many of my informants, exhibiting the importance of an emic orientation during initial research. In addition, an etic perspective is also necessary for identifying other important themes that may not be immediately perceived by my informants but are evidenced across the data. Following the completion of this first phase, I identified two patterns I had not initially considered: the role of cross-boundary experiences of faith life and the differentiation between faith and superstition. These surprises challenged me to reconsider and expand the range of my research for future phases.

Discerning the impact of cross-boundary experiences of faith life

First, I was surprised by how many had significant experiences of faith outside the context of mainland China. Out of my nineteen initial informants, nine shared about how experiences of faith during their time in Hong Kong, the United States, or the United Kingdom
deeply formed their relationship with God. This is likely a product of snowball sampling as it is only natural for internationally experienced Chinese Christians to introduce others with similar backgrounds. Nonetheless, what surprised me most was the way their current faith lives in mainland China were so deeply shaped by their time abroad.

The nature of these faith lives abroad did not always point to any grand experiences of God’s presence, but instead bore the marks of new perspectives and habits of faith that were fostered in places and congregations different than that of mainland China. For Maria, it was her year of graduate studies in Hong Kong that transformed her faith. While she was raised in a Christian home, she could never fully articulate why her faith was meaningful for her. “I just felt something very moving (gandong 感动). Sometimes when I was singing a hymn or maybe hearing a testimony about God’s peace at work. But I didn’t really understand why. I just felt it. I had a lot of questions.”11 When she went to Hong Kong, she joined the university’s Christian fellowship and a bible study led by a local seminary professor. It was in this setting that her faith went beyond feeling.

When I joined the bible study, I realized other people had even more questions and deeper questions than me. I mean, lots of smart people, psychology majors and chemistry majors. And our bible study leader... was also a science major before. He had the past experience of dealing with a teacher who criticized religion a lot from a scientific perspective. But he became interested in faith nonetheless and approached it from a psychology perspective as a graduate student. He then came to faith and so when he leads bible study he really listens to your questions because he had them all himself. He often said, ‘Faith begins with pondering questions, curious questions.’12

11 Interview with Maria, November 2018.

12 Interview with Maria, November 2018.
One year of this critical and open bible study that welcomed questions transformed her faith into something deeper with firmer foundations than she had ever had. After returning to China, her sense of Christian life was saturated with a rich desire for learning that translated into a more passionate faith in many other areas of life.

In the past my faith was like admiring a grand stained glassed window. Beautiful but far and distant. During bible studies in Hong Kong, I realized the bible was really written for me. I mean, it was written for all people, I know, but you could feel that the words addressed my life and the way I should live. It became intimate. Its stories held meaning for me. The book became something I had relationship with, and that’s when I felt God close to me. I got a sense of what kind of God this is and what kind of person God wants me to be as result.13

It could be argued that this sort of bible study could easily have been experienced within mainland China, but I wondered if there was some positive correlation between Hong Kong’s more open religious environment and critical education system that made her experience particular.

Another one of my informants, May, had only just returned to Shanghai for a new job after spending three years in the United States for graduate studies and work. Returning to China rendered many classic symptoms of reverse-culture shock. “When I was in America, I didn’t feel like America changed me, but once I came back to China, I realized I had changed. For example – crossing the road. In the U.S. pedestrians have the right of way and when I came back to China, I found myself much angrier with drivers.”14 But in addition to these more

13 Interview with Maria, November 2018.

14 Interview with May, November 2018.
everyday realizations also came serious theological reflection about what it meant for her to return to China.

One of the big differences I experienced when I returned to China is that I could see others’ needs more clearly. When I was in America, I could only see my own needs. I was a stranger in the U.S., so I naturally only thought about my own job and path and what I needed. But here in China, I started noticing more social issues. For example, that recent incident in Changchun involving false vaccinations. This made me realize, that after all China’s development, how can things like this still happen? There are also incidents at elementary schools when children were attacked with knives. All of this really left a deep impression on me. I had just gotten back to China and I heard another incident where a high school student committed suicide... the worse part about it was the people watching, asking her why she hadn’t jumped yet, telling her to hurry up and jump. This chain of events led me to think, maybe I didn’t come back to my home country so I could be back in my dear home, but to spread the Gospel... In this church there are so many of us who returned from overseas, has God chosen us to return with the Gospel? I do wonder if this is what’s happening. I mean, society is advancing so quickly, but people really do need God too.¹⁵

May’s reflection evidences deep thinking wrought by extended time away from China, a complex analysis of society and culture through theological lenses to make sense of personal experiences of life abroad and at home. Her responses sought to place her own feelings and thoughts about God into the larger context of China’s contemporary social problems.¹⁶

For multiple participants who had lived outside mainland China, the perspectives and habits they gained while away had brought about understandings of the Christian faith that significantly influenced the way they lived after returning. I wondered: what was it about experiences of faith and congregational life outside of mainland China that made them so enriching and how were these elements being played out in their current lives?

¹⁵ Interview with May, November 2018.

¹⁶ May’s sociocultural analysis of Chinese society’s shortcomings based on her experiences abroad is not a theme limited to the Christian perspective. For a more general study of how returning Chinese students orient their reformist sensibilities, see Stig Thogerson, “‘I will change things in my own small way’: Chinese Overseas Students, ‘Western’ Values, and Institutional Reform,” Journal of Current Chinese Affairs 44, no. 3 (2015): 103-124.
Discerning the boundary between faith and superstition

Second, in discussions about the nature of Christian life, some of my participants used the language of superstition as a contrast to their faith. The term, “superstitious,” was sometimes used as a ubiquitous other: beliefs and practices based on irrationality and selfishness. In one of my first encounters with this dichotomy during an interview, a young financial banker, David, states, “Nobody is a Christian in my family. I am the first to have a real faith and live it out. For some in my family, they will confess Buddhism, but it’s not so deep. They’ll go and worship (baibai 拜拜) when they feel they need something is all. It’s not really a faith (xinyang 信仰) actually if you think about it.”17 In Chinese, to “baibai” is a term closely related to the rituals one acts out before the gods or Buddha before an altar, either in a temple or perhaps at a home, business, or holy mountain. For Christians, the term can connote the worship of idols in particular. What caught my ear was David’s remark that such acts should not be considered faith at all. These comments raised the question of how faith ought to be defined?

In my interview with Stanley, the university student who shared his experiences of God’s peace in community with his fellowship, the topic of how faith should be defined also arose. Speaking of when he had just become a Christian in high school, he confessed feeling very embarrassed about talking about faith in front of his friends. “In my heart I thought – how will my friends think of me? Thinking back on it, I don’t know if I would even identify what I had then as real faith. It didn’t really have any deeper impact on the way I lived. It was just

17 Interview with David, December 2018.
something that made me feel better. Maybe it was more superstitious (迷信) at the beginning.”

Even though matters of faith and superstition were not addressed in my line of questioning, I asked Stanley to elaborate to give me a sense of how he defined the differences between the two. “I used to think... faith was just something you believed in as a sort of means to an end – that it brings peace and direction. And that’s certainly true – it does bring peace and direction. But over time I realized faith requires more of you than just that. There are deeper layers to consider. And that over time this faith changes you, it’s going to change your life. That’s how I look at it now.” Stanley confesses a view of faith that goes beyond what is commonly understood to be a means to comfort without denying the fact that it is also true. He came to the Christian faith to access meaning and comfort but, in the process of living it out, found something that changes your character and worldview.

In contrast, Stanley believed superstitions did not place such demands on one’s life. Instead, they operated simply as a means to an end that one desired to achieve. According to Stanley,

Superstition is more like, behaviors that are supposed to realize benefits for you. For example, in China there are a lot of people who ... how do I say it... Well, there’s this one saying that sums it up I think: “If you have money you can exorcise ghosts and drive out demons” (你有钱能使鬼推磨) – I remember seeing a movie regarding a ghost who was following you and messing with you so the person burned a lot of paper money and chanted until the ghost left. This is the obvious example of superstition. But at a more everyday level, you know, I’m reminded of another saying - “if you work hard you will surely succeed.” It is a common mentality in Chinese culture today. In a way – this is also a sort of superstition. It tells you what you must do to

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18 Interview with Stanley, January 2018.

19 Interview with Stanley, January 2018.
succeed. If you do things a certain way you will surely succeed. This is the essence of a superstition really. It’s not always about ghosts and spirits – at a deeper level it’s a simplistic assumption.\textsuperscript{20}

For Stanley, the assumptions that drive superstition are based on a simple arithmetic of avoiding ill and obtaining good based on one’s own human desires.

Faith, on the other hand, contained a different foundation – one that required a person to change him or herself to meet its foundational standards. Stanley explains further, “Faith, however, has something certain within it. But this certainty is not something you can move or manipulate or change. This foundational certainty isn’t something that is shaped by human desires. So to learn and grow in faith is to consider this certainty and you have to change yourself in relationship to this certainty. It provides a certain standard (yueshuli 约束力).”\textsuperscript{21}

This “standard,” which can be literally translated as a “binding force,” was an important term for Stanley. He referenced it a number of times in his explanation. As an example, he cited the temptation he sometimes faces to cheat on exams, a common practice among some of his classmates. “No matter what you do, even if you cheat – the demands on your faith remain the same and you know it. It will give you guidance, but it won’t force you. Even if you fail, your faith remains to call you to that standard again. Faith always gives you this standard.”\textsuperscript{22} He states that faith goes deeper, even if it means negative results for following your convictions, like failing an exam. For Stanley, this willingness to accept ill-fortune or difficulty in exchange

\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Stanley, January 2018.
\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Stanley, January 2018.
\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Stanley, January 2018.
for integrity to a higher standard was a foundational part of what differentiated faith from superstition.

Stanley’s analysis is fascinating for its careful definition of faith and superstition as different attitudes toward life as a whole instead of what is traditionally associated with belief in spirits or the transcendent. The difference is about motivations and the impact of behaviors. In other words, there is an inherently ethical dimension to faith. Based on this worldview, he is able to recognize the superstitious nature of his initial draw to Christianity and hypothesizes the same underlying assumption at work in modern maxims of hard work and success: superstition is about getting what you desire, regardless of whether your desires are good or bad. It is a means to an end. Faith and superstition are, therefore, not black and white categories of belief but rather states of mind or heart.

Stanley’s reflections evidence a careful process of self-reflection, arranging a variety of experiences, feelings, motivations, and goals into his differentiation of terms. How did these various components come to be organized through cycles of unconscious praxis in the daily lives of my informants? The tone and timbre of Stanley’s explanations did not exude a sense of confidence during our interview. His explanations were full of stops, stutters, and back pedaling, signals that he was working out these dynamics as he spoke. Yet the final product was not only pragmatically cohesive but also nuanced, though not without logical inconsistencies. It was at this point I also recognized the question of how these internal processes contributed to my participants’ articulations needed some theoretical framing.

During this first phase of research, I was only able to have an extended conversation about this topic with Stanley, though many other participants made comments that also
merited further discussion. I wondered: in what other ways might the boundary between superstition and faith be constituted and what differing experiences and logics might they reflect? Moreover, how did this shape my participants’ frames and understanding of other religious adherents who were not Christian?

**Theoretical reflections: Building on lived religion**

The praxis-based logic of theo-social theory requires oscillation between active research and theoretical reflection. While the initial findings explored above lay the groundwork for new investigations, I also needed a stronger framework for analyzing my participants’ varied experiences of God’s presence. Over time, I began to see the data through the lens of religious formation, questioning how a person articulates and integrates experiences of faith into their sense of self through their personal reflections, everyday routines, and larger negotiations with society and culture. I wondered what role God’s peace, experiences outside of mainland China, and definitional questions of faith and superstition played in this formation.

As I prepared for my second phase of in-depth interviews, I pondered how to square the findings from my initial interviews with the existing literature and theories in contemporary religious studies and sociology of religion. The sociological orientation of studies in lived religion provided the most appropriate perspective to build upon. Drawn from francophone sociologies of religion, the concept of “lived religion” was introduced to American scholarship by David Hall and Robert Orsi in their 1997 volume, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Hall and Orsi promoted a reorientation of religious studies, shifting from a focus on traditional conceptions of timeless beliefs drawn from holy texts to that of everyday practices
embedded in social contexts. For Hall, religious practice is patterned and linked to a complex network of meanings provided by religious worldviews. Thus, the study of practices provides a more comprehensive window into what constitutes “religion.” Practice, “encompasses the tensions, the ongoing struggle of definition, which are constituted within every religious tradition and that are always present in how people choose to act.” In other words, the ways people behave are the true markers of a religious tradition’s range of meaning and its impact on humanity.

Orsi outlines four principles for the study of lived religion that remain pertinent for this study: “(1) a sense of the range of idiomatic possibility and limitation in a culture... (2) an understanding of the knowledges of the body in the culture... (3) an understanding of the structures of social experience... and (4) a sense of what sorts of characteristic tensions erupt within these particular structures.” What these four principles call for is an imaginative sensitivity to the ways cultural worldviews and social institutions shape our perceptions of the religious self in action, through conversations, behaviors, and interactions with others played out in our discursive thoughts and bodily senses. The study of lived religion investigates the impact of cultural and social structures at a grounded level within individual lives in their quotidian rhythms.

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24 Hall and Orsi, 7.

25 See Robert Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). This early study by Orsi is widely recognized as one of the forerunners in lived religion studies, exhibiting many of the key principles articulated by Hall and Orsi.
Moreover, the lived religion paradigm’s focus is not on the religious elite but the everyday layperson. Meredith McGuire describes the goal of lived religion as the study of, “how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives...” This shift is a reclamation of everyday actions as forms of complex religiosities, acknowledging the importance of popular forms of belief and practice that are deeply connected to larger systems of history, doctrine, and ritual that problematize tidy ideals of tradition and belief.

_Differentiating religiosity and religious identity_

Lived religion is a disciplinary perspective focused on practice in both the individual’s everyday life and his/her participation in historical traditions and institutions. It addresses both diffuse and open experiences of boundary crossing as well as distinctions rendered by boundary making. Working with my initial data set in conversation with lived religion’s basic assumptions, I began to work out a definitional distinction between “religiosity” and “religious identity” that would come to have a significant influence on the ways I approached and analyzed my data.

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27 See Nancy T. Ammerman, ”Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers” _Nordic Journal of Religion and Society_ 29, no. 2: 83–99, for survey of literature and themes drawn from lived religion studies over the course of the past two decades that have built on Hall, Orsi, and McGuire’s work.

28 See Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity” _Theory and Society_ 29 (2000): 1-47, for a literature review and analysis of identity as an analytical category in sociological studies. The differentiation of these terms is informed by the increasingly problematic usage of the term “identity” as either a constructed or reified category of analysis when addressing matters of behavior and belonging, particularly in sociopolitical contexts.
In the context of this study, “religiosity” is defined as a fluid and diffuse set of beliefs and practices that are socially recognized as forms of engagement with the transcendent in response to meaningful experiences of life. These ways of being religious can range from personal acts of piety to collective forms of ritual but are not bound by static forms of identity or institutional structure. In this definition, what marks a person’s religiosity are the inward, sometimes unconscious, motivations that drive a wide variety of outward expressions.

In contrast, “religious identity” can be defined as a conscious differentiation of the self that is marked by belonging to a distinct group on the one hand and exclusion of others on the other. Religious identity is thus grounded in more organized and systematic understandings of the transcendent with boundaries in belief and practice that are negotiated to attain clarity and order regarding one’s place in the world. In this definition, religious identities are understood as discursive constructions that formalize expressions of religiosity rendered in response to the realities of social life.

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29 This working definition of religiosity is inspired by the concept of “diffuse religion.” Introduced by C.K. Yang in Religion in Chinese society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and some of their Historical Factors (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1991), the concept of diffuse religion continues to garner attention in the field of religious studies and sociology of religion. For example, see Roberto Cipriani, Diffused Religion: Beyond Secularization (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017). This concept of religiosity has been prominent in studies of modern and contemporary Chinese religions. See Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, Chinese Religiosities: Affliction of Modernity and State Formation (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2008) and also Adam Yuet Chau, Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

30 See L. Luke Chao and Fenggang Yang, “Measuring religiosity in a religiously diverse society: The China case” Social Science Research 74 (2018): 187-195. Chao and Yang employ a similar definition of religiosity in terms of beliefs and behaviors that can be identified as “religious” and yet are also independent of formal religious identities and institutions, arguing that contemporary China serves as a novel laboratory for pioneering new methods in measuring diffuse religiosity in quantifiable ways. See also Fenggang Yang, “Exceptionalism or Chinamerica: Measuring Religious Change in the Globalizing World Today” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 55, no. 1 (2016):7-22, where Yang argues for the necessity of reworking definitions of religion and religiosity in order to more accurately analyze religious change in an age of globalization.
Together, religiosity and religious identity intertwine to form and order a person’s religious formation. For many, religious identity provides the means for a person’s religiosity; a time-tested toolbox of institutional confessions and practices to make sense of God’s presence. Traditional forms of theological inquiry that focus on scripture and tradition exemplify this particular dynamic. Alternatively, unbridled forms of religiosity inevitably re-shape religious identity when new resources are brought to bear on established norms. This can be understood as a bottom-up approach to study of religions. In this context, a powerful experience may elicit forms of religiosity that do not resonate with one’s articulated religious identity. Throughout history, the abductive experiences that activates these alternative religiosities often grow into new forms of religious identity. This interplay between religiosity and religious identity illustrates some of the dynamics at play between a person’s inward experiences of the transcendent and the outward social structures that articulate its meaning.\(^\text{32}\)

*Building a framework for the analysis of religious formation*

These definitions of religiosity and religious identity provide the grounds for constructing a *religious formation framework* (henceforth referred to as an “RF frame”). This

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framework provides a constellation of concepts for analyzing my data and constitutes an important theoretical foundation for my theo-social method (see figure 5).

At the center of the diagram is the conception of the “self,” which I define as a holistic yet contingent entity made up of both symbolic and material processes. The self is both a heart-mind capable of complex feelings and thoughts as well as a material body embedded within time and place. The figure endeavors to map key elements and relationships in how this self comes to develop a sense of religiosity and religious identity that addresses the many dimensions or religion, culture, and materiality encountered in everyday life.

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33 The concept of the “self” used in this framework draws on Chinese conceptions of the “xin” 心, often translated as the heart-mind, the seat of both mental and emotional processes. See Ning Yu, *The Chinese HEART in a Cognitive Perspective: Culture, Body, and Language* (Berlin, DE: Mouton De Gruyter, 2009), for a comprehensive linguistic study of the term in classical, contemporary, and comparative perspectives.

34 While the construction of this framework for religious formation is drawn primarily from religious studies scholarship, its underlying structure can be credited to Xiaotong Fei, who argued that the Chinese sense of self was distinct and yet also enmeshed in concentric layers of association to family, village, and larger
Surrounding the self are three concentric circles that symbolize three inter-related dimensions of religious life. The “individual” dimension is personal and immediate, existing in a constant present that includes both material processes of affect rendered by one’s physical environment as well as mental processes of association that generate symbols in the initial stages of meaning making. The “everyday” dimension builds upon the personal with broader senses of collective identity in contemporary contexts. In these everyday settings, symbols are negotiated through discourses with others in daily conversations, tested in multiple contexts of life, and re-arranged in constantly evolving networks of meaning. Likewise, the affects that emerge within us are embodied in practices that are similarly deployed and reworked in a feedback loop between personal affects and social circumstances. Lastly, I compose the “society and tradition” dimension of religious formation along lines that are most recognizable as organized religion – the formal institutions that oversee the official narratives, texts, and rituals of their communities. This dimension accounts for a sense of history, however imagined or constructed it may be. In addition, its institutional nature implies a more rigid sense of religious belonging with official canons of sacred scripture, definitions for doctrine, and protocols for ritual.

Operating within each dimension is a pair of categories. Together they generate meaningful senses of religiosity and identity that are specific to their contexts while also interdependent with others. At the individual level, “affect” and “symbol” operate

phenomenologically to shape and direct experience and forge religiously significant meaning. This level is experienced personally and immediately. At the everyday level, “discourses” and “embodiments” are expressed and negotiated in routine interactions that shape a fluid yet pragmatically coherent sense of religiosity. This level is experienced within communities tied to distinct situations a person most regularly inhabits. At the level of society and tradition, “narrative/texts” and “rituals” serve to systematize and formalize one’s sense of religious identity. This level extends beyond any one person or community, including dynamics of institutional history that carry a religious system’s worldview across generations.

Seen through the heuristic structure of this RF frame, this study’s definitions of religiosity and religious identity are products of a fluid and organic process that play across all three dimensions. Generally speaking, the inner dimension’s oscillation between symbol and affect produce the impulses that guide religiosity while the outer dimension of society and tradition provide the concrete scaffolding for molding religious impulse into a bounded, distinctive identity. In between, in the realm of the everyday, is where religiosity and identity are negotiated across the various situations and contexts that make up life.

The six individual categories that make up this model can be sourced to two important paradigms within religious studies as a whole which I heuristically label “symbolic” and “materialist” paradigms. I associate symbol, discourse, and narrative/text with the symbolic paradigm and associate affect, embodiment, and ritual with the materialist paradigm.

The dynamics of the symbolic paradigm will be familiar for many scholars of religion. It emerges out of a symbolic interactionist perspective, often referred to as a “linguistic turn” in religious and cultural studies. This paradigm focuses on the creation, negotiation, and
rationalizations of meanings in a religious system. It is heavily influenced and guided by methodological orientations of semiotics and hermeneutics. The symbolic paradigm can be traced to the linguistic turn in religious studies rooted in the theo-philosophical hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. This focus on symbol and meaning was synthesized with Emile Durkheim’s and Max Weber’s early sociological studies of religion in Clifford Geertz’s interpretive anthropology that sought to understand religion as a system of cultural symbols closely related to social circumstances and historical contingencies. Together, this understanding of religious formation presumes a social process that utilizes a range of symbols, images, and myths to construct a cultural-linguistic system that, according to Geertz, “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”35 Within this stream of thought, the study of symbol, text, and culture became intricately tied with the study of religion.

Lived religion reorients this symbolic study of religion by focusing the scholar’s gaze on the symbols, discourses, and narratives of laypersons in their everyday lives rather than the traditional focus on religious texts and elite systems of thought. Moreover, it privileges the dimension of the everyday as the focus of one’s study, the complex middle ground between theories of high religion as sociocultural structures for a civilization and phenomenological investigations of the private inward experiences of the holy that have tended to dominate

religious studies. With this symbolic understanding of the religious everyday – one’s daily discourses can be understood as an important field for forming cohesiveness between the personal symbols of one’s inner life and the institutionalized texts and narratives of the social world they inhabit.

Second is the materialist paradigm. Without ignoring the symbolic dimensions of religion and culture, the materialist paradigm emphasizes embodiment as the foundation of religiosity and is chiefly concerned with feeling and their often unconscious relationships with behaviors and physical environments. Manuel Vazquez’s More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion provides one of the best descriptions of this “materialist turn” in religious studies. For Vazquez, the materialist turn “… approaches religion as it is lived by human beings, not by angels.” This framework, ...

approaches religion as the open-ended product of the discursive and nondiscursive practices of embodied individuals, that is, individuals who exist in particular times and places. These individuals are embedded in nature and culture, and drawing from and conditioned by their ecological, biological, psychological, and socio-cultural resources, they construct multiple identities and practices, some of which come to be designated, often through contestation, as religious at particular junctures. For Vazquez, embodiment itself needs to be the initial focus of study, investigated more rigorously from multiple disciplinary standpoints. He focuses his attention on embodiment and materiality in a deeper way than self-professed lived religion scholars, arguing for a “cultural


37 Vasquez, 5.

38 Vasquez, 8.
neurophenomenology of religion” that can thicken our understandings of the non-linguistic dimensions of religiosity that take place beyond one’s consciousness.

Of the scholars who have taken up Vazquez’s challenge, Donovan Schaefer’s work on religious affects is one of the most prominent.39 Building on Vazquez’s call to re-situate human experiences of religiosity in relationship with nature as a whole, Schaefer anchors his theory with the curious episodes of chimpanzees dancing before mighty displays of nature, such as a rushing waterfalls or blazing fires, as observed by Jane Goodall and other zoologists.40 For Schaefer, these collective acts ought to be situated within the realm of religious practice, bodily expressions of wonder drawn out of a nexus of feelings invoked by environmental conditions. This grounds religious experience deep in bodily instinct instead of mental rationality. Utilizing the emerging field of affect theory, Schaefer seeks to make sense of religiosity, “before language, before cosmology, even before ‘thought,’ understood as a way of converting a situation into an explanation.”41

For Schaefer, affect theory is about, “showing the multidirectional vectors of influence between embodied emotions and politics,” a posture that avoids viewing emotion and embodiment as an internal/external dualism.42 Like other forms of critical theory, the categories of history and power continue to play an important role in assessing the ways

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40 Schaefer, 4.

41 Schaefer, 9.

42 Schaefer, 8.
embodiment and emotion are registered over time. What is distinctive about Schaefer’s approach is his attempt to bracket out the linguistic dynamics that have been so prominent in recent analysis of religion’s role in shaping the body. Instead, the body itself becomes the record of the past, its instinctive responses signposts of social, cultural, and political dynamics.

Vazquez’s and Schaefer’s focus on embodiment as a “cultural neurophenomenology” of religion animated by affect provides rich theoretical soil for revisiting Catherine Bell’s theory of ritual practice.\(^{43}\) Like Vazquez and Schaefer, Bell is concerned with how ritual operates in specific contexts of practice as not only a site of social construction but also a means for making sense of one’s own body. For Bell, ritualization is, “the production of a ritualized agent via the interaction of a body within a structured and structuring environment.”\(^{44}\)

The implicit dynamic and ‘end’ of ritualization—that which it does not see itself doing—can be said to be the production of a “ritualized body.” A ritualized body is a body invested with a “sense” of ritual. This sense of ritual exists as an implicit variety of schemes whose deployment works to produce sociocultural situations that the ritualized body can dominate in some way.\(^{45}\)

This ritualized body is, therefore, a body under control, though not always consciously or rationally. It is a body living into a new schema of values through disciplined performances internalized through regular practice. Bell conceives of ritual as not something to be decoded but rather an important source of encoding.\(^{46}\) Instead of viewing ritual as a set of symbolic practices inscribed with meaning from the outside, ritual ought to be conceived of as the source

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\(^{44}\) Bell, 100.

\(^{45}\) Bell, 98.

\(^{46}\) Bell, 82.
of inscription – multisensory experiences that respond to unruly affects unrealized by discursive engagement. Bell’s theory of ritual practice works with the materialist turn advocated by Vazquez and Schaefer to form a continuum of embodiment that can be discerned from the immediate affects that surge through the body to a diversity of practices that are carefully curated into rituals that cycle back to reshape the very affects that generated them.

When these two paradigms are synthesized in the RF frame, its six categories construct a holistic framework for understanding and analyzing religious formation across all three dimensions of the individual, the everyday, and within societies and traditions at large. This framework accounts for both symbolic and materialist paradigms in two interdependent ways. First, the relationships between symbol, discourse, and narrative/text, on the one hand, and affect, practice, and ritual, on the other, operate in respective continuums where the dynamics of the personal, everyday and society/tradition build off of one another. Second, the components of each dimension (symbol and affect, discourse and practice, narrative/text and ritual) operate in a relational praxis, mutually informing one another while simultaneously accounting for shifts in other dimensions.

First, in the symbolic continuum, symbols (either in the form of language or some other sensory medium such as sight or sound) operate at the most basic level of meaning. These

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47 The inspiration to synthesize the symbolic and materialist paradigms reviewed here has its genesis in Jorge N Ferrar and Jacob H Sherman, *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). Ferrar and Sherman argue that the cultural-linguistic orientation toward religious studies has exhausted its efficacy in a post-modern age. They call for a participatory turn draws on experience and embodiment as critical categories that integrate dynamics of spirituality and mysticism to produce a more holistic study of religion.

individual fragments are negotiated through everyday discourses in multiple communities. These multiple discourses serve as a process of constructing larger structures of meaning that both draw on and are embedded in various narratives. Some stories remain close to the everyday, but a few are selected as sacred. They become scripture, directing the historical growth of the institutionalized community. In figure 5, the arrow moving outward from the self toward narrative/text represents this process.

This process, however, also operates in the opposite direction represented by the arrow moving from narrative/text toward the self. The cornerstone narratives and texts of a tradition mediate the most important symbols of the community to the personal via a diversity of everyday discourses that are typically managed and curated. Catechisms, bible studies, and church small groups in one’s weekly routine are examples of how the everyday dimension help connect the personal and the traditional in both directions. Once the official symbols of tradition are internalized in the individual, however, they can potentially become dislodged from their larger structures and personally re-negotiated.

A similar process takes place in the materialist continuum where bodily affects direct one’s behaviors in a multitude of ways. These behaviors, however, are inevitably tested and adjusted in light of social relationships. Because everyday life is made up of diverse social groups, individual affects become diverse practices among different communities and situations. Select practices are elevated to the status of ritual by formal institutions. These rituals become important for realizing the tradition’s values and behaviors. The arrow moving outward from the self represents this trajectory.
This process also moves in the opposite direction. Rituals can be utilized from the start to discipline the body from the top down. This renders particular norms for embodiment that help inform one’s affective experiences. Once the dynamics of a past ritual have been effectively impressed upon the rhythms of the body, however, they are just as likely to be reconfigured in new practices outside an institution’s approved boundaries. This is the story of many indigenous forms of folk religion today that hybridize religious practices.

**Conclusion: Surprises in religious formation and the role of abductive inquiry**

The precarious and unpredictable nature of religious formation makes this framework insufficient for capturing the complexities of how these concepts interrelate. Rather than straight lines and circles, zigzags and spirals would be more accurate. What moves a practice into the realm of ritual or how a particular symbol from a sacred text might be dislodged and reconfigured in everyday discourse is dependent an endless combination of variables. There is no single formula for religious formation. We must always be ready for surprises.

It is at this junction that earlier discussions of abductive reasoning, with its orientation toward surprise, intersects with the proposed RF frame’s structure. Vazquez’s conception of “religious enactment” and Schaefer’s conception of “accident” are important reminders that our horizons should be ever widening when it comes to seeking to account for religiosity and its multiple expressions within one’s evolving network of identities.

Drawing on new research from neurosciences, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary biology, Vazquez thickens his proposal for a non-reductive material framework for religion by utilizing the conception of “enaction” to account for how religiosity may be both hardwired and
malleably reconfigured in the space between human consciousness and physical processes. Defining enaction as, “cognitive processes (that) emerge from the nonlinear and circular causality of continuous sensorimotor interactions involving the brain, the body, and environment,” Vazquez argues cognitive systems ought to be thought of as autopoietic. This means they are, “continuously produc(ing) themselves as spatial bounded systems, distinct from but in close interaction with their surrounding media.”\(^{49}\) Inquiry into religious enaction is a question of how religiosity comes to be in any given body, group, or place – of how a gut instinct or behavior can be reflected upon or ritualized into something with cosmic consequence.

Paralleling Vazquez, Schaefer argues that religiosity is partly formed by “accidents” in affective economies that are, “... driven by a complex of compulsions that do not necessarily follow predictable watercourses of functional clarity. Bodies as nodes of power do not land in geometric patterns, but produce religious-political formations reflecting the priorities of an eccentric ensemble of affects.”\(^{50}\) The result is a non-rational yet principled evaluation of religiosity’s multiple possibilities where unique combinations of biological, historical, and other contextual variables intersect in surprising ways to produce new practices and beliefs. Schaefer continues, “In affective economies, there doesn’t have to be a ‘reason.’ Affect sits closer to the engines of power than reasons, circulating their own compulsions that easily and often overwhelm rational, logocentric determination – the linguistic explanations that arrive after the

\(^{49}\) Vazquez, 181.

\(^{50}\) Schaefer, 150.
“...fact of a body moving in place.”

Thus, while the RF frame provides an overarching structure for understanding the elements that make up religious formation, it is in no way predictive or prescriptive of the ways its multiple categories and dimensions might interact.

When considering the history of religious studies thus far, dimensions of social tradition and the personal have received the most attention. Religion has generally been framed as either belonging to the abstract yet unified realm of religious traditions embedded in grand stories, systems, rituals, and institutions or the subjective experience of the individual’s encounter with some sense of transcendence. Empirical studies of religiosity in the messy middle of everyday discourse and practice are fewer, perhaps because in this middle space definitions are always shifting. The lived religion approach is, therefore, a vitally important piece in the larger study of religion for the exact reason that it makes this dimension of the everyday its primary focus. It is in the everyday that both symbolic and materialist dynamics are at their most complex because it is here that both institutionalized religious doctrine and individual religious experiences are tested, negotiated, and bricolaged into the religiosities and religious identities that we engage with on a regular basis.

This proposed RF frame accounts for all three dimensions of individual, everyday, and social tradition spread across various categories of a person’s senses of religiosity and identity in an intersubjective matrix of relationships. What it does not do, however, is prescribe any

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51 Schaefer, 174.

52 Examples of the former are evidenced in Emile Durkheim and Max Weber’s sociological approaches to religion to modern studies of the role of religion in global systems. Examples of the latter can be found in Rudolf Otto’s and William James’s studies of religious experience on through modern studies in phenomenology of religion. The disciplinary perspective of history of religions advanced by Mircea Eliade attempts to account for both social and individual dimensions of religious formation but can only speculate on the everyday processes that have bridged them given its macro-historical orientation.
one way these categories and dimensions interact. An abductive orientation is, therefore, fundamental when attempting to understand how one’s senses of religiosity and identity are formed – where enactions and accidents are waiting to be noticed and followed by the researcher. When it comes to religious formation, there are always surprises.

The RF frame’s overarching logic is thus reflective of what Nancy T. Ammerman calls a “practice approach” to the study of religion.\(^{53}\) Ammerman argues, “All social practice... is characterized by embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment, and narrative structuring. What distinguishes religious practice, in turn, is a seventh dimension, a spiritual dimension that invokes direct or indirect (institutionalized) connection to something that is ‘other than’ everyday reality.”\(^{54}\) The various dimensions of social practice proposed by Ammerman are conceptually similar to the categories mapped out in this study’s proposed RF frame. Moreover, this “other than” quality of religious practice, in particular, demands a posture of abductive inquiry that must remain ever open to unexpected phenomena and the multiple variables and semiotic chains that shape them. One remaining question is how to conceptually structure this attention to the other in order to discern and analyze it. Ammerman’s answer is to discern what activates a person’s “sacred consciousness,” a proposal to which we now turn.


\(^{54}\) Ammerman, “Rethinking Religion,” 9.
Discerning sacred consciousness among sacred stories and spiritual tribes

Ammerman’s 2020 argument for a practice approach builds on her 2014 study of everyday religious dynamics in the United States of America. This study provides an outstanding example of how the theoretical foundations and practical dynamics of the RF frame can be deployed.\textsuperscript{55} First, Ammerman recognizes the contested concept of religious identity in a similar fashion to the way I differentiate religiosity from religious identity.\textsuperscript{56} Recognizing this complexity, Ammerman uses a diverse repertoire of interviews, photography, and participant journaling to weave together a portrait of American religious life that connects inward dynamics of religious belief and belonging with outward expressions in relationships, spaces, and social structures. Her method accomplishes this by centering her analysis on the intersubjectivity of everyday practices narrated in the form of “sacred stories” that influence one’s sense of belonging to various “spiritual tribes.” In this way, Ammerman’s study highlights the connection between symbolic and materialist paradigms by linking narratives and discourses with embodiments and rituals.

For Ammerman, the foundational unit of analysis is an individual’s spiritual narratives and the various sites and symbols associated with it. First, she listens to the stories articulated by her participants. Second, she follows up by connecting words with actions, exploring spiritual


\textsuperscript{56} “Religious identity is not an essentialist social category. One of the things that narrative theories of identity make clear is that identities are always multistranded and intersectional…. Which narratives are operative will depend on the particular combination of spiritual (and non-spiritual) tribes that is listening… What I am suggesting, then, is that even as we look at the presumably individual stories I have been describing, we should expect them to be both sacred and secular at once, continually evolving in multiple conversations.” Ammerman 2014, 299-300.
practices associated with the discursive themes identified in the stories. Third, both stories and practices are mapped in relationship with the participant’s social networks including relationships with both religious and non-religious communities. Ammerman explains the rationale for this method by stating,

Stories are important in part, because they are not merely personal. They exist at the intersection of the persona and public... Listening to stories of everyday religious life means listening both for the canonical storylines that come from shared religious traditions and for the way they are improvised in new circumstances... By systematically exploring the stories people tell about their everyday lives, we will trace the patterns of religious presence and absence in the social world... Sacred stories also imply audiences – what I will call ‘spiritual tribes’ – who listen and co-create the tale. It is important, then to pay attention to the role of religious communities themselves. 57

This conception of narrative analysis is not individualized. Instead, it is a starting point for mapping an individual’s social networks and the many ways different people and places are tied to one’s identity. It is in this way that spiritual stories are linked with a spiritual tribe.

Ammerman concludes that everyday religious lives are oriented and embodied in a sacred consciousness. This sacred consciousness is one that finds ways of breaking into various participants’ everyday lives by moving them toward the recognition of a “‘more than ordinary’ dimension in life.” 58 “There is in these stories a consciousness of transcendence, recognition of a sacred dimension that goes beyond the ordinary... When sociologists study religion, it is this sacred consciousness that is at the heart of our enterprise. Recognizing a wider range of variation will allow us more powerful explanatory models.” 59

57 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 8-10.

58 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 292.

59 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 293.
Whether it was related to relationship with the divine or with an overwhelming sense of ethical call, this sacred consciousness has found ways of breaking into people’s mundane and everyday interactions at work, quiet moments at home, and social gatherings. For Ammerman, this is clear evidence that spirituality and religion could not be contained to any single place, time, or set of rituals, but is instead diffused throughout one’s life. She concludes,

In the world of everyday life, sacred stories can be found, for good and ill, throughout the social world. There is much more to learn about how and to what effect sacred consciousness intertwines with mundane realities. Sacred consciousness is produced both in institutionalized spiritual tribes... and in shifting situational bonds of conversations among people who recognize some spiritual common ground. There is no single social location and connection matter. Different kinds of spiritual stories provide more and less powerful images of agency in the world. Different kinds of religious identity cues make cooperative interaction more and less likely. The sociological questions for analysis remain.60

The question that remains is how one’s sacred consciousness is formed and triggered? In some cases, it was a particular relic or item one carried. In others, a specific regiment of prayer. For some, it took a particular social event or crisis. How does a particular context or relationship, whether at work or in the streets, with one’s friends or children, shape one’s sense of sacredness? How do these various senses of divinity influence and shape communities of shared meaning and perception?

By summarizing the contours and conclusions of Ammerman’s study, I am building functional credibility for my proposed RF frame while simultaneously drawing inspiration for ordering my own study of everyday faith in China. When assessing Ammerman’s study through the structure of the RF frame, an oscillating journey between levels of society/tradition and the everyday is evidenced. Her study maps the ways institutional narratives and rituals interface

60 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 304.
with personal discourses and embodiments across various contexts. In addition, when Ammerman explores how one’s sacred consciousness is activated, questions of symbol and affect come into play; a question of how individual sense of the transcendent mediated by meaning and feeling. Moreover, the recognition of the presence of a sacred consciousness as an independent variable in sociological analysis opens the door to the very presence of God as a real and active agent in my informants’ lives. In this way, looking for how sacred consciousness is formed and deployed becomes as much a theological endeavor as it is a sociological one.

This chapter has proposed abductive inquiry as the starting point for theo-social analysis, an orientation that is directed toward surprising and unexpected experiences of God’s presence that signal the beginnings of a sacred consciousness at work. Based on my first phase of interviews, a number of my informants recall experiences of peace as one of the loci in which a sacred consciousness is activated. Moreover, I also discerned two etic themes that speak to the ways in which my informants’ sense of religiosity and identity are formed. Many cited the significance of experiences of Christian life in other sociocultural settings as formative factors on their religiosity and a number of my informants also framed their identity as Christians as one of faith vis-à-vis superstitions. These two themes are undoubtedly embedded in a much larger network of experiences and contexts that will require intentionality to untangle. To do so, I move into a second phase of research with the RF frame as an analytical lens to better discern the ways in which the religiosity and identity of my informants are being formed and negotiated in multiple levels, seeking to better understand how their sacred consciousness is embodied in everyday life.
CHAPTER 2: Investigating the peace and guidance of God across situations

This chapter begins with a series of methodological reflections to establish a multi-disciplinary approach for data analysis based on the dimensions and categories of the RF frame introduced in chapter one. This analytical process is then applied to one of my informant’s experiences of God’s peace and its impact across a series of situations from individual prayers to the workplace. The various components of these situations are mapped using the categories and levels of the RF frame to reveal the role God’s peace plays in the causes and effects that shape everyday life and social relationships. This approach is then repeated with the stories of other informants to discern generalizable patterns. What emerges is a thick connection between experiencing God’s presence as peace and as ethical guidance. The sum of this analysis points to a larger theme of cultivating the ethical life as a particularly important part of my informants’ conception of what Christian life ought to be defined by. The chapter concludes with a survey of bible passages that explore the connection between God’s peace and ethical living to establish a scriptural foundation from which to expand later cycles of theo-social analysis.

Methodological reflections: Tools for discerning God’s presence across situations

With the RF frame established as an analytical framework and a set of experiences and opinions gathered from initial interviews, I turned to three qualitative research traditions to guide and structure my second and third phases of research: phenomenology, grounded
theory, and ethnography.¹ Each tradition provides different orientations and methods for approaching empirical data and suggests different pathways for further study. While no single study can necessarily deploy all aspects of these three methods together, reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses provides different pathways for imagining further study and analysis.

First, the phenomenological approach’s focus on analysis of feeling and experience as bracketed units is appropriate for engaging the individual religious experiences collected in my first phase of interviews. Because phenomenology is concerned with individual inward experience, it provides important resources for identifying initial concepts common to Chinese Christian experiences of God’s presence in everyday life. Experiences of God’s peace provide a promising starting point for phenomenological study. Sequenced follow up interviews can delve deeper into other dimensions of my informants’ experiences, parsing the various stimuli and symbols that activate, shift, or dissolve this peace.² The method is thus well suited for studies focused on dynamics of symbol and affect within the RF frame’s level of individual religious formation. Over time, one can unbracket these experiences to examine the relationships between these inward processes and their external environments in different situations. This linking of inward and outward dynamics is the beginning of the kind of semiotic analysis that abductive analysis calls for.


² See Ference Marton, “Phenomenography - A research approach investigating different understandings of reality,” Journal of Thought 21, no. 2 (1986): 28-49 and Gerlise S. Åkerlind, “Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods,” Higher Education Research & Development 24, no. 4 (2005): 321-334. The foundations of phenomenology as a qualitative research tradition is sometimes referred to as “phenomenography” and can be traced to the study of learning within contexts of higher education in the 1970s by Ference Marton at Goteborg University in Sweden. Marton’s focus was on why and how students learned different things from reading the same text.
Second, grounded theory provides a number of methodological assumptions and processes that are not only suitable to interview data but also resonates with the complex dynamics of everyday life between individual and society. Grounded theory assumes a constant comparative approach to data analysis where the researcher oscillates between data collection and analysis to discern patterns that can direct further inquiry. Hypotheses formed in an initial phase are theoretically refined and tested in new phases until a cohesive theory can be discerned. This rhythm provides both structure and flexibility for working with diverse data in different ways. Grounded theory also emphasizes various forms of systematic coding to organize and relate data. Coding interviews for emerging themes that can be deployed across multiple informants speaking to different situations and contexts suits the discursive and embodied nature of the RF frame’s level of everyday religious formation.

One of the various coding processes suggested in grounded theory is “axial coding.” Axial coding is defined as “a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences.”\(^3\) The goal is to provide a thick account of the “when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences” of the phenomenon observed, systematically exploring the possibilities inherent in the variables.\(^4\) Axial coding is conducted by focusing one’s analysis on a specific theme in tandem with a range of theoretically informed concepts to examine the relationships between


them as manifested in the data. Axial coding procedures provide one avenue for systematic analysis of the emerging themes observed in initial interviews by using the RF frame’s various categories and levels as a coding paradigm. Experiences of God’s peace or boundary crossing can be centered as an axis while the six categories and three levels of the RF frame operate as sensitizing concepts that surround it like spokes on a wheel. When operating as sensitizing concepts, the various parts that make up each situation are not only sorted but related in a holistic fashion. Through this process, the evolving chains of meaning that arise from these experiences can be situated and linked to produce new insights on religious formation.

Third, ethnographic method’s emphasis on analyzing cultural values and behaviors at the societal level provides tools for discerning the role of institutions and traditions. Pioneered and refined by generations of cultural anthropologists, the practice of participant observation allows researchers to witness how a wide array of sociocultural norms and structures influence individual experiences and behaviors. In the context of this study, ethnographic methods can strengthen analysis of the role formal institutions of Christian life might unconsciously manifest

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5 This structure for analysis is based loosely on Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin’s conditional matrix model of analysis. See Strauss and Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research, 163. It also adopts key parts of Adele Clark’s “situational matrix.” See Adele E. Clark, Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 73.


7 Tavory and Timmermans, Abductive Analysis, 66-86.

8 The conception of ethnographic method and participant observation employed in this study is deeply informed by Clifford Geertz’s lifelong work and reflections on the nature of ethnographic knowledge and writing as well as the critical perspective initiated by James Clifford and George Marcus that address post-modern and post-colonial dimensions of power and social structures. See Clifford Geertz, Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) and James Clifford and George Marcus, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).
themselves in other social contexts. In contrast, they may also uncover how alternative logics of the workplace, family, or other religious traditions might shift certain perceptions or behaviors associated with Christian living. By accompanying my informants across multiple times and spaces, I am also able to witness the transitions and negotiations taking place from one place to another.⁹ Each place, rich with its own forms of institutionalized norms, endeavors to impart its own constellation of values and behaviors. In participant observation, everyday discourses and embodiments could be assessed in person and in context instead of via the recollection of memories and narratives. Most importantly, the ways in which my informants engage with the whole of each situational context can be observed to discern how larger social structures influence their religious formation and expression. Taking an ethnographic posture would allow me to witness these encounters in all of their complexity.

The purpose of this survey of research traditions and their different methods is to consider the multiple ways the emerging themes discerned in my initial interview phase can be guided and analyzed by the structure of the RF frame. By organizing their aims, concerns, and methods alongside the levels and categories of the RF frame, I can map a holistic roadmap and toolkit for the study of religious formation (see table 1). These methodological reflections provide the foundations from which to begin building new phases of research to investigate and build upon the themes discerned in initial interviews. Depending on what aspects of

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⁹ See Margarethe Kusenbach, “Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool,” *Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (2003): 455-485. Kusenbach provides a compelling argument for the adoption of go-alongs as a qualitative research method suited for observing shifts in situations, space, and the processes through which an informant adjusts themselves from context to context, tying a phenomenological sensibility to participant observation.
religious formation are most pertinent to one’s research agenda, different orientations and methods can be adopted.

### Table 1: Research traditions and methods for the study of religious formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Tradition</th>
<th>Aims &amp; Concerns</th>
<th>Employed Methods</th>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Categories of Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Personal experiences, feelings, and the meanings they render</td>
<td>Bracketing, sequenced interviews, and imaginative variation</td>
<td>Individual &amp; the beginnings of religiosity</td>
<td>Symbol and affect; the formation of religiosity composed of meanings rendered from feeling and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Theory generation oriented toward understanding the causations, interactions, and consequences of social processes</td>
<td>Memo writing and coding phases conducted with a constant comparative process in an abductive posture</td>
<td>Everyday life &amp; the negotiations between religiosity and religious identity</td>
<td>Discourse &amp; embodiment; the expression and negotiation of religiosity in relationship with identity in routine collective life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Formations, expressions, and reproductions of cultural values within social structures and institutions</td>
<td>Fieldwork based on participant observation, go-alongs, and open-ended interviews</td>
<td>Society &amp; tradition’s roles in formation and reinforcement of religious identity</td>
<td>Narrative/texts &amp; ritual; the formal structuring and reproduction of identity in the church and society.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Building new phases of inquiry: Expanding and deepening

While all three research traditions have their roles to play in the holistic study of religious formation, circumstantial limitations and the study’s focus on the everyday dimensions of my informants’ experiences leads me to prioritize in-depth interviews and grounded theory as the primary methodological orientation for a second phase of research. In between phenomenology’s focus on inward dynamics of experience and ethnography’s focus on the cultural mechanics of a larger context, a grounded theory approach is flexible enough to assess how initial experiences are negotiated and expressed across different situations from both etic and emic perspectives. While methods in phenomenology and ethnography are not deployed in this study, the insights and priorities that animate them inform the greater theoretical sensibilities that guide my analysis.

This study’s second phase of research takes place from March to May 2019, beginning with in-depth follow-up interviews with a smaller theoretical sample of informants drawn from the original sample used in phase one. These informants evidenced substantial resonance with the themes and patterns identified in the first phase: surprising experiences of God’s presence, dynamics of faith life across boundaries, and negotiations between faith and superstition. At the conclusion of phase two, I had completed additional interviews with eight informants.

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10 See Glaser and Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Theoretical sampling is a process of data collection oriented toward generating and refining an emerging theory. Informants are selected based on narrower criteria that are defined by concepts articulated in earlier phases for the purpose of discerning the emerging theory’s components and their interrelationship with one another.
of my original nineteen informants. Each interview was initiated with three open ended questions:

1) Do you feel any differences in the way you experience God during everyday life in China compared with life in Hong Kong/abroad? Why? Can you give me an example?
2) How do you feel about persons of other religions or those without any faith? How do you behave or interact when you are with these persons?
3) What do you feel is the difference between living a life of faith (xinyang 信仰) compared with superstition (mixin 迷信)?

While interviews were oriented by these questions, the conversations in this second phase flowed more freely than the first. During these interviews, I listened for responses that pointed to particular situations that were open for follow up questions. By situation, I mean events or experiences that are grounded in a series of relationships and interactions in space and times based on shared cultural norms and expectations.11 My focus centered on the figurative space between my informants’ experiences of God and the range of possible discourses and actions embedded in the situations they inhabited in order to map how God’s presence might frame and influence their perceptions and decisions.

In addition to interviews, I adopt participant journaling and photovoice activities as means for accessing new perspectives and experiences that I would not be able to necessarily uncover via interviews alone.12 While the data obtained from interviews remains the primary source for data in this study’s analysis, the additional data obtained though participant

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12 See Ammerman, Sacred Stories, for an example of how participant journaling and photovoice are also utilized in the study of lived religion.
journaling and photovoice provides alternative perspectives from which to reinforce or reorient hypotheses and emerging theories. The experience of recording one’s experience in a journal or taking a photograph with one’s phone is qualitatively different than verbally responding to an interviewer’s questions. These alternative data points provide opportunities to check for the cohesiveness of my interview-based hypotheses in other mediums and situations.\textsuperscript{13}

Out of the eight persons I conducted in-depth follow up interviews with, I invited four to participate in participant journaling. Over the course of approximately one month (late May to late June 2019), Maria, May, Cassi, and Daniel agreed to jot down their thoughts and feelings regarding the ways they believed God might be present and working in their lives. Journal entries were guided by questions about their experiences of God’s presence in everyday life. At an interval of every three days to a week, they penned responses to the following questions.

1) In the past few days, have you experienced an awareness of God’s presence? If so, where, when and how?
2) What has God been guiding you in recently? How do you know it is God?
3) How have you responded to God’s presence or guidance recently?

Cassi, Maria, May, and Daniel were encouraged to use these questions as framing devices to help them reflect but that they shouldn’t view them too rigidly. Instead, I told them to feel free to write about whatever meaningful experiences of faith they may be working out at that time. They were allowed to either handwrite or type their answers in either English or Chinese – whatever language they felt most comfortable communicating their experiences in.

\textsuperscript{13} See the appendix of this study for three narrative accounts featuring May’s, Cassi’s, and Daniel’s participant journaling and photovoice. These cases display how participant journaling and photography can be used to expand and deepen the themes and patterns discerned from interview data highlighted throughout this study.
For the photovoice activity, I asked Cassi, Maria, May, and Daniel to take photographs of places and items in their lives that were meaningful to their sense of faith. I provided the following written instructions.

Please take a few pictures of anything (persons, places, objects, etc) from your daily routine that you feel are significant to your faith. These pictures can represent something from your past, something still present to your daily life, or something you hope for in the future. Please write a single sentence description for each picture you take.

The number of pictures my participants decided to take was their decision to make. The inclusion of participant journaling and photovoice to this project further grounds this study by providing multiple avenues into participant reflections regarding their experiences of God’s presence. My analysis of this data followed a similar orientation to my follow-up interviews. In reviewing journal entries and photos, I focused on situational data that could be grounded in particular contexts and relationships. In the journals, this meant the description of events or interactions. This was easier for the photographs as the very images captured carried with them the particularities of a situation.

**Examining presence: Between existence and being by one’s side**

Reviewing on my initial interviews, I quickly realized the importance of the Chinese terms I was using to translate the term “presence” and needed to adjust my language to engage the topic more precisely in the second phase. In English, presence is a multi-faceted term. On the one hand, the term contains the objective sense of something physically existing within one’s immediate setting. When something or someone is present, you are able to use your senses to engage it directly. On the other hand, presence can also take on a more subjective quality that transcends physicality. In English, it is common to speak of someone’s
presence as a character trait. When one says some people have more presence than others, they do not always mean their physical size. Presence can also be used to describe the feeling of someone’s existence even when they are physically absent. In this sense, presence is not linked with the object itself but with the sensory perceptions of the object. This can be parsed as the difference between a real or objective presence and a perceived or subjective presence.

In Chinese, these two different connotations of the English word “presence” are somewhat split. I asked several of my informants how they would translate “presence” into Chinese. Most often their response was “cunzai” (存在). Cunzai does mean presence, but the word leans heavily toward the objective sense of physical existence. In most cases, to say that something is cunzai is to communicate that it exists. It is not fake or imaginary but real. To use this term would essentially render my research as an inquiry into “experiences of God’s existence.” I was not satisfied with this phrasing.

What was the best way to include the subjective dimension of presence in the Chinese language? A number of words captured other senses of the English term. If one was speaking of the charm or charisma of a person, they might refer to his/her “qidu” (气度), their degree of energy or temperature. If one wanted to welcome one’s presence into their physical space, the term “lin” (临) is commonly deployed, a verb that can be used to connote the arrival of one’s presence and its effect on others in that space. For example, the phrase “welcome your illustrious presence” (huangying guanglin 欢迎光临) is a ubiquitous welcome pronounced at restaurants and stores throughout China. Discussing the semantic range of these terms with some of my informants, none seemed appropriate for my purposes.
The operative term in cunzai is “zai” (在), a basic term that can be used as a verb, preposition, or adverb generally associated with “is” or “are” in the sense that something “is” here or there or they “are” doing this or that. In Chinese, this general sense of something that “is” can be adjusted with the preceding character. So the cun in cunzai renders the meaning existence. Other examples include changzai (常在), a sense of abiding or consistency rooted in the character chang (常). Another example is xianzai (现在), meaning “now” or “at the present moment” rooted in the word xian (现) which implies a moment of encounter. The fullness of the English word, presence, can thus be expressed through these variations of the character zai.

For example, when asked how to best translate the phrase, “my mother’s presence is with me,” some of my bi-lingual informants suggested variations of “Wo ganjue dao wo de muqin zai wo shenbian (我感觉到我的母亲在我身边),” which literally means “I felt my mother by my side.” When attempting to capture both the objective and subjective connotations of translating presence, two key terms are important. First is the term “ganjue” (感觉) which is the common word for “feeling.” Second is the phrase, “zai wo shenbian (在我身边),” which can be translated “by my (body’s) side.” Based on these conversations with informants whose English nearly fluent, the subjective sense of presence is difficult to communicate in Chinese. In the everyday setting, it is best to denote perceived presence by combining the language of feeling with space.

The dimension of presence I sought to capture most in my translation was that of relationship. To experience presence, particularly God’s, is not simply a matter of engaging an object that exists or does not. More importantly, it is about the relationship between two
subjects and the affects one has on the other. To this end, the term that I settled upon for my questioning and conversation was “tongzai” (同在). While tongzai is dynamically equivalent to the English word, “presence,” it carries a more active connotation – as in “to be with.” It is not a commonly used phrase in everyday conversation, but it is an integral part of Chinese Christian discourse. For example, tongzai is commonly used by Chinese Christians as part of the greeting/farewell, “May God be with you” (Shangdi yu ni tongzai 上帝与你同在). Tongzai, therefore, is best understood as an immersive presence approaching the way English speaking Christians might perceive the term “abide.” It is a presence that is actively with you, not just a presence that happens to be here or there. Moreover, tongzai is not just any active presence. Outside of Christian discourse, the term is typically reserved to address high and powerful entities. For example, tongzai is not a good term to describe how your best friend is always with you. Besides God, the high connotation of tongzai is most appropriately used for entities such as the emperor or the nation. This sense of tongzai thus implies a magnanimous presence.

This study’s focus on Christian experiences makes tongzai a natural translation for presence because of its high and active connotations easily associated with God. It is a commonly used phrase among Christians. What the term lacks, however, is the subjective dimension of presence – the closeness of everyday relationship that can be difficult to translate. When hearing, “how do you experience God’s presence (tongzai)?,” one’s reaction may be to imagine some kind of out of the ordinary experience of revelatory or grandiose proportions. In order to achieve some sense of balance, I also use the more verbose, “During the everyday, do you feel God is by your side?” (zai ni richang shenghuo zhong, ni neng ganjue shangdi zai ni shenbian ma? 在你日常生活中，你能感觉上帝在你身边吗?). This language of
feeling and closeness is used to elicit a more everyday sense of God. In order to achieve my stated research aims, it is important to express both the high and everyday senses of God’s presence in my line of questioning and conversations.

**Mapping experiences of God’s peace across situations: A case study**

This section explores a specific case from my interviews to illustrate how a grounded theory approach can be used to organize, map, and analyze the ways in which my informants’ experiences of God’s presence are negotiated and expressed across various situations.\(^1\) It adapts principles and procedures from abductive inquiry, semiotic chains, axial coding, and the RF frame to structure and assess the various ways God’s peace affects perceptions and behaviors from private prayer to group bible studies and from train commutes to interpersonal relationships at work.

Zoe recently started a new job in a smaller city a few hours away from Xiamen. Zoe considers Xiamen, a larger city on China’s eastern coast, her real home because all of her close friends and Christian fellowship are based there. In her new job, Zoe felt alone and stressed. She was living in a dorm room by herself with a lot of pressure and stress from her workplace, including difficult relationships with certain colleagues. Every weekend she would take a train

\(^1\) The selection of this account as a case study is based on a number of factors guided by the literature on case study methodology in order to present an illustration with enough theoretical components and patterns for articulating a moderatum generalization that can be expanded with other accounts. See Jason Seawright and John Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options,” *Political Research Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2008):294-308; Bent Flyvbjerg, “Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (2006):219-245; and Geoff Payne and Malcom Williams, “Generalization in Qualitative Research,” *Sociology* 39, no. 2 (2005):295-314.
back to Xiamen to connect with her friends and fellowship. Then, on Monday morning, she would reluctantly take the train back to a week of isolation and labor.

When asked when she felt closest to God, Zoe quickly responded that it was during her private times of prayer and bible reading.

It’s a time of focus. When I wake up or go to sleep and I’m not too tired, I enjoy kneeling by my bedside to pray and read the bible. It’s a time I treasure. Here in this small city on my own, in a dorm room, I really value this time just between me and God. It’s a time I can really settle and see how I am doing or feeling and connect with God about it. I feel at peace and there are no interruptions.  

This daily personal ritual of evening prayers and study is tied to experiences of peace and a connection with God, an experience that is relatively common among many Protestant Christians all over the world. After all, it is during these quiet times of devotion that one can set their whole focus on God and, as a result, expect God’s response in some form. Within the situational context of personal prayer and study, the transcendent concept of an omnipotent God is transposed into a personally intimate one. Tanya Luhrmann observes similar dynamics in her study of Evangelical-Charismatic Christians in the United States regarding the ways in which their religious practices forge vivid spiritual experiences. Luhrmann states, “This is the way people come to recognize an invisible God that the prayer books tell them is even more undefined and unexpected than they thought. They map this abstract God from their own particular lives. They use their own experience of how conversation happens and how they relate to trusted friends to pick out the thoughts and images in their minds that are like those ordinary moments, but different in certain ways.”

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15 Interview with Zoe, January 2019.
stories of many of my informants, a description of God’s presence that is similar to the way one might describe spending time with close friends and family.

For Zoe, the peace that she finds when she is with God allows her to rest and be herself, to settle and see how she really feels about what is happening in her life. The peace of God provides moments of self-perceived sincerity. The conception of a relationship between one’s authentic self and the one true God is a powerful image that anchors many forms of Christian spirituality. For Zoe, and many of the other informants interviewed in this study, practices of prayer anchor the self in relationship with God. These individual acts of prayer and bible reading operate as a unique and powerful normative frame from which to cultivate their sense of self. It is one of the few everyday practices they enact with the expectation of connecting with the transcendent in such a way that their sense of self can be located and altered. David Winchester and Jeffrey Guhin explain, “normative frames structure how actors perceive practices should be carried out, bringing to bear certain expectations regarding proper emotions, time and place, bodily comportment, and speech. A normative frame clues actors into when a certain cultural tool might be appropriate to use and also allows them to adjudicate whether that cultural tool has been deployed successfully.”¹⁷ Based on this definition, the sense of peace experienced by Zoe during her prayers and study affirms that her practice has been deployed correctly, so to speak. Peace signals the potential to discover not only God’s presence, but also the presence of the authentic self.


How does this experience of peace during personal prayers shape one’s perception and behavior in other situations and contexts? I center Zoe’s daily time of quiet devotion as a starting point from which to trace the negotiation and expression of faith in her everyday life because it is the situation that she confesses feeling closest to God. As our interview continues, I note another situation that bestows a similar feeling of content that can be linked together with the calm that comes from prayer. Zoe tells me that during her weekend trips home to Xiamen, she always makes time for Sunday afternoon bible studies with her fellowship. She notes that while these gatherings are short, they are rich in learning and relationship. “My fellowship doesn’t actually have a lot of social activities, so it’s really during bible study on Sunday afternoons that we can connect. We update one another on what how we are doing, the challenges we are facing, etc. We pray for one another. And when people share their inner experiences and such, I can feel God is with us.”¹⁸ In this setting, Zoe’s feelings of God’s presence are connected with larger sense of belonging that is framed by lessons drawn from scripture on the one side and the personal stories of her Christian brothers and sisters on the other. In this way, the institutional narratives of Christianity are intertwined with everyday discourses of life among close friends that reinforce Zoe’s holistic sense of identification to the Christian tradition.

The overarching formation that takes place within this set of situations shapes other parts of Zoe’s life, including difficult ones. For example, earlier in the same interview I had asked Zoe what the hardest part of her everyday routine was during this current season of life.

¹⁸ Interview with Zoe, January 2019.
She told me the most difficult part of her week was Monday mornings when she took the train to return to work – leaving behind the place and people she felt were her real home. It was later in the interview, when we were speaking on the topic of God’s presence, that she referenced this same situation with a new perspective: “When I am alone on the platform at the train station, surrounded by strangers who are also going back and forth, I am physically alone. But it’s also during this time I realize that I am never actually alone. I am very thankful for what I have.”19 There in the midst of what she had earlier noted to be the most difficult part of her week was also a moment of spiritual significance – the realization that God and, by extension, the community of Christians to which she belonged, were actually always with her. In hindsight, Zoe’s feelings of both struggle and grace on the train platform between the places she associates with church and work can be classified as a subtle but significant experience of abduction, of God’s surprising presence on the boundary between two ways of being in everyday life.

Zoe’s faith and the formation that comes from her individual and community practices extend beyond inward feelings on a train platform. They also play a role in the situations and relationships at her new job. Despite the high pressure, she sees her work life as an important growing experience. “In this time, I have learned a lot about how to deal with different standards. Like, the world’s standards and expectations compared to what I have or want. I’m starting to really see what I am willing to do and what I won’t do and see examples of other’s lives as comparisons. So, despite all the pressures, I am learning a lot about my personality and

19 Interview with Zoe, January 2019.
growing.” Here, Zoe’s comments point to a different facet of everyday faith: an ethical dimension regarding standards and how she feels she ought to behave. This dynamic of faith and ethics in the workplace is another important theme that has been explored in previous studies of Chinese Christian life. The immediate concern of this study, however, is how these dynamics might relate to experiences of God’s presence.

At the close of our interview, I ask Zoe what she feels the best part of being a Christian is. Her response cycles back to an earlier conversation about work life. She recounts a recent conflict with a colleague as an example of what she believes to be one of the most valuable part of her faith:

The best part of being a Christian is when I don’t know what to do, when I have no experience for it or no framework for making sense of it, I have the bible. Here’s an example – during work today, a colleague I really don’t like, because I disagree with her worldview and behavior, asked me to proofread an email she wrote in English. Her English is bad and yet she really wants to look good in front of her boss. I generally understood what she was trying to communicate, but it was really bad grammatically. At that point I had to ask myself: do I actually correct this email up to my standard? Or do I just do half of what I would normally do? Or do I just say no to spite her? Then I realized, the Lord wouldn’t want me to be so petty. It would be wrong for me to outright refuse to help her. I don’t think the Lord would be happy with me. And so I took the time to proofread and correct her draft email. It took nearly 30 minutes. She was so surprised I took so much care with it. She normally is quite rude to me. I struggled a lot with this because she loves to take credit for things she didn’t really do and tries to make others look bad to make herself look better. I’ve never experienced such a person like this, and so I don’t have a reference point. But I know God does not call us return evil with evil. You can’t become like them. I think this is a blessing, because you’ll never be trapped in a place where you have no clear sense of what the right thing to do is. You’ll never have to be stuck in a situation with no sense of direction. There is a sense of peace in this (emphasis mine). This is just an example. So what if she’s mean to me? God is with me and protects me.

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20 Interview with Zoe, January 2019.

Present within this experience of conflict and decision is God’s peace. Within the situational context of this anecdote, however, God’s peace is not referenced in relation to a sense of belonging to God or a fellowship. Instead, it is a peace of ethical certainty, a sense of security in knowing how to behave in the face of challenges. In the context of Zoe’s experiences, this is an active peace that composes a basis for action, not just a state of comfort or shelter away from life’s difficulties. Moreover, Zoe’s description of the situation shows how the normative frame she routinely employs to draw close to God in prayer and study manifests itself in situations she has not encountered before. Faced with a new experience and situation, Zoe returns to the sense of self that is being cultivated in her faith practices to discern what behavior she ought to pursue.

Figure six visualizes the relationship between Zoe’s various everyday faith experiences using an axial coding inspired process that charts relationships between situations with a focus on how God’s peace is experienced and deployed in each. Using peace as an axis, this analysis proceeds by clustering the situations associated with this peace into the various RF frame categories. This collection of symbols, discourses, narratives, affects, embodiments, and rituals are then mapped onto the various levels that make up each situation. This theoretical sorting of data allows one to observe different elements of religiosity and religious identity in relationship to one another in order to discern causations and consequences. It provides a

22 This process of theoretical sorting and diagramming is inspired by combining axial coding procedures developed by Strauss and Corbin with clustering of data around sensitizing concepts. See Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 147-149, 184-186, 216-224.
canvas for arranging the situations so that they can be linked together to discern the semiotic chains that move everyday experiences of God’s presence into other parts of life.

Figure 6: Example of data analysis utilizing the religious formation frame

The relationship between these various situations is illustrated by the lines and arrows connecting them. Solid lines bind together Zoe’s experiences of personal devotions, bible study, and personal sharing with other Christians, all related to positive experiences of peace, self-reflection, and belonging. This set of situations collectively operate as a self-referencing normative frame that deepens Zoe’s Christian religiosity and identity based on her intimate relationships with God and church. The slotted lines in the diagram reference Zoe’s high-pressure work situation and the specific case of her decision to edit her colleagues email draft, a situation where the normative frame guiding one context is deployed in another in order to extend the sense of self being formed in God and church to the context of work in the world.
Based on the interview data, this diagram illustrates how Zoe’s sense of God’s peace, embedded in her Christian practices, influences perceptions and practices in the alternative context of her workplace. Zoe’s daily devotional time acts as a bridge between both contexts because it is a practice in which both contexts are actively engaged with in personal reflection. Moreover, Zoe’s train platform epiphany can also be interpreted as an important point of convergence. It is simultaneously one of the most difficult moments in her week while also a place of God’s gracious presence. The train ride to and from Xiamen is not just a physical commute but also a metaphorical one that carries the sense of self formed by Zoe’s Christian practices to her workplace and back. Finally, the dotted line represents a hypothetical situation regarding how Zoe’s experience at work with her colleague might be processed during her devotionals and, later, with her bible study group the following weekend if she were to choose to share about it. In the same way faith practices influence other contexts of life, so too will the events and experiences of other contexts cycle back to either reinforce or challenge one’s faith.

Working with this type of flow chart involves a sensitivity to the nature of each situation vis-à-vis the different categories of the RF frame. In this example, I assign Zoe’s daily devotional practice, her bible study time, and the sharing that takes place in these settings with the categories of ritual, narrative/text, and discourse, respectively. I deliberately place Zoe’s experience of stress and pressure at work as an affective experience bordering the individual and everyday dimensions and situate her response to her colleague’s request as an embodiment – a concrete expression of her faith. Of course, each of these situations includes dynamics that could easily be associated with other categories. The particular arrangement mapped here is based on what I perceive to be not only the most reasonable but also the most
relevant to the aims of this study. Thus, utilizing this sort of framework also requires creativity in discerning relationships. There is an artistic and intuitive element to arranging the data that the researcher must remain ever mindful of because each set of situations can be arranged differently based on alternative logics, thereby producing different hypotheses. The different possibilities inherent in analyzing situations and their relationships with one another speaks to a larger dynamic of holism and fragmentation inherent in interview data and its analysis. How these fragments are recounted and pieced together by both the interviewer and interviewee deserves sustained attention.

_The holistic yet fragmented nature of everyday faith and interview analysis_

Based on the overall flow of this analysis, one can discern both the holistic and yet fragmented nature of everyday faith. God’s presence is both at once expected, as seen in Zoe’s personal times of prayer, and surprising, as experienced on the train platform. In Zoe’s accounts of everyday life, God’s peace provides rest and comfort in the midst of Christian fellowship but also issues challenges to a higher standard of behavior in relationships with others at work. What ties these different narratives together depends on the meanings ascribed to each situation in relationship with the others. Is Zoe’s pursuit of the Christian life motivated from the inside out by a vision of holistic faith, or is her conception of everyday faith

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23 This creative arrangement of variables is inspired by a phenomenological method known as imaginative variation. See Clark Moustakas, _Phenomenological research methods_ (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 1994), 97-98. Moustakas defines imaginative variation thusly, “The task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions... Describing the essential structures of a phenomenon... In this there is a free play of fancy; any perspective is a possibility and is permitted to enter into consciousness."
shaped from the outside in through the piecemeal integration of fragmented experiences in disperse situations? Moreover, taking a more reflexive posture, what role does the interview between Zoe and I play in this narrative account of religious formation?

The situational map I have presented above appears to align with an inside out perspective. From a holistic perspective, the inner peace and strength that comes from Zoe’s devotional and congregational life builds up an ethical framework from which she engages new situations in other contexts. This cycle works for the inside out with a sense of peace arising in prayer times at the individual level and reinforced in collective situations that all share a common normative frame that orients Zoe’s religiosity and identity. The religious formation she experiences under these relatively short but concentrated conditions prescribes various scripts for living that motivate how she will behave in new situations. This is one way to understand Zoe’s decision to assist her colleague despite the negativity she felt toward her. Zoe’s decision to help is intentionally motivated by her explicit commitment to the Christian values.

In contrast, C. Wright Mills and Ann Swidler have both proposed that culture is less of a clearly understood structure from which one intentionally acts and more of a toolbox from which specific meanings are drawn upon in order to justify what has already been done. In other words, everyday life is far more fragmented than whole. Culture, therefore, provides the means by which one can forge a sense of unity in hindsight rather than motivate an action from the very start. From this perspective, Zoe’s choice to help her colleague is less a matter of

holistic motivation and more a process of justification, making sense of the reasons for her behaviors after the fact.

To resolve the tension between these two positions, Stephen Vaisey draws on both cultural sociology and social psychology to argue for a dual process of culture in action that gives space for both forms of motivation and justification, sorting human action into discursive and practical tiers that operate at both conscious and unconscious levels.25 Similarly, David Winchester and Kyle Green draw from pragmatist conceptions of action and experience to argue motivation and justification as converging processes in identity formation that emerge most potently when individuals reflect upon their experiences through narrative accounts.26 For Winchester and Green, the holistic visions that can orient behaviors are better understood “hermeneutic hooks” that a person can attach their fragmented “situational strings” to. In this way, self-narrative accounts play a significant role in religious formation because they bring together one’s more conscious sense of self with the less orderly situations and unconscious behaviors they inhabit on a daily basis. The composition of narrative accounts thus serves to simultaneously square fragmented experiences into the expectational mold of a larger situational frame while also adjusting the situational frame to become more holistically applicable across more diverse contexts.

Drawing from both Vaisey’s and Winchester and Green’s proposals, I argue human behavior can be directed by both a discursive holism while practiced in a fragmented manner,


especially when the normative frame of one situation is brought to bear on a seemingly unrelated one. Seen within the context of the RF frame, the narratives, texts, and rituals of a cohesive tradition are typically associated with a holistic worldview that ushers its adherents toward an ideal view of self and life. The symbols and affects that motivate human behavior at the individual level are not, however, directly connected to this larger tradition. There is no direct line between the idealism of a religious tradition and the self. In between is the less predictable setting of the everyday, filled with multiple situational frames that can either reinforce or derail the idealism of the religious whole or the inner desires of the self. Seen in this context, everyday faith is an oscillation between the ideal and the practical, the whole and the fragmented. As the RF frame visualizes, there are both outside in and inside out processes at work that converge in the everyday. Following Winchester and Green, it is within the context of one’s self-narratives that an operational cohesion can be formed, however imperfect.

See in this new light, Zoe’s narrative account can be seen with a different trajectory that does not begin with her personal times of prayer and experiences of peace but ends with them. If we view self-narrative accounts as a key process through which fragmentary actions and experiences are integrated into a whole, then Zoe’s times of prayer and bible study exist as not only a time of rest but also of work where the day’s experiences can be remolded in conversation with God and in comparison with the great narrative of the Christian tradition. Times of prayer, bible study, and personal sharing with other Christians every weekend are more than a place to be find her authentic self. They are also a workshop for forging the self through collective narrative accounts in community. Seen in this way, experiences of God’s peace are as much a product of recognizing God’s work in the fragments of the everyday as it is
a motivation to live a holistic Christian life. The chain of situations that animate Zoe’s narrative account can, therefore, be understood as a dual process of religious formation moving from both the inside out as a consciously motivated pursuit and the outside in as an unconscious process of justification.

The fact that this narrative account emerges through the vehicle of an interview with me both affirms this dual process and complicates data collection and analysis moving forward. First, the holism of Zoe’s account can now be seen as contingent with the very process of being interviewed. My conversation with Zoe shares many dynamics that can also be found in Zoe’s times of personal prayer and conversation with God. Both are vehicles for integrating fragmented experiences into a holistic sacred narrative. My line of questioning is designed to identify everyday experiences of significance and discern God’s presence within them. For example, during our interview, the events Zoe describes are not shared in the same chronological order as I present them above. By asking general questions about her daily routine in the beginning, I elicited some of Zoe’s general feelings and thoughts about her daily commute and work like the difficulties she feels every Monday morning when leaving Xiamen and the way her work environment was testing her worldview. She did not voluntarily integrate God’s presence into these answers at this time.

The pivot in my interview structure begins with an open question about when Zoe feels closest to God. It is at this point that our focus shifts from seemingly everyday questions to religious ones, perhaps an activation of the sacred consciousness Ammerman observes. It is also in this second half of the interview that Zoe, without my prompting, returns to the situations she shared in her previous answers. Here, she inserts her impressions of how God is
present on the lonely Monday morning train platform and her interpersonal work conflict. In fact, Zoe’s extended anecdote about her decision to help her colleague took place the same day the interview was conducted. The non-verbal dimensions of our conversation reinforce the hypothesis that Zoe might have been constructing a narrative account in that very moment rather than just recounting cohesive events she was already sure of. There were long pauses that pointed toward extended reflection on previously unexamined experiences and tones of voice that came with a sense of surprise. Moreover, the explanations I gave for the purpose of my study may have prompted her to unconsciously frame her experiences as potentially spiritual ones from the beginning in order to provide the anecdotes she assumed I was looking for. All of this begs the question of what role the interview process itself played in activating and integrating some of Zoe’s thoughts about everyday faith.

The dynamics examined here in my interview with Zoe and her narrative accounts are present in all of the interviews conducted for this study. This spotlights a difficult analytical predicament that must be accepted as one of the ever-present challenges of interview analyses. To what degree can the data being collected represent a priori conditions that are being uncovered? To what extent is the act of interviewing a co-constructive process in and of itself? Based on recent sociological theory, the answer is likely both. As a result, the data collected and analyzed throughout this study must be approached with a both a critical reflexivity and a clear theoretical goal capable of accounting for this dual process.

The holism that might be recognized in everyday faith is not a given. It must be negotiated among numerous factors. Intentional acts of reflection are necessary for this holism to emerge in a conscious way. By relying on interviews as the primary conduit for data
collection, I must balance the emic confessions of my informants with an etic perspective regarding the socially constructed nature of experience. Each interview is a platform for my informants to both report and construct. The dual nature of these negotiations must thus be accounted for in data analysis.

The peace and guidance of God’s presence for the ethical life

This study’s focus on experiences of God’s presence in everyday life has come to settle on peace as one key theme. In addition to the language of peace, however, a number of my participants also used language of ethical guidance as a marker of God’s presence. As illustrated in Zoe’s account, when faced with difficult situations, God’s peace can also provide a sense of direction regarding what actions to take moving forward. This section expands on these dynamics, examining both inward experiences of God’s guidance and their outward expressions in ethical living. Many of my informants said the greatest benefit of being a Christian is the blessing of a moral foundation for an ethical life based on universal standards rather than the undependable whims of human thought and feeling.27

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27 Emphasis on ethical living as a cornerstone of Chinese Christian experience is a theme that is often addressed in Chinese Christian scholarship. Prominent examples include Aiming Wang, *Church in China: Faith, Ethics, Structure: The Heritage of the Reformation for the Future of the Church in China* (Bern, CH: Peter Lang, 2009) and Manhong Lin, *Ethical reorientation for Christianity in China: the Individual, Community and Society* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Center on Chinese Religion & Culture, 2010). Both authors are prominent figures in the registered Three-Self Patriotic Movement church. Though their studies examine different dimensions of Christian history and theology, Wang and Lin both emphasize the key role ethical living must play in Chinese Christian identity. Unlike my informants’ individualistic and interpersonal emphasis, however, Wang’s and Lin’s works focus on the larger ecclesial and social dimensions of Christian ethics. This overlap and gap between the Three-Self Patriotic Movement’s official discourse on Christian ethics and my informants, who by and large attend unregistered house churches, is an important point of potential convergence. For a recent promotion of the role of religion and ethics across religions in contemporary China, see Xinping Zhuo, Zhonghui Qiu, Philip L Wickeri, and Theresa C Cariño, *Toward a Shared, Sustainable Future: The Role of Religion, Values and Ethics*, (Hong Kong: Amity Foundation, 2018).
peace, while remaining an important factor for understanding the larger processes that contribute to my informants’ religious formation, often gave way to the more pragmatic dimension of ethical living. The positive traits associated with experiencing God’s presence, whether they were peace, joy, or courage, were often understood as the God providing the emotional conditions needed to take a course of action that God called them to live into. A sensitivity to God’s presence often meant a clarity of ethical direction in the face of life’s many difficulties. To experience God’s presence calmed the heart and guided the mind in order to live in such a way that brought glory to God. Interestingly, it is also this ethical standard that many of my informants find most difficult about the Christian life. God’s presence brings high expectations and there is always a sense of lacking before what God calls for.

The inward experience of God’s presence: Peace and guidance

Among my informants’ experiences of God’s presence, a spectrum exists ranging from sudden experiences of transcendence of varying degrees to less pronounced yet steady everyday support and guidance that one only recognizes under particular circumstances. This section surveys this range with a selection of testimonies. As previously highlighted, language of the peace God’s presence brings is noteworthy – a calm amidst the accelerated busyness of young modern life. Further analysis revealed a second dimension of God’s presence discernable across these various experiences – a sense of God’s guidance in life, whether in everyday interactions or a sense of vocation or calling. In other words, God’s presence brings expectations that orient the way life ought to be lived.
Cassi is a deeply rooted Shanghai native. She was born and raised in the city, went to university there, and continues to work in the city at an international company. She is also the first Christian in her family, joining the faith through the witness of colleagues at work—particularly her boss. Her workplace environment plays a large role in Cassi’s sense of what Christian life is. As much as she is inspired by Christianity, she is equally weighed down by it. Her struggles with family, romantic relationships, and work-life balance are typical of her generation, but she seems especially sensitive to Christian expectations. Since beginning part-time MBA studies, her busy schedule has kept her from attending church regularly, but her commitment to her faith remains strong.

Cassi is one of the persons cited in the previous chapter who articulated a sense of peace as a hallmark of God’s presence, particularly when she was able to calm her heart during times of prayer. Outside of these times of personal prayer, however, Cassi wasn’t sure how God’s presence ought to be considered. She confesses,

> During everyday life, one isn’t thinking about God, one’s motivation and attention are on other matters. It is when you feel a need to connect with God or turn your attention to God that God is present. That’s what prayer is, of course. There are times when you feel particularly struck by God’s presence when faced with a conflict and you feel you need a sense of moral guidance. I don’t think anyone can experience God’s presence in an everyday way—I think it takes someone of great spiritual maturity and a lot of discipline.  

Like Zoe, personal practices of prayer are a central medium through which Cassi connects with God. Moreover, it is during times of conflict that God’s presence seems to intercede with a “sense of moral guidance.” In addition, Cassi does not believe average people, such as herself, are capable of experiencing God’s presence in an everyday way. Her conception of God’s

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28 Interview with Cassi, March 2019.
presence remains high and intercessory in nature. God comes to us in our time of need, making God’s presence known to calm and to guide. As an example, Cassi shares a time she felt God’s presence during a very physical sense of exasperation. She was participating in an organized survival challenge that required her to journey across 70 kilometers of desert over the course of ten days. She spent a year getting ready but during the last leg of the course became exhausted. “I was hurt and physically very weak. I literally prayed for God to let me live! To get through this challenge and not have to call the ambulance. I do feel like God was present with me at that time.”²⁹ While the conditions of this situation may not be something faced in everyday life, the physical desperation Cassi experienced must have been pronounced, leaving a real mark on Cassi’s sense of God’s presence as comforter and guide.³⁰

In contrast to Cassi, Daniel grew up in a “small” city of nearly half a million a few hours outside Shanghai. His father is a scholar of English literature and Daniel has followed in his father’s footsteps, teaching English at a local college. Married with two young children, Daniel was introduced to Christianity by his grandmother, a devout believer, and his father, who “believed without belonging.”³¹ It wasn’t until his own time in university that he began to

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²⁹ Interview with Cassi, November 2018.

³⁰ Cassi’s linking of God’s presence with the physical and mental distress experienced during this event can be analyzed in light of the growing literature on religious experience and the body that include the multivalent relationship between symbol and affect. See, for example, M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall and Chris J. Boyatzis, “God in the Body: charting the course of research on religiosity and the body,” Mental Health, Religion & Culture 19, no. 1 (2016):1-7, and David Cave and Rebecca Sachs Norris, Religion and the Body: Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2012).

³¹ See Grace Davie, “Believing Without Belonging: Is this the Future of Religion in Britain,” Social Compass 37, no. 4 (1990): 455-469. While the social conditions and reasoning for this state of religiosity differ between China and Britain, the basic premise remains constant: a personal belief that trusting in God does not require participation in any formal institutions of religion.
systematically consider Christian faith, exposed to richer conversations with American English teachers. Always curious but ever critical, Daniel only began attending church on a regular basis during his M.A. studies in Hong Kong. Today, Daniel considers himself a Christian and will read the bible for guidance and spiritual reflection. He remains skeptical about organized religion, however, and refuses to identify fully with any Christian institutions. He has recently returned to Hong Kong to begin doctoral studies.

When asked how he experiences God’s presence, Daniel’s response is complex. Initially, he states God is present when things are going well for him and that God feels distant when things are going badly. But after some further thought, he nuances his response:

> If you need an honest answer, I would tell you I feel God is near in my successes. But you know, when I really think about it, when I calm down, or, not calm down but more like, when I awaken to it, it seems like it’s not just in positive or smooth times that God is near, but that God is always near, whether things are good or bad. God is always near. When my heart is at peace, when I am quiet, like I’m not feeling too emotional, too good or too bad, I know this for sure. I’m not sure if this is easy to understand. When I look back on what I just said, it doesn’t sound so good. I don’t mean God is only present when I succeed. I mean more, like... I forget God is near. During the difficulties I forget about God. I think this is a better way to explain it.³²

In this excerpt, Daniel is working out the relationship between his subjective and objective senses of God’s presence. He rephrases his experience in the language of awareness, recognizing that God is always present or near, but that in difficult times he forgets it. This

³² Interview with Daniel, December 2018. Daniel’s comments contain similar dynamics to Zoe’s in that he appears to be actively reworking his opinions and experiences during the interview itself. The reasons for his dissatisfied with his initial answer are unclear, but his wording signals a sense that it may have appeared a shallow or selfish conception of God’s presence. Daniel’s second explanation can thus be viewed as a sort of face-saving mechanism. The manner in which he spoke contained an improvisational quality, a searching for words that would both correct the impression of his previous comments while maintaining a degree of honesty and integrity with his new ones. Whether Daniel’s comments are honest to his feelings and experience in the moment of the interview are, however, less important for this study than how these statements might be remembered and deployed in new situations.
truth of God’s omnipresence is a product of yet another variety of peace, what Daniel describes as a calming of emotions that avoids extremes. This sense of peace is different than that described by the majority of my informants. Also note Daniel’s lack of reference to practices of prayer, bible study, and fellowship. This is likely a product of his unwillingness to participate in traditional Christian institutional forms. Instead, Daniel’s description of calming and awakening to the reality of God around him is more reminiscent of similar discourses in Buddhist and Daoist religiosity as well as Confucian ethics.33

Daniel shifts contexts as he continues to share, reframing his explanation in light of what he now sees as a subtle but real experience of God’s presence during high school.

When I was in high school prepping for university exams, I asked myself some really hard questions. Like, what am I to do or be when I am an adult? What do I want my life to be about? I thought about questions like this for nearly half the year. One night, when I was lying in my bed staring at the ceiling, I realized I wanted not only to live for myself but for others. In hindsight, I really feel God gave me this feeling. I think it’s why I became a teacher. I thought this was one way to live for others. Like, I think if I joined a company instead of teaching, I’d make a lot more money and life would be more secure in some ways, but I never felt that was for me. So I think being a Christian gives me a sense of security in what I feel God has called me to.34

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33 See, for example, practices of mindfulness meditation or quiet sitting (静坐 jingzuo) common to many forms of Chinese religiosity in Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian traditions. The similarities in wording between Daniel’s reflection and these forms of Chinese religiosity is one example of how normative frames from one context can be brought into another to make sense of similar experiences or thoughts. Convergences between Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thought over the centuries illustrate this well. See, for example, Jennifer Eichman, “Intertextual Alliances: Huang Hui’s Synthesis of Confucian and Buddhist Paths to Liberation,” T’oung Pao 100, no. 1 (2014):120-163. Like Huang Hui’s sixteenth century scholarly synthesis, contemporary scholars articulate similar convergences between Christian spirituality and forms of traditional Chinese religiosities. See, for example, Pui Fong Wong, From solitude to solidarity: A Neo-Confucian appropriation of centering prayer in the transformation of self (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2016). Seen in this light, Daniel’s processing of his Christian spirituality can be understood as an everyday example of the same process.

34 Interview with Daniel, December 2018. Here, Daniel is reordering fragments of his life into a more cohesive whole guided by a newly acquired Christian sensibility. The inclination to become a teacher in his youth is recast with holier significance. A holistic religious formation cannot simply direct the future, it must also reclaim the past.
In hindsight, Daniel believes his sense of calling to a life that brought benefits to others instead of his own was something God gave him – part of his slow turn toward Christianity as a worldview capable of both explaining and guiding this impulse. For Daniel, being a Christian provides a sense of security in pursuing this call. Seen from this standpoint, Daniel’s initial rejection and later acceptance into a PhD program can also be understood in a much larger context of God’s calling. This is not simply a case of God giving or not giving him what he wants, but of God’s leading into what Daniel supposes is God’s calling.

May studied and worked in the United States before returning to Shanghai a little over a year ago. In the U.S. she rediscovered the Christian faith she had been raised with when she was small, attending different Chinese American congregations while working for a small tech startup. There, her faith blossomed and became a rich part of her everyday life. Upon returning to China for a new job at an international company, May had to reflect and reorient her faith life. Thankfully, she found a house church fellowship with a strong discipleship program that offered courses in how to integrate faith and life, including in the workplace. She is often thinking about the best way to witness for her faith among her colleagues while navigating the many differences she recognizes between the work culture of the US and China. Mindful everyday of what God might be calling her to, her prayers and hopes reflect a deep commitment to the life of her church as her extended family and evangelism to others.

Like many of my informants, May’s experiences of God are embedded in multiple situations including scripture, prayer, times of fellowship with other Christians. Beyond these, May also articulates a more complex sense of God’s presence at work in the ways these
situations are related to one another in everyday conversations. She says she knows God is speaking to her when these situations align in communicating a single message.

When I read scripture, I get a sense that it is speaking to me, the words connect emotionally with me. At times when I pray and I don’t feel anything it seems like God is a stranger, but suddenly, I mean, not super suddenly but maybe my attitude changes, when I devote myself to serving God, I felt so many incidents speaking to me. I spoke with the church pastor’s wife and she shared about how Mary followed Christ and the way Mary obeyed Christ. Then at a prayer meeting another pastor gave a short homily and referenced the same story and it really felt like God was constantly telling me to obey. In any case, I felt God telling me in many different ways the same thing. When I decided to finally follow this voice, I felt a greater sense of peace and stress dissipate.  

This is how May understands God’s presence as one of active guidance, calling her to obey and follow through a variety of mediums. Upon recognizing God’s guidance and obeying what God is calling for, May highlights the sense of peace that washes over her. In May’s experience, God’s presence as guidance is thickly related to God’s presence as peace.

David, the logical and articulate financial analyst introduced in the previous chapter, offers a more analytical approach to his experience of God’s presence, acknowledging both the emotional and rational dimensions of his faith.

[There are] two ways to think about knowing God’s presence – a more rational way or a more emotive way. I lean rational so I depend on the bible for my understanding of God’s work in my life. I try to pay attention to the fruits of my prayer and actions based on the bible’s standards, including in relationships, in friendships. I recognize good fruits in my relationships. From an emotive standpoint, when one is in a position of weakness, one

35 Interview with May, November 2018. Unlike Zoe’s and Daniel’s accounts, May’s account was delivered with greater clarity and confidence. This was not an example of co-constructing fragments into a cohesive whole in hindsight during the interview. Instead, May’s account reveals a confident sense of discerning God’s presence across multiple situations that has been well practiced. To use Ammerman’s language, May’s sacred consciousness appears to be more sensitive than, for example, Cassi’s. She is always looking for ways to discern the possibilities of God’s voice embedded in her everyday routines. Throughout our conversations she would often ask what God might be trying to tell her through the events or relationships she was explaining to me. This practice blurs the lines between secular/material and spiritual as the former is always being analyzed as potential carriers of the latter waiting to be uncovered and pieced together as divine communication. See Tanya Luhrmann, How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), for an extended study of the dynamics illustrated in May’s account.
can really experience God’s strength, supernatural feelings that can feel miraculous. I never had these experiences before I was a Christian, but as a Christian I’ve had some of these experiences and they are really moving. I’m thankful for all God has arranged for my life. It’s quite powerful given how logical and rational I typically am. It moves you and it gives you strength. There are things you’d never be able to do on your own, but with God’s presence and movement, you feel a greater sense of responsibility or standard or strength to direct your relationships. The line is no longer set based on what you can get or money or things like that. It’s different than those who don’t believe.36

Like May, David relies on a certain criterion for discerning God’s presence at work in his life that is largely based on his reading of scripture. It is with the bible that David measures the fruit of what he is experiencing. Like Cassi, David also confesses a sense of supernatural strength in the face of challenges that accompanies him. This strength is something that David cannot rationally make sense of but is also distinctive and rich enough to take seriously. In specific, this strength gives David the ability to engage his relationships with responsibility based on a clear standard. There is an outward effect that comes from these inward experiences.

The varieties of religious experience highlighted in this section share a common link, one in which inward peace is often coupled with a sense of guidance. While my informants relate these two sensations in different ways, their testimonies give witness to a close relationship between them. The next step in my inquiry focuses on what how these senses of peace and guidance are expressed in everyday routines and relationships.

The outward expression of God’s presence: The ethical life

Data analysis has highlighted not only a sense of peace, but also a sense of guidance when experiencing the presence of God. But this peace of God is not something that is meant

36 Interview with David, December 2018.
simply for comfort or solace. Similarly, the guidance God gives is not simply to better one’s own standing. For a number of my informants, this type of belief amounts to a form of superstition, something that will be discussed further in the next chapter. Instead, inner peace and guidance ought to lead to purposeful living, an ethical and upright life that brought glory to God. The life of a Christian should be distinguished by the universal standard that God provides all peoples.

When asked what the best part about being a Christian is, a variety of answers is possible. One can cite eternal life in heaven as the blessing of Christ’s salvation, a sense of peace and solace in one’s affairs, or the blessing of being part of the community of the church. While my informants would surely agree with the above, for the majority of my informants, the best part about living the Christian life was the ethical foundation it provided. Christian faith provides a universality that one could always rely on to discern right from wrong, a dependable moral compass to guide one’s actions. Consider David’s perspective:

The best part of being a Christian is the ethic it gives you. In my field of investment banking there are a lot of legal processes and moral calculations that need to be made about how you invest and work with others. As a Christian, things are bit more straightforward. You want to think of the best interest of your clients first and you want to be law abiding. You can consider things with a clear standard. Life’s direction is clearer too. Before life is just a material world and based on Darwinism and such. But after becoming a Christian you realize God has a plan for every person and that we have a duty to glorify God and to help society and to help build the church, to be salt and light and bring glory to God. So, whatever you do, you think about how to bring glory to God. It’s not like others who are really just thinking about themselves or their group. It’s a complete change of your worldview and values really. As you get older, I think all of this becomes clearer too. As you become older you get closer to death and you start asking questions about really matter. I think as a Christian you get a clearer sense of things earlier, what is right and wrong.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{37}\) Interview with David, December 2018.
Some version of the sentiments David expresses here were common across the majority of my interviews: the belief that the power to live an ethical life that gives glory to God was the most important and beneficial part of Christian life. David’s comments about how this ethic ought to be applied in his workplace was also common. Given the life stage of most of my informants, questions of ethical living were often tied to workplace relations, such as the extended narrative of Zoe’s relationship with her colleague. Maria shares similar circumstances and ideas when reflecting on this same question.

The best part of Christianity is the hope it gives you and also the fact you know there is an eternal life ahead. I am not afraid of death. There is something afterwards. Because of this you also realize what is really important in life. That it’s not about material things but a person’s character. You have a God to depend on and a goal and meaning to undergird you. There is a challenge ethically, however. You think about the parts of the world you shouldn’t participate in. You have to carry your cross, you have to recognize sin and stay away. For example, like saying sorry to my colleague and reconciling. This is what I need to do. It was very hard, but it is God’s expectation. God wants us to become new persons, but that process takes a long time. You need to carry the burden of a holy life.38

First, note that even as Maria highlights salvation and heaven as the most positive aspect of her faith, the ethics of Christian living elicit much more thought and consideration. In Maria’s logic, eternal life doesn’t somehow make this life unimportant. Instead, it only highlights the truly important aspects: our character in relationship with God’s holy expectations. Like Zoe, Maria also struggled with a difficult work relationship. Similar to Zoe, it was also in the context of this relationship that Maria recognized the weight of Christian expectations. Maria was partnered with a younger colleague for several work projects and found her lacking in responsibility and initiative. The relationship was strained, but tensions subsided when Maria’s colleague left for maternity leave. During that time, Maria would not have to worry about their relationship.

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38 Interview with Maria, November 2018.
Later, Maria was convicted of the unresolved conflict during a weekend church retreat. Maria continues sharing,

The bible often says we need to confront our conflicts face to face, just like Jesus on the cross or Hagar’s story when she returned to face Sarah during their conflict. The point is we can’t run away, like Peter who denied Christ. I felt convicted. I needed to right this wrong and speak with her. So when she returned to work I invited her to lunch. She was curious as to why. I told her and apologized for some of my bad actions. I said I didn’t want to be a bad witness for my faith. In response she also admitted her faults and also said my expectations were very high of her. At the close of lunch, I told her that even if we aren’t going to be good friends in the future, I wanted to do this to put our conflict behind me. I didn’t want to think of her and only have negative feelings or thoughts. That’s hard to bear. After that meal, I did change. Just like Jesus sees us anew, I began to see her anew. I realized her strengths and saw her differently. I’m sure if I didn’t have Christian faith I never, never would have sought to reconcile with her.  

Maria’s recounting of this event is sprinkled with biblical allusions, a mark of just how deeply she has internalized the bible as a foundation for guiding her life. Relying on this mosaic of biblical narratives, Maria took the unconventional step of apologizing first for what she saw as her part in the workplace conflict. Her stated motivations are aligned with what she feels God calls all Christians to – faithfulness to seeing the world as Jesus would and acting in accordance. While the high standard of behavior that comes with Christian faith was perceived by many of my informants to be Christian faith’s greatest gift, it was simultaneously confessed to also be the most difficult part of Christian life. May summarized this sentiment succinctly when

39 Interview with Maria, April 2019.

40 Ryan Dunch argues that the two distinguishing traits that can be observed across nearly all Protestant expressions of Chinese Christianity are its experiential emphasis and its Biblicism. The former is often associated with supernatural or transcendent experiences of God including Healings. The latter is an includes allegorical reading and application of scripture to all realms of life. See Ryan Dunch, “Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing” in China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future, Stephen Uhalley Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 203-204. Maria’s comments, along with many of my other informants, evidence both these traits. One key difference, however, is the different degrees of experiential emphasis. The experiences of my informants were more often quiet, inward experiences of God’s presence rather more socially visible supernatural phenomena like Healings.
sharing. “One’s life ought to be distinguished by holiness (fen bie wei shen 分别为圣). One’s value system and worldview are changed. This is good, but it’s also hard because to live a holy life is difficult. So being a Christian is both good and bad – to have such a high standard and yet never being able to attain it can be difficult, but I know God’s guidance is good.”

The goodness of God is not an easy one, but it is worthwhile.

The heaviness of God’s expectations was particularly evident during my interview with Cassi. Early in our conversation, she questioned whether I ought to be interviewing her at all because she did not consider herself to be a very good Christian. Cassi explained,

First, I don’t feel like my relationship with God is that great. I know what the standard is, what I’ve been taught to do, but I generally don’t do it all. I just live an everyday life and only pray when things get tough. It’s a very normal life. But when you face real difficulties, that’s when you feel God’s presence the most. But recently I don’t feel like I’ve been doing well so I don’t feel it. When I say I don’t do it well (zuo bu hao 做不好), it has to do with behavior. I haven’t done what Christians are supposed to do.

As Cassi confessed, her voice grew shaky, on the verge of tears. While I cannot speak to the reasons behind this sudden swell of emotion, it was clear that something about what she was sharing – her inability to be a good Christian – was a trigger. I assured her that I was seeking a range of different Christian experiences, not only the “good” Christians. Despite Cassi’s self-perception as a lackluster Christian, her concluding response to my question regarding the best part of Christian faith hit the same notes as others who might be considered more devout.

Despite her perceived inability to meet Christian standards, she nonetheless felt they were the best part of her faith.

41 Interview with May, April 2019.

42 Interview with Cassi, November 2018.
The best part of being a Christian is having a clear standard of what is right and what is wrong. You know where the line is and that it’s not going to move around. You have the bible. You can come back to the bible to figure out what is right and what is wrong. It’s not dependent on context or people’s whims. In your heart you have a basis. Even when you do something wrong, you are clear on it in your heart and don’t make excuses to get by. [You have] brothers and sisters supporting one another. I have had people say to me, “You Christians are really different.” I’m not sure for what reason, and I couldn’t think of what I did in particular, but it has to do with a clear sense of morality they see. It’s really hard actually. God’s expectations are high. How can we live it out in our behavior? I feel quite weak. A lot of things I cannot meet or achieve. I may know it’s bad but I continue to do it. So expectations are really hard in everyday life. To be able to do it with all one’s heart you need a lot of things. I really think I am weak and I am easily influenced by many other factors. I may know it’s bad, but I still do it. That’s why I’ve said a number of times I do not do it very well, being a Christian.43

While terribly discouraged by her inability to meet the expectations laid out by her Christian faith, Cassi is nonetheless positive about the standard it provides. Cassi’s sentiments appear paradoxical. How does one find comfort, security, and inspiration in the same dynamic that also causes discouragement?

Stanley, the senior undergraduate student introduced in chapter one, shares the same sentiment and provides a particularly insightful explanation of how he holds these various tensions together.

The best and worst part of Christian faith are actually the same answer: the best part is you know God exists, you know God’s presence is with you. The worst part is also you know God exists, and you know God’s presence is with you.

If I think about my life, I think back to high school and the way I questioned what the meaning and direction of life ought to be I felt really lost and depressed. Like I’m just a small boat in a big storm just getting blown around without a sense of security. At the least, I feel faith gives me a direction. That was my initial reason to turn to faith. But now that I have a deeper faith, I see how God is really present and active in my life. I am not so lost or confused. It’s like, even if you can’t see light doesn’t mean light doesn’t exist. Now that I know God, I see light and what it shines upon as a way of directing my life. My life is rooted in something instead of a directionless boat. It has a direction and a protector. And to have a fellowship to experience God’s love and compassion through my

43 Interview with Cassi, November 2018.
brothers and sisters, that this is something God has given me and given my heart a new sense of peace.

But from the other perspective, the most difficult thing is also knowing God because, once you know God you also know his holiness and righteousness and his expectations. What it means to be holy and follow God and love others because this is God’s character. The more you know God’s holiness the more you see your own sinfulness. Particularly when you know your faith is calling you to something you want to personally avoid – it actually adds burden to your life, and you feel sad when you are unable to meet this standard. I mean, it’s not really something so bad that it weakens you – what I mean is it helps you know your weaknesses so you can depend on God more to grow. This is what I mean by it’s also the worst thing. I guess I should say it is difficult – but it is not bad. It grows our faith.44

Stanley’s remarks contain key elements of many of the explanations shared above. Like Daniel, it was in high school that Stanley began to seriously question the meaning and purpose of his life and found Christian faith to be a useful medium for working out a sense of direction. Like Maria, Stanley feels that growing in Christian faith has blessed him with a deeper awareness of God’s presence. As observed throughout this analysis, this presence comes in the form of guidance as well as peace. Yet, like Cassi, Stanley also recognizes the great difficulty that comes with meeting these expectations of holiness.

Altogether, a closer analysis of the interview data reveals a larger constellation of concepts at work in my informants’ experiences of God’s presence. God’s peace may provide a sense of calm and comfort, but it is nearly always coupled with a call to ethical standards that are difficult to live into. Despite the challenge, most of my informants also confess it is this same standard that provides the greatest blessing: a set of values and morals based on God’s holiness. In this arrangement of affects, discourses, and embodiments, the sense of peace that

44 Interview with Stanley, November 2018.
comes with God’s presence seems to operate as a form of calming that allows one to receive more clearly God’s guidance in an intimate and personal way. Zoe and Cassi both confess prayer practices as a way of attaining this sort of posture. Maria and David are keen to turn to scripture’s narratives and principles as the basis for validating what God may be calling them to. May sought to discern God’s guidance based on validations given across multiple situations. What all of the stories share in common is that even when what God calls for is clear to them, it is still difficult to do. Nonetheless, to pursue it is what the Christian life is about: glorifying God and being formed in God’s image.

**Scriptural theological reflections: Sacred consciousness and the peace of Christ**

The stories of God’s presence shared above resonate closely with Ammerman’s earlier discussed definition of sacred consciousness, when “… people often recognize a spiritual dimension in practices and experiences that have neither magical intent nor a location outside everyday reality.” In other words, the sacred and secular exist together. They occupy the same territory. Whether one sees or experiences one or the other depends on the individual’s orientation, not the material or situation in and of itself. The relationship between sacred and profane is not so much a duality but a continuum and the study of everyday religious life reveals its various shades.

Sacred consciousness is not, then, something that comes in all-or-nothing, everywhere or nowhere, forms... we can identify social conditions that make such a consciousness more and less likely and social interactions that are sites of production for it. We can also assess the relative effectiveness of secular powers arrayed against it. By locating the stories we gathered across a broad range of everyday contexts, we hoped to provide

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45 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 292.
a more nuanced picture of religion’s presence and absence, and that has allowed us to undermine the sorts of either/or alternatives implied in secularization theories, to see where the mundane world is most powerfully disenchanted and where its interactions are suffused with more-than-mundane significance.46

This orientation leads Ammerman to embrace the concept of “transcendence” without an otherworldly or supernatural guise. She continues, “It is that fundamental recognition of a ‘more than ordinary’ dimension in life that is the common thread running through all the spiritual stories we have explored. It is sacred and it is transcendent, and this sacred consciousness constitutes the domain sociologists of religion can and should be studying (emphasis in the original).”47

Sacred consciousness is not only a matter of sociological study but also of theological reflection. While sociological logic looks to the situational and contextual dynamics that may elicit a person’s awareness of the sacred at work around them, theological logic discerns possibilities for why and how God might actively facilitate such experiences. Whereas the sociological asks what can be learned about humanity through such experiences, Theology asks what we can learn about God. This preliminary theological reflection begins a process of tentative engagement with questions of God’s role in the experiences, narratives, situations, and contexts shared by my informants that will culminate in this study’s concluding chapters.

The bible is a cornerstone of most Protestant Christian traditions, a source from which theology is discerned and constructed. The principles and narratives embedded in this text are essential influences on Christian religiosity and identity. They orient a Christian’s sacred

46 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 293-4.

47 Ammerman, Sacred Stories, 292.
consciousness, framing what affects and symbols signal the presence of the transcendent.

Therefore, an examination of the biblical resources available for framing and understanding my informants’ experiences of God’s peace and guidance can provide a firm foundation for subsequent theological exploration.48

First, the Hebrew bible contains numerous blessings and prophetic utterances invoking God’s peace. In Numbers 6:22-27, the priestly benediction God charges to Moses and Aaron to bless the Israelites with includes safety, grace, and peace as indicators of God’s favor.49 It is by these traits that the Israelites shall know they are God’s. Psalm 85:10-11 express sentiments that, like my informants, tie a sense of God’s peace together with God’s righteousness:

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.”

Embedded in this praise is the correlation of God’s love and righteousness with peace and faithfulness. As God’s love and righteousness are revealed to God’s people, the people respond with peace and faithfulness. For my informants, faithfulness is best understood as a commitment to God’s moral and ethical standards – God’s righteousness.

A comparison of verses from the great prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, further affirms the connection between God’s presence and peace. Speaking of God’s reign of peace, Isaiah 32:16-18 proclaims, “Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the

48 All passages quoted in this study are from the New Revised Standard Edition translation.

49 “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”
fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.” The passage thickens the relationship reasoned from the earlier quoted Psalm. In God’s reign, the justice and righteousness of God lead to a rich experience of peace characterized by security and quietness. Isaiah 54:10 promises, “my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” bringing together traits of God’s love and peace in a covenant relationship with God’s people.

In contrast, Isaiah 59:8 also states, “The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace,” in reference to peoples who reject God. When one departs from God’s ways, the presence of God’s peace cannot be accessed. The laments of Jeremiah warn against the self-delusion of God’s peace without God’s justice. A repeated motif of the early chapters of Jeremiah is the withdrawal of God’s presence from a corrupt people with an emphasis on false peace. Jeremiah 6:14 and 8:11 both state, “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” All of these verses point to a reality that associates true peace as a signal of God’s real presence. This link between peace and God is so strong that the validity of a prophet’s pronouncements can be determined by it. Jeremiah 28:9 warns, “As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.” From the priestly blessings and sung psalms of a community the precarious realities of geopolitical contentions, this sampling of passages from the Hebrew Bible affirm the importance of peace as a vital

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50 See, for example, Jeremiah 14 with its many denunciations of false prophets preaching peace.
indicator of God’s presence at work beyond individual experiences. Peace is also a matter of God’s engagement with community and society writ large.

Second, the invocation of God’s peace is evidenced in the Gospel testimonies of Jesus’s earthly ministry. On the occasion of the miracles recorded in Luke 8:48 and 7:50, Jesus declares, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace,” connecting experiences of physical healing with a greater sense of wholeness that ought to include one’s spiritual and emotional state. In Luke 24:36 and John 20:19, the first words the resurrected Jesus speaks to his disciples is, “Peace be with you.” The Gospel of John contains some of Jesus’s most extensive discourses on peace. Commissioning his disciples, Jesus proclaims, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,” and “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

This blessing of peace echoes the priestly blessing of Exodus to bless and keep God’s people in peace, signaling a greater and more intimate fulfillment of these words. Jesus Christ is Lord. It is his peace that we receive, and it is in him that this peace continues to abound.

Third, a review of New Testament epistles highlights peace as a key priority and indicator of God’s continuing redemptive work through Christ. Galatians 5:22 famously lists peace as one of the fruits of the spirit, but other passages give peace an even greater place. The Greek term translated as “peace” in these passages is “εἰρήνη” (eîrînē). The term denotes more than simply a feeling of rest or tranquility, but also an active sense of making things

51 John 14:27 and 16:33
whole. It is in this sense of peace that Colossians describes the cosmic nature of Christ, pronouncing, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” Building on the larger implications of peace for communities and nations alluded to in the Hebrew Bible, Christ’s work is presented as the ultimate peacemaker on a grand scale that encompasses all of God’s creation.

Ephesians 2:11-22 embeds this universal peace in the larger context of God’s plan for all peoples, arguing for the Gospel’s efficacy beyond Israel to the Gentiles.

The passage speaks explicitly of Christ as “our peace” and the proclamation of peace as fundamental to reconciliation. This greater peace and reconciliation are thus imparted as an essential characteristic of the Christian life. The Ephesians passage echoes the ministry of reconciliation Paul charges to the church in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, a call to the church to participate in God’s work and, by extension, expand the God’s peace. This outward movement is complimented by

53 Colossians 1:19-20

54 “So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”
inward formation. For example, Philippians 4:6-7 encourages Christians, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The passage implies that experiences of God’s peace are not a single event or experience, but something bestowed as one lives and strives in the Christian life. Peace and peacemaking are, therefore, cornerstone markers of Christ’s redemptive work and of the church’s sense of self that ought to be deepened and expressed.

In conclusion, the biblical record provides theological precedence for identifying everyday experiences of peace as legitimate experiences of God’s presence at work within a larger theological structure. Sensitivity to God’s peace can also be connected to larger themes of God’s redemptive work to foster wholeness on individual, communal, and societal levels. Unexpected experiences of peace activate my informants’ sacred consciousness, signaling the “more than ordinary” nature of the transcendent amidst the everyday, paralleling the priestly blessings, prophetic utterings, and divine commissions and promises found in Christian scripture. From a theological perspective, this peace is an active peace that promotes not only wholeness in the individual but is meant to expand outward. All of these theological assertions are evident in the sacred consciousness expressed by my informants when they link these experiences of peace with what they perceive to be God’s calling to righteous and ethical living in the contexts of their work and family life.
Conclusion

This chapter began with a series of methodological reflections prompted by my initial application of the RF frame to the first set of data gathered in my initial interviews. The result was a mixed qualitative methods approach for analysis that utilized elements of phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography – organized to engage the different levels of one’s religious formation from individual experiences to everyday interactions to larger dimensions of social structures. As an example, I recounted Zoe’s experiences of faith set across different situations of individual prayer, her workplace, and her Christian fellowship. The result was a diagram mapping the various ways Zoe’s experience of God’s peace influenced and was influenced by different situations, moving from individual peace in prayer to community discourses grounded in the biblical narrative to actions in confrontation with a disliked co-worker. Zoe’s story provided a template for deepening my investigation of my initial theme: how God’s presence is experienced in everyday life. Multiple components of the pattern witnessed in Zoe’s experiences were also seen in other informants, leading to a more robust understanding of God’s presence as a peace that leads to God’s guidance toward a holy life based in a God given and universal ethic. Lastly, based on a review of biblical passages, this semiotic chain linking God’s peace to ethical action in everyday life can be recognized as one example of God’s active engagement with the sacred consciousness of my informants.
CHAPTER 3: Negotiating diversity, spirituality, and familial bonds in everyday faith

Working with a second phase of interviews, photovoice, and participant journaling, this chapter deepens analysis of the contingent social and relational dimensions of the two themes articulated in chapter one: cross-boundary experiences and differentiating faith and superstition. It also explores a third theme drawn from extended analysis: the importance of familial-like bonds and belonging in congregational life. In the first theme, cross-boundary experiences of faith were often correlated with my informants’ recognition and articulation of cultural and theological nuances. This contributed to a larger understanding of how Christianity can be both diverse and united at the same time, both particular and universal. In the second theme, different conceptions of the relationship between faith and superstition result in two views of religiosity and identity. In one view, a dualistic conception of faith and superstition as two completely different systems of belief were often marked by negative stereotypes of other Chinese religious traditions, particularly Buddhism. Alternatively, those who articulated a developmental view of faith and superstition were more likely to recognize the parts of their own Christian faith as potentially superstitious and were more open to interpreting the religiosity of non-Christians as reasonable expressions of faith. Lastly, further analysis of discourse and situation reveal the familial like quality of congregational life as a key component of my informants’ lived faith. The congregation, framed as a family unit, forms an especially acute sense of religiosity and identity closely linked with collective belonging to God and one another.

At the conclusion of this second phase of research, a more robust picture of Chinese Christian experiences of God’s presence emerges across the different levels of religious
formation. The previous chapter illustrates how, at the individual level, experiences of peace and guidance push my informants toward living an ethical life worthy of God. This chapter focuses on the realm of the everyday where experiences across congregational, cultural, and religious boundaries nuance and challenge what the means and ends of Christian life ought to entail. Moreover, when the tensions of negotiating faith across these boundaries is strained, my informants often re-ground their sense of Christian religiosity and identity in two key foundations: scripture and the life of their fellowships. This chapter concludes with a theological reflection on how the experiences, narratives, and themes discerned in this study thus far can be used as a basis for theological construction. Drawing on Peter Phan’s conception of life as source and summit of liturgy, I argue my informants’ internal dialogues with God across everyday situations are foundational to the larger ecclesial and missional priorities of Asian theological inculturation, mirroring the triple dialogue advanced by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference.

**Theme one: The implications of transboundary experiences on religiosity and identity**

One of the themes investigated in greater depth during this second phase is how faith life outside of mainland China shapes Christian religiosity and identity. Follow up interviews confirmed how important these cross-boundary experiences were for my informants’ diverse understandings of Christian tradition. Three general groups were identified in my sample: those who had lived outside of mainland China, those who had never left the mainland but participated in different congregations or fellowships, and those who had more or less been
part of the same congregation the majority of their faith lives. The following sections explore dynamics in the first and second group.

*Negotiating congregational contexts across geographical and cultural boundaries*

While studying or working outside mainland China, many of my informants either became Christians or took deeper ownership of the faith their family had passed on to them. It was across these geographical/cultural boundaries where they grew the most and it was this growth that reshaped their conceptions of faith and everyday life upon their return to China. Their capacity to compare and contrast cultures paralleled their ability to engage questions of diversity and unity in ecclesiology and the nature and mission of the church. These perspectives contrasted with those who had never left mainland China.¹

In a previous chapter, I shared about how Maria’s experience attending a bible study in Hong Kong transformed her sense of faith. In follow up interviews, I asked her to explain in further detail why she felt her time in Hong Kong was unique. “Of course, there is a difference, but also there is no difference. Cause, you know, every Christian has their own experience of God, so every church is different. In a way, we are all theologians... In Hong Kong I experienced both more open and more conservative churches the same way I have in the mainland. So it’s like they are different in the same ways.”² Maria’s response downplayed the distinctive traits


² Interview with Maria, April 2019.
of Hong Kong and, instead, focused on the diversity of the Church universal. She saw similarities in the range of congregational types that could be found in both the mainland and Hong Kong. Maria continued,

“These differences haven’t affected my faith life. One’s spiritual life really has to do with the life of the church. Every church has different foci, whether on scripture or on everyday life and relationships. I feel like the latter doesn’t provide as much spiritual growth. That’s just my opinion. Those churches that really focus on the bible, that give systematic ways for studying and learning – this really helps faith grow a great deal because you really understand why you believe and the way it is structured.”

Maria again recounts the blessings she felt she received at her Hong Kong fellowship, noting again her bible study leader’s openness.

This shift to a more bible-based worldview also shifted Maria’s perception of what she wanted in a church community. After returning to mainland China to begin work in Shanghai, Maria describes the church she began attending as a community that was more focused on developing relationships than a deeper understanding of scripture. In addition, she felt the over-arching ethos of the congregation leaned toward legalism. “In my five years at this church, I realized my particular small group was quite open, but others were very strict. Maybe legalistic. If you have questions or doubts you might be critiqued. This is just my experience, but I feel my faith grew less there even though my relationships were really deep.”

Maria also explained how the heavy emphasis on relationships in this church could quickly turn sour. She described the church’s mentorship program that sought to pair longstanding members with newcomers to provide discipleship and guidance.

3 Interview with Maria, April 2019.
4 Interview with Maria, April 2019.
The good part about this is that newcomers have someone they can look to in order to learn and grow... The negative part is that people are always filled with their own nature... If the bible is not the foundation, then people will turn to their own ways of thinking. I almost entered into such an arrangement with a mentor at that church but didn’t. This potential mentor said something to me I completely disagree with. She said, “You need to listen to what I teach,” and I replied, “Of course, so long as it is in accordance with the bible.” Her response was, “well, if you are going to measure everything I say or do with the bible it will be very hard for me to love you.” I just brushed it off initially but after deeper consideration I thought, “then what makes your love different than the world’s? If I listen to you, you’ll love me, and if I don’t, you won’t?”

Amidst these challenges, Maria began considering attending a different church. She describes this process as a difficult one because to have a church is to have a family, and it is never an easy task to leave one family for another. She was torn between her desire for a deeper personal faith life like the one she had experienced in Hong Kong and the rich community relations that surrounded her at her current church.

May shared similar responses as Maria in follow up interviews. Having spent three years in the United States, I expected May to have different experiences of God’s presence. On the contrary, like Maria, May expressed a sense of commonality. “In both settings, I feel my faith is truly alive. I communicate with God every day. I’m not saying I’m always moved by reading scripture or anything, but there is that sense of closeness. I don’t think there is really any difference in the context.”

At the individual level, in both the United States and China, May believed her faith was grounded on the same foundation. She did not feel her experiences changed, even if the culture that surrounded her did.

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5 Interview with Maria, April 2019.

6 Interview with May, April 2019.
At the everyday level, however, May acknowledged several ways in which differences between Chinese and American cultures shaped her experiences of congregational life. First was the Chinese state’s restrictions on religion have major impact on religiosity. This was the most commonly noted difference by most of my participants, as the majority were members of unregistered house church communities. May said these restrictions severely limited the range of activities she felt the church was called to engage. As China’s political climate has tightened, fellowship gatherings have become smaller with no more than one hundred persons meeting together at a time. Every fellowship within her network of house churches had a contingency plan for how and where to split into smaller cells if necessary. Second, perhaps as a byproduct of the state restrictions, May noted the stronger sense of community she’s observed among Christians in China. “The relationships in fellowships in China are much closer with deeper commitments. In the US, it seems people might attend church so for social reasons... [In China] the depth of relationships extends to actions... if someone is sick or has cancer, the fellowship with take action to help care for you. This is very inspirational to see.”

Reflecting on her time in the United States, May explains how her faith evolved as she attended different congregational settings. Like Maria, May began owning her faith at a university fellowship for Chinese graduate students. In this setting, she learned how to read the bible critically and began applying what she learned to everyday life. When May moved to a new part of the U.S. for work, she began attending a more charismatic church. “This church emphasized the feeling of the spirit, encouraged speaking in tongues, etc. I didn’t think there

7 Interview with May, April 2019.
was anything wrong but, in hindsight, I prefer evangelical teaching over charismatic because it
[Pentecostalism] relies on an emotional state to communicate with God. If you can’t feel a
connection, you can become very depressed. I didn’t want to use this standard to measure my
faith, I’d rather use the bible.”

May valued her time at that congregation. It helped her
experience God in a rich way, and she felt it was good to know how diverse the church can be.
Nonetheless, she eventually left this church to attend a more evangelical church she felt
focused on the bible.

Later in the interview, May reflected on the nature of the church across cultural
boundaries in contrast to what she saw taking place in the larger context of contemporary
Chinese society.

Wherever Chinese go, Chinese culture is still active. Maybe in the US, culture changes
and gets influenced by Western culture, but it isn’t too big. Taking [social] responsibility
is one thing though – the Chinese are not good at it. In a US church, the pastor may
preach regularly about taking responsibility for your community. In China this sense of
community is disappearing. When I was small, we still had a community-feel, we knew
our neighbors above or below us and would help [each other] out. Today, particularly in
big cities, this sense of community is pretty low and so a sense of responsibility to others
isn’t strong either. There is a sense that your life is different than my life, so what
relationship is there? It is very cynical. I think a lot of conversations in churches, whether
in US or China, there is a sense of orienting your life to influence those around you. This
is common in the church but isn’t so common in China.

May’s thoughts appear somewhat jumbled. At times she is speaking about Chinese culture but
pivots to the culture of the church, and then back again to Chinese culture. She is trying to
work out and express complex dynamics church and society across different cultural spaces. In
the above passage, she is not only thinking about how differences in culture might influence the

8 Interview with May, April 2019.

9 Interview with May, April 2019.
church, but also what commonalities ethnically Chinese churches might share across geographical boundaries.10

Altogether, May’s thoughts regarding the nature of her experiences of God, her congregational life, and her observations of Chinese society would not be possible without the multiple vantages she gained in different types of congregations and cultural contexts. Both Maria and May share a certain sophistication in their articulations of faith, church, and society. Both articulated aspects they felt were common across churches as a means of grounding their faiths in a sense of universality but were also mindful of how churches were different based on theologies or cultures.

In an earlier chapter, I highlighted some of May’s thoughts on her sense of calling to share the gospel in China as a key component of her religiosity, worked out through affects rendered by her observations of the social and ethical degeneration she perceived to be taking place in China. This “return-mission” sensibility also plays a very important role in Melody’s life.11 Melody became a passionate Christian during graduate studies in the United States. She took on a major role in the overseas Chinese ministry on her campus. When her studies were over, Melody was confronted with the decision of whether to return to China or stay in the


11 For more on how the concept of “return mission” has influenced the Chinese church, see Alexander Chow, “Jonathan Chao and ‘Return Mission:’ The Case of the Calvinist Revival in China,” Mission Studies 36, no. 3 (Oct 2019): 442–457.
United States. She decided to return to Shanghai, feeling called to help support those who had become Christians overseas but struggled with their faith when returning to China.

I think faith life in China is much harder... In the US, it was perhaps simpler because [as] a student, it’s just church and friends. But in China there are more complex relations with work and family and such, so things feel fragmented. That’s why they say some 60% of Chinese who become Christians overseas don’t continue in their faith when they get back to China. When there is no network of Christians it becomes really difficult. And work and family pressures can quickly overwhelm someone.¹²

Melody returned to China with a burden for Christian returnees, especially having invested so much of her time and care in this population while she was in the United States with an overseas Chinese ministry. Reflecting further on the difficulties of the mission she felt God had given her, Melody states,

I see my investments [in the United States] quickly fade [in China] and it’s really, really discouraging. It hurts my heart having spent so much time with [new Christians] in the US, but they leave [the church] coming back to China. They get caught up in the world. When they return it’s hard to get involved in the Three-Self churches. And house churches are closely networked so you have to already be part of the community. It’s really difficult to come in... So when I came back to China I felt the need to support new Christians coming back from overseas, to establish links with churches so people could get easily plugged in. What I found, coming back, however, is that many churches in China aren’t interested in such a ministry. Local churches don’t really know how to disciple those from elsewhere. Churches also aren’t interested in chasing down those who don’t always come.¹³

Melody’s comments here speak to her strong belief in the importance of community as key to Christian life and to the difficulties of in-group out-group dynamics in Chinese churches. In

¹² Interview with Melody, January 2019.

¹³ Interview with Melody, January 2019.
Melody’s observations, the cultural dynamics of the mainland Chinese churches are significant obstacles for those who became Christians overseas seeking to participate and belong.14

Maria, May, and Melody are examples of “ecclesial devotees,” exceptionally devoted to their faith and what they perceive to be the mission of the Church. For them, to be an active participant in the work of the church is fundamental to Christian life. Their testimonies give witness to the complexities of squaring their intercultural and inter-ecclesial experiences with their devotion to the church as a universal entity. At the everyday level, the closeness of community that binds house churches together has proven to be problematic for Maria, who finds within that relational closeness a lack of biblical foundation. Melody also views this closeness as a wall that may keep out newcomers unable to fully integrate. Nonetheless, May sees within such community a type of counter-cultural witness to what she perceives as contemporary China’s disintegrating sense social responsibility.

Maria, May, and Melody are also committed to the symbol of scripture as the unifying foundation for Christian life. In this sense, they are also “scriptural devotees.” For all three, reference to the narratives and principles of scripture ground their affective and symbolic faith in the unity and mission of the church despite the everyday tensions they experience. The power of these holy narratives, embedded in a larger tradition, provides them sustenance for individual belief and feeling. For example, when asked how she experiences God, Melody

expressed her devotion to scripture as a firm and yet responsive foundation – something undergirding the more emotional experiences she may have from time to time.

I think God is always present, sometimes I can feel it. You know, those who study art are sometimes more sensitive. Sometimes I’ll hear a particular song and I’ll feel moved, maybe cry... Or sometimes when I’m just walking down the street and am suddenly moved with a thought or feeling I don’t think I would normally have. I think this is also an evidence of God’s presence... When I read scripture, I’ve already read it two or three times. I use a bible app and mark passages that really move me. But it’s interesting because when I read the same passages different times, sometimes the earlier marked passages don’t mean as much as they used to. It’s rather the passages that I kind of skimmed over previously that are not impactful. And I’m like, wow, how can this passage speak to me so differently now than then? I think this is also evidence of God’s presence.15

Melody’s reflection evidences a process of negotiating the fluidity of everyday faith and community life with scriptural study. When all of these pieces appear to come together into a cohesive whole, God’s presence is experienced.

For Maria, May, and Melody, transboundary experiences of faith are forged into a universal devotion to God and church through scriptural fidelity. All three women highlighted in this section give witness to the complexity of negotiating experiences of culture, congregation, and place in dialogue with their belief in the bible as a living and responsive mediator of eternal truth. The prominence of the group bible studies as touchstones of both community and spiritual growth for so many of my informants aligns closely with Protestant ideals of the church as a community bound together by the word of God. In this type of religious formation, the relationships that tie the church together must not only be intimate, but also a witness to God’s presence within the bible.

15 Interview with Melody, January 2019.
Second, while having no significant experiences outside mainland China, some of my informants did attend different types of congregations. In response to my questions about how these different experiences shaped their faith life, their comparisons often led to insightful theological observations. Like those who had lived outside the mainland, there appeared a correlation between experiences of ecclesial diversity and capacity to apply critical discernment to their faith commitments and lifestyle.

Consider Norman, who has never left mainland China but has had substantial experiences in both a Three-Self Patriotic Movement church and an unregistered house church. Comparing the two has helped him articulate what he finds most compelling about Christian faith.

I used to go to the Three-Self church, but now I really don’t like to go that congregation because I feel like its teachings led me astray... I attended that church for two to three years and during that time, my overall impression was that I needed to behave a certain way to become one of God’s children. If I didn’t act the right way then God would not consider me His child... so they don’t really look at your inner life, your devotional life. At the church I go to now, they take more time to help you see how your faith ought to influence your everyday life. Understanding how to glorify God in your actions, but even more importantly, to have your heart in the right place. I didn’t know this before.\(^{16}\)

Norman’s experiences in both a state registered Three-Self church and his current unregistered house church speak to the importance of boundary crossing even within a single religious tradition or cultural context. Different teachings and experiences of congregational life gave Norman different senses of how faith ought to be lived.

Another dimension of cross-boundary faith experience that surprised me was not in the context of a church congregation, but of work. For Cassi, her workplace plays a large role in her

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\(^{16}\) Interview with Norman, January 2019.
sense of Christian life. Because Cassi’s works at an international company, the environment is more open to religion and the Christians in the company maintain a small group for prayer, sharing, and social events. Cassi’s faith life contains two parallel communities, one with her house church and the other with her work small group, providing resources for comparative reflections on faith and everyday life across different situations.\(^\text{17}\) Cassi shares,

> Within the workplace [relationships are] closer, but it’s pretty easy to see why, because we see each other more regularly. We also have more conflicts and tensions though, for the same reason. So church relationships are sometimes smoother because we don’t see each other as much or experience those same conflicts. But in the church fellowship, we have a deeper sense of shared foundation in the bible and share out of this foundation, directed by a teacher. In the workplace, we attend different churches and so we have somewhat different expectations of one another — so there are some differences there.\(^\text{18}\)

Cassi references the role scripture plays in aligning a community’s sense of expectation and its influence on the closeness her relationships. She is aware of ecclesial diversity in her workplace small group compared to the unity that comes from a particular reading and teaching of scripture in her church. What matters most for Cassi is not necessarily interpretations of scripture, but its impact on everyday life. When asked who has had the most influence on her faith life: Cassi’s answer was not her bible study leader or pastor. It was her boss: “My relationship with my boss is also a form of mentorship and discipleship. We have a shared


\(^{18}\) Interview with Norman, January 2019.
value, ethical, world, system. This is the biggest benefit because we move in the same direction – so regardless of the work challenges we are facing I know we share the same trust.”

In conclusion, the range of perspectives and experiences reviewed in these different examples provide deeper analysis of transboundary experience and its impact on Chinese faith lives. Each boundary crossing experience, however long or short, near or far, imbufes persons with alternative situational frames and logics that must be reckoned with. The change in context can be as simple as the commute between two cities, such as the case of Zoe who attended her church and spent time with friends in one place and worked in another. In Zoe’s case, her weekly yet concentrated time of Christian fellowship in one context reinforced and encouraged her to live out her faith in the other. For Norman, comparison between registered and unregistered church communities played a significant role in shaping his sense of Christian identity. Cassi provides another variation on this theme. Without ever leaving Shanghai, Cassi was regularly provided alternative models of faith between the boundaries of work and church. The more traditional means of formation brought through bible study and Sunday worship are foiled by less formal times of office sharing and prayer, each addressing different goals and objectives under a common umbrella of values.

But for those with more significant transboundary experiences like Maria in Hong Kong or May and Melody in the United States, the contours of Christian religiosity and identity must be discerned in more complex ways that account for multiple dimensions of society, culture,

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19 Interview with Norman, January 2019.
and theology. For persons like Maria, May, and Melody, there is also a noticeable correlation between their references to scripture as a foundation for faith amidst greater experiences of Christian diversity. All three show a strong understanding of denominational and theological differences, including those rendered by socio-cultural conditions. Yet their awareness of this diversity does not plague them with doubt – rather it reinforces and strengthens their personal affinity for the bible as a unifying foundation.

**Theme two: Faith, superstition, and the layers in between**

Another theme expanded upon in this second phase of research regards the differences between faith and superstition. This section explores how my informants negotiate their Christian faith in relationship to the atheism of the government’s communist ideology, traditional Chinese religions like Buddhism, and a larger spiritual realm. State-sponsored atheism is ever-present, taught from elementary school through university. Buddhism’s thousand years of cultural influence, while no longer the dominant worldview it once was, remains equally embedded in the Chinese imagination. Moreover, as a people of faith in the transcendent and supernatural, how do my informants position themselves in relation to a larger world of spirits in a modern society that rejects their very existence?

This section also investigates the two basic orientations for differentiating faith from superstition uncovered in early interviews: a dualistic approach and a developmental approach.

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20 See Nanlai Cao, “A Sinicized World Religion?: Chinese Christianity at the Contemporary Moment of Globalization,” *Religions* 10, (2019). The polycentric nature of Chinese Christian experience spread across multiple global locations and boundaries being negotiated by persons like Maria, May, and Melody are examples of the basis that make up Nanlai Cao’s proposal to study Chinese Protestant Christianity as a trans-national “Sinicized World Religion,” one that can be seen as centered in contemporary Chinese context and yet globalized through the Chinese diaspora’s diverse experiences driven by education and business networks.
The latter often evidenced a greater degree of openness to inter-religious relations while the former advocated stricter boundaries. A closer look at the discourses expressed in both approaches reveal, however, a mixed economy of religiosities and relationships that blur traditional conceptions of religious identity. One finds those who confess a bounded and exclusive definition of faith can carry worldviews that are, nevertheless, greatly influenced by other religiosities. Those who define Christian faith as a process of growth can be challenged by the faith of religious others.

_Discerning religious faith between materialism and superstition_

Analyzing how my informants differentiated faith and superstition over the course of their lives, two concepts emerged as important markers. The first were comments related to the atheist and materialist worldview that undergirds the Communist Party’s state ideology. The second were comments related to the supernatural or enchanted dimensions of religiosity – relations with the spirits. Nearly all of my informants’ religious journeys began with a critical assessment of the materialist worldview they were taught, leading them to embrace Christianity as a holistic worldview worthy of their faith. Their acceptance of God’s presence and a transcendent realm beyond the material led some to questions regarding their relationship with a larger spiritual world. How do my informants navigate this intersection between the modern material and the spiritual? Negotiating everyday life between these two poles is emblematic of modern religiosity.
All of my informants were raised in the People’s Republic of China and were educated with atheistic materialism as their normative worldview. Remembering this childhood education, Daniel shares, “When I was in elementary school, I remember religion and superstition were seen as the same thing. Materialism was pushed on us as the only plausible faith or belief. Anything else, forms of idealism or mythology were all implausible... Religion was categorized as a mythical idealistic worldview. It’s an ontological problem at its base. Of course, the textbooks present this from only one side to make their position more justifiable.”

Superstition is, therefore, an unfounded trust in any form of supernaturalism or transcendence.

If religion is a form of superstition, then one’s faith must be put elsewhere. Faith remains a positive term, but it ought to be directed toward the party and its inevitable triumph in ushering communism into society. David adds, “‘faith’ can be applied to many things, not just to religion. For some people, it is associated with the betterment of society, or faith in understanding the cosmos scientifically, or to serve the people and to realize the greater self. All of these might be connected with the word, faith, even if it has nothing to do with religion.” Therefore, in order to put one’s faith in religion, a process of differentiating superstition from religion must first take place. The various meanings and affects associated with concepts of faith, religion, and superstition must be dislodged and rearranged, developing

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21 For a systematic study of the influence of China’s political education, see Miao Li, Yun Lu, and Fenggang Yang, “Shaping the Religiosity of Chinese University Students: Science Education and Political Indoctrination,” Religions 9, (2018). According to their study, students studying natural/applied sciences were less likely to perceive Christianity or Islam as plausible and less likely to have supernatural belief. In contrast, students in humanities/social sciences were more open. Students who positively evaluated the political education courses were also less likely to view Christianity as plausible. Curiously, student views of scientific and political education were not correlated with beliefs in Buddhism or Daoism.

22 Interview with Daniel, April 2019

23 Interview with David, March 2019.
new semiotic chains. Marxist materialism must be critiqued and rejected, religion most be conceptually divorced from superstition, and finally – religion and faith must be bonded.

The dynamics of this process are important for understanding religious formation in the context of mainland China. Daniel was the first to recount this shift in worldview to me,

When did religion become associated with faith rather than superstition? It was in high school, I think. That was the turning point. I think it was just being rebellious at first. You realized that what you learn in school doesn't make sense, it doesn’t work in your actual life. If you look at the world through materialist lenses only, you get stuck and meaning just disappears. Materialism is really just competition and Darwinism. You get the feeling that life is meaningless. A lot of people get lost and materialism offers no real answers.24

The beginning of faith in religion begins with a loss of faith in materialism as a sustainable worldview for guiding one’s life. Tipped off by Daniel’s remark, I began asking others about when they began to doubt materialism. For those who were not raised in a Christian family, the process often began during high school during while studying for national university entrance examinations. This single test is perceived by many Chinese youth to be the key to their futures. This is the pinnacle of pressure and competition for Chinese adolescence, a time often accompanied by difficult doubts that are often left unaddressed so that one’s focus can remain on the test at hand.

For some, it is during university that doubts take root and grow into a search for a new worldview. In Chinese society, university life is considerably more relaxed than high school; a time when students can decompress after the battles of the entrance exam have passed. Amidst this newfound freedom, many Chinese youth begin to develop their sense of independence, pursuing open ended questions of belief and value instead of the carefully

24 Interview with Daniel, April 2019.
engineered examination questions with only one correct answer. This increase in personal freedom comes at the same time as two other situational shifts that are likely to play important roles in the redefining concepts. First, there is the natural search for social belonging in a new place that is absent of familial relationships. The search for belonging in Chinese culture is an important one and social circles often reset during university. Second, the Marxist theory and materialism once diligently studied under the threat of entrance exams is replaced with crowded lecture halls led by lackluster instructors who often wear their disinterest on their sleeve. A few of my informants noted the irrelevance of these required classes, recounting their memories of an instructor’s blank, monotone lecture droning above checked out students, many chatting quietly, immersed in their phones, reading their own books, or studying for other classes. In such a setting, it is easy to imagine the credibility of the materialist faith losing stock rather quickly.\(^{25}\)

Once materialism’s trustworthiness is undercut, religious traditions become probable options for redirecting and reinvesting one’s trust. For the majority of my informants now in their late 20s or early 30s, it was also during university that they either became Christians or recommitted to the faith they were raised in. There is something unique about this period of time in Chinese youth, from the pressure cooker of university entrance exams to the free searching setting of the university. While outside the scope of this study, the sequence of

\(^{25}\) See Phil Entwistle, “Faith in China: religious belief and national narratives amongst young, urban Chinese Protestants,” *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 2 (2016): 347-370. Based on fieldwork and interviews, Entwistle highlights the correlative relationship between urban Chinese Protestants coming to faith alongside an increased doubt and disillusionment with the Chinese Communist Party’s nationalist ideology and narrative. He notes how Protestant Christianity’s global presence and networks appeal to Chinese seeking a more global and cosmopolitan sensibility. Nevertheless, Entwistle also observes that many of these urban Chinese Protestants retain a strong sense of national concern for social morality and ethics. All of this points to a critical selectivity in urban Protestant negotiations of faith and national belonging.
events and the situational contingencies that accompany this season of life read as particularly potent for religious formation in contemporary China.

Second, once a religious worldview becomes the object of one’s faith, the neglected world of spirituality is also opened up. If materialism is not true, then questions regarding the nature of the immaterial unseen that might undergird a religious worldview become legitimate paths of inquiry. The immediate image that comes to the Chinese imagination are often the ghosts and spirits of Chinese mythologies. While certainly vivid, these images have also been aggressively marked as superstitious – a category that must be avoided if one’s religious faith is to have a degree of merit in modern Chinese society. Negotiating how the world operates from a spiritual standpoint is no small constructive task, but every Chinese Christian must engage it. They do so by assessing the various resources available to them from Chinese cultural history, the teachings of their church or scripture, and their own personal experiences. To adopt a Christian worldview is begin a process of varying degrees of re-enchantment, ushering believers into a way of life that takes seriously dimensions beyond their sensory perceptions. What does this process look like for my informants and what might we learn about the broader process of religious formation from it?

Norman remembers this dynamic at play in his first months of being a Christian during undergraduate studies. “[At first] …only a few people knew I was a Christian. Only a few close friends would ask, ‘what is this faith you believe in?’ I remember really clearly one question I often heard, which was, ‘then do you believe in ghosts?’ and I said, ‘yea, I believe in that.’ In response they would sometimes say, ‘then aren’t you afraid?’“26 The impression this question

26 Interview with Norman, January 2019.
leaves on Norman is telling. It marks a conscious awareness that the world he once knew as only material was changing. Yes, the spirits are real, but what are they and how does their presence impact life? A new plane of existence must be constructed at this crossroads.

When I asked May to give an example of how faith differed from superstition, she replied, “For me, faith is really alive (huopo 活泼). If I felt nothing, I wouldn’t believe it, I wouldn’t bother with it. What I feel has a real impact on my life. My experiences direct me to faith.” Faith needs to be felt. It needs to be present and influential in the way one lives. It needs to be alive. This tenant shapes May’s views of the spiritual world as well. To illustrate, May shares a recent anecdote,

Just last week my friends and I spoke about when a ghost might attack you in your bed (Gui Ya Chuang 鬼压床). Last year when I first came back to China – I experienced this. It’s like a dark spirit or shadow comes over you and tries to enter your body. It was at night when I was sleeping. I wasn’t sure of myself in the morning, like if it had really happened. You feel this shadow trying to enter you. I told it to go away but it entered anyway. Once it is in you, you can’t move. Like you go numb. I was desperate and shouted “In the name of Jesus Christ, I cast you out” – three times – and then this shadow disappeared. It was a real experience – my eyes were open the whole time. I never shared it with others though because I was worried what others would think. The other day during lunch together after fellowship, someone shared their experience and we found out many of us had the same experience. It really is a living faith. A few days after that event, I remember reading scripture from one of the gospels – when you cast out demons in the name of Jesus, do not be afraid or proud but give glory to God. This is another example of scripture’s witness.”

May’s testimony to the reality of spirits was the first personal experience of the spirits I heard in my interviews. A few lessons can be gleaned from it. First, a substantial period of time passed between May’s experience and her willingness to share it, even with members of her

27 Interview with May, April 2019.

28 Interview with May, April 2019.
congregation. She states that she was, “worried what others would think.” Despite an openness to the supernatural world, these experiences remain unexpected – clashing with not only with the teachings of Marxist materialism, but the overarching ethos of modernity itself.

Second, May’s cites scripture as the guiding logic of her faith punctuates her interpretations of the event. For many of my informants, scripture serves as a mediator between modern rationality and spiritual experience, a particularly modern protestant sensibility. If interpretation of scripture allots space for such experiences, then they are legitimate products of faith. May’s concluding comments signals that the combined testimony of her experience, church, and of scripture provided the certainty she needed.

May’s experience with the spirits was the first explicit reference to the presence of other supernatural entities besides that of God and provided me a preview into another dimension of spiritual formation. For Chinese Christians, particularly those who are well educated and upwardly mobile, what variables contribute to the varying degrees of recognition given to experiences of supernatural presence and how do these experiences contribute to their negotiated differentiation of faith from superstition? The presence of the spirits as an element of faith versus that of superstition complicates the traditional categories that have been developed in the modern era.

*Discerning multiple religiosities within a bounded sense of belonging*

One of the two positions observed toward faith and superstition was a strong dichotomy between the two. Based on expanded interviews, three dynamics appear to orient the difference between conceptions of faith and superstition. First is the degree of selfishness
that motivates the person’s behaviors. Faith is not driven by selfishness. Instead, it is concerned with self-cultivation and growth. Moreover, this self-cultivation is described relationally. It is a cultivation based on your relationship with God. Superstition, on the other hand, is animated by desires for quick fixes based solely on your own interests. Second, faith is animated by personal agency and a critical posture of searching. In contrast, many see superstition as a belief or action based in passive acceptance of norms or dependence on some outside source. Faith differs because it springs from personal investigation and experience. Lastly, faith is built upon the wisdom of standards passed down over generations. Many cite scripture as the basis of this standard. Superstition is perceived to be based solely on hearsay without a historical record that can be critically assessed.

These conceptual differentiations between faith and superstition were grounded in the context of everyday living via comparison to Buddhist and Daoist forms of religiosity. Daniel had an especially negative view of Buddhism. “It’s actually kind of awkward or inappropriate to say – but I feel like being a Christian makes me a better person than others. Others might not be able to understand or think I’m silly, especially when they think my belief in God is the same as most people’s belief in Buddha.”

I ask Daniel to elaborate on what he sees in contemporary Chinese Buddhism.

I think Buddhism in China doesn’t have much hope. What I mean by this is that a lot of people who believe in Buddhism are very practical, they join the faith for a very particular reason, and that is to get something they want. It’s a bit more realistic or self-interested if you will. There are very few devout Buddhists. It’s just monks and nuns that are most faithful, but even then, there is a lot of economic interests for them. I think Buddhism has been co-opted a bit – there’s a lot of economic interests at play. The most famous

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29 Interview with Daniel, March 2019.
temples in China are also tourist sites. I don’t think this religion offers people true faith to connect with God or the transcendent. It can’t be considered a faith anymore I feel.30

Daniel believed that Buddhism had lost its right to even be considered a religious faith based on the criteria that its ritual life was grounded in the logic of selfish exchange.

The language of “economic interests” grounds Daniel’s critique. It is the culture of the market that profanes Buddhism. The more temples double as tourist sites, the less legitimate they appear. May notes the same dynamics when she is asked why she feels Buddhism is superstitious.

I also feel like Buddhist temples have become really commercialized. Like you go to the temple in order to burn incense, but the first incense costs more than the ones lit later because it is supposed to have more power, so there’s a monetary cost associated with it all. It’s really tied to people’s selfishness – if they want to get into this or that good school or buy a new house.31

These explanations of superstition are interesting because they do not make reference to falsity. My informant’s responses make little to no references to Buddha being a lifeless idol that cannot do anything or that superstitions are based in deception. Instead, the first point of reference is the commercialized nature of Buddhism and the type of negative character its rituals foster.

Based on the perspectives of these informants, Christian faith is unique because it is a system of belief and values that rises above the superstitious qualities of traditional Chinese religions like Buddhism or Daoism. It fosters selflessness over selfishness. This was the perspective David shared while reflecting on how his faith differed from some of his family

30 Interview with Daniel, March 2019.
31 Interview with May, April 2019.
members who still practiced Buddhist rituals. A deeper dive into David’s perspective, however, reveals a complex constellation of values and beliefs that can be linked to other forms of religiosity embedded in the very traditions he rejects. There were multiple religiosities at work despite David’s singular confessed identity. Returning to David’s perspective, however, one encounters a notable example of the multiple religiosities that unconsciously undergird what may at first appear to be a single exclusivist religious identity. David’s Christian identity is the product of a single congregational setting – a conservative evangelical house church in Shanghai that is part of the same network as the fellowship he joined in university. As David explains his definition of faith, however, a series of remarks signaled the influences of a larger ecology of religiosities recognizably linked to other discourses common to traditional Chinese religion and ethics.

“There are some things are just built into the way life works, moral principles behind people’s experiences whether good or bad, causes and effects in a sort of cause and effect (ganying 感应) cycle,” David shares, “They are built into the way the world works from the beginning of creation.”32 The most notable part of David’s statement is his casual use of the term “ganying,” which I have translated above as “cause and effect cycle.” This term is also closely associated with the Buddhist conception of “karma,” the very concept that grounds its worldview of cosmic merit. Given David’s negative comments about Buddhist ritual, it is unlikely he uses this term with intentional connection to the Buddhist worldview. Instead, ganying has become so closely tied to Buddhist ideas of karma in Chinese culture’s long history that one cannot help but associate them in a larger view of what constitutes religious

32 Interview with David, March 2019.
cosmology. Moreover, ganying has also been modernized in scientific parlance to describe natural processes like the induction of electricity. Terms such as ganying thus play an important role in how the Chinese perceive universal order. David’s casual use of the term speaks to a far more complicated genealogy of religiosity than might be first apparent.

Following this statement, David shifts to a more explicitly Christian register, alluding to concepts of sanctification and sin to expand on his conception of faith. “I think real faith has a real impact on people’s lives, a sort of ‘power’ that moves you to do things you wouldn’t be able to do in your own strength or spirit. Having faith can push you to do unimaginable things. Like to be able to achieve a state of sinlessness, a way of living with a sense of God’s ‘mission.’ This is the ideal, but we are more often weighed down by sin.”33 Here, David’s language utilizes Christian concepts of spirit and sin to articulate faith’s distinctive impact on one’s life. Unlike ganying, the concept of sin (zui 罪) is relatively new to Chinese culture which has long considered human nature inherently good.34 The term, zui, is associated with legal processes; to commit a sin (fan zui 犯罪) is to commit a dramatic crime against social order. In the Christian context, the term is appropriated in a way that associates sin with crimes against God.

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33 Interview with David, March 2019.

34 See Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, Sources of Chinese Tradition, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 129. - “All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. The ancient kings had a commiserating mind and, accordingly, a commiserating government. Having a commiserating mind, a commiserating government, governing the world was like turning something around on the palm of the hand.... Now, if anyone were to suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would always be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion. That he would react accordingly is not because he would use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child’s parents, nor because he would seek commendation from neighbors and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation. From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels aversion and shame would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human” (Mencius 2A:6).
David’s use of these terms reveals an internalization of Christian thought alongside other Chinese religio-cultural resources.

In the very next statement, David pivots to a recognizably Confucian register to describe the impact of faith in the world: “You can see faith’s impact in people’s lives, in the fruit of individual lives, in families, and even in society. Real faith will advance human society, not take it backwards. At the big level it shapes a nation, at a small level it shapes a family. Parent-family relations shape all relationships. But if faith becomes idolatry or just utilitarian, a means to an end, this will cause trouble in our relationships.” David’s ordering of the relationship between nation, family, and the individual is one of the most notable features of the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation found in *The Great Learning*, one of the key texts in the Confucian tradition. It is a belief in interconnectedness of virtue and its rippling effects from the sage to the world.

This extended analysis of David’s reflections points to a definition of faith that is animated by self-cultivation and grounded in both personal agency and universal principles. It releases humanity from sinfulness by the power of the spirit for the sake of all people. When lived out, faith causes the right ordering of relationships. This contrasts with superstition, conceived as a set of beliefs and actions accepted without critical reflection and motivated by

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36 See Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 331. “It is only when things are investigated that knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended that thoughts become sincere; when thoughts become sincere that the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified that the person is cultivated; when the person is cultivated that order is brought to the family; when order is brought to the family that the state is well governed; when the state is well governed that peace is brought to the world” (*The Great Learning*).
selfish desire. David’s explanations are thus peculiar for their exclusivist posture expressed in pluralistic registers, using multiple religio-cultural resources drawn from both traditional Chinese conceptions of Buddhism and Confucianism as well as Christian theology. This bricolage of various perspectives may not be product of conscious inter-religious reflection, but an instinctual composition brought together by a resonance of overlapping cultural values. It is a case of the way the everyday faithful might construct a bounded sense of religious identity out of very fluid concepts that migrate across traditions.37

Discerning ethical growth in the religious other

A second position for interpreting the difference between faith and superstition arranges the two in a developmental spectrum. In the previous chapter, Stanley acknowledged that his initial beliefs in Christianity were motivated by a superstitious attitude – a simple desire to find meaning and solace. Over time, however, Stanley’s superstitious mentality became a real faith as he matured and understood the basis of Christian faith: a relationship with God which changes you and brings you into a special community of God’s children.

This is an understanding of faith as a mature worldview that may emerge out of superstitious beginnings. Maria takes a similar position:

37 See Daan. F. Oostveen, “Religious Belonging in the East Asian Context: An Exploration of Rhizomatic Belonging” Religions 10, (2019). Oostveen’s conception of rhizomatic belonging provides an alternative framework for analyzing the dynamics I observe in my interviews. Citing Hent De Vries, Religion: Beyond a Concept (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), Oostveen argues, “From a rhizomatic perspective, religions are not seen as bounded entities, but rather as networks or assemblages of elements which sometimes group together to form larger networks, sometimes, exclude other structures, but are often connected in many ways to other religious segments of society. What we imagine as ‘Buddhism’ or ‘Daoism’ in a hermeneutics of multiple religions, should better be described as networks of religious ‘words, things, gestures, powers, sounds, silences, smells, sensations, shapes, colours, affects and effects’ (De Vries 2008).”
Superstition, from the surface, just looks like basic exchange. If I do this, you’ll give me that. I think this is the basis. A trade. Faith has to do with one’s relationship with God. It’s like in the book of Job. Satan wants Job to view God from the perspective of superstition, of trade and exchange. I think a lot of Christians actually treat their faith from this superstitious perspective. But in faith, there is a process of growth. Perhaps one begins with superstitious beliefs, but with time they realize it is about a transformed life. In fact, this new life is already within us – it’s just hindered by the flesh. We are created in God’s image after all. So faith is a really grounded and realistic dynamic. It’s like one of my teachers said, “your relationship with others is a real marker of your relationship with God.” So the gap between faith and superstition, I feel, is quite large.38

Maria’s believes the distance between real faith and superstition is a large one. But, like Stanley, she acknowledges many Christians live out their religiosity in the form of superstitions. Faith is identified as a process of growth in relationship to God that results in a transformed life.

This developmental approach to faith and superstition can foster a degree of openness to truth in other religious traditions. For Maria, this openness was displayed in the inter-religious relationships she made in her workplace leading a book club that included a self-avowed Buddhist and Daoist alongside atheist party members. Unlike the observations of some of my informants who seemed to stereotype Buddhist practices from afar, Maria had a real relationship with a devout lay Buddhist colleague who was able to intelligibly articulate her beliefs and values. As a result, Maria has had to work out a more nuanced conception of faith and superstition that does not cast Buddhism as a simplistic superstitious other. Maria explains the circumstances that led to the formation of the book club and her inter-religious friendship thus,

Our company used to be a state-owned enterprise with lots of Communist party members and propaganda. Then it became privatized and there really wasn’t much of a culture at work. When it changed it became all about work. The manager of the company became concerned because we had no culture in the office other than work. With high housing prices and stress, he was worried we wouldn’t work well under these conditions. So he

38 Interview with Maria, April 2019.
started a book club to encourage us. Somehow... they pulled me in to help start this book club. In fact, I ended up writing the discussion questions.

[Because of the book we read,] We talked about death, life, and some other really deep topics right away. The person who really engaged this topic was Buddhist, and so I found it really interesting because as Christians we discuss these topics too. A lot of people were interested in chatting about these deeper topics so we all just got to know each better through this. The book group went about a year. It only met a few times a month. It recently ended. We’ve gotten busier at work.

... Those who had religious faith were interesting because we could talk about deeper problems beyond getting a job or getting a house or cars or making money. My Buddhist colleague would write journal entries reflecting on her past and would take time to share them with me. She sent her daughter to traditional Chinese dance. When she assessed society’s problems, she really had something to say about it. They are actively searching for something. They believe in something supernatural that one should seek after. It’s not just people are people. There’s something more and this is the same as Christianity.39

A product of genuine encounter and dialogue, Maria was given the opportunity to see what many of my informants defined as “faith” exhibited in the religious other, a model of self-cultivation in relationship that fostered values meant to engage one’s entire way of life.40

How does Maria discern the boundary between faith and superstition in circumstances such as these where the religious other is just as committed to self-cultivation and social change as she is? When asked if adherents of other religions could experience similar degrees of transformation, Maria responds,

For those of other religions I think it is similar. For some I think their faith and life are not really connected. I mean, Buddhism for example, I know those who are very devout to their practice of vegetarianism but in their relationship with other people I don’t see any differences with those who don’t believe in Buddhism, at least not in a way I can recognize. But then there are those who practice their faith more seriously – this is

39 Interview with Maria, April 2019.

40 See Liping Liang, “Multiple Variations: Perspectives on the Religious Psychology of Buddhist and Christian Converts in the People’s Republic of China,” Pastoral Psychology 61, (2012): 865-877. Liang’s comparative inquiry into the reasons and impact of conversion to either Christianity or Buddhism provides context for the common foundations from which Chinese religious formation can be pursued between two seemingly different traditions.
evident in the way they speak to their children and teach them a sense of ethic. That’s when I can tell faith is deeper. I don’t know if they are able to articulate their faith as clearly as I can with mine because I have taken a lot of Christian discipleship courses. I do wonder whether their ethic is a result of their faith or just part of their personality. I’m not sure if I’ve made myself clear.\footnote{Interview with Maria, April 2019.}

Maria’s thoughts show an uncharacteristic uncertainty here. She is negotiating whether she can afford devout Buddhists a similar faith status as Christians. Though Maria does not directly refer to her Buddhist colleague in the above statement, her presence may be influencing Maria’s processing. What begins with general assertions about the faith of the other becomes progressively specific including an example of childrearing and ethics. The structure of her statement suggests a connection with what Maria shared in an earlier interview when she noted how her Buddhist colleague, “...sent her daughter to traditional Chinese dance. When she assessed society’s problems, she really had something to say about it.” At the end of the above statement, Maria is questioning whether a devout Buddhist’s sense of ethics is a product of their faith or of personality. She confesses at this point that she is uncertain about the clarity of what she is trying to communicate.

Maria makes explicit references her Buddhist colleague in her next statement. What she shares showcases the cognitive dissonance that can come with taking inter-religious relationships seriously.

So some of the people I know have a lot of personality and have strong beliefs about how life should be lived. One colleague of mine is a very devout Buddhist and really values family and relationships over money or success. She has a strong personality. We haven’t really chatted about the role her faith plays in this position though. Even before she became Buddhist, she had a strong personality.\footnote{Interview with Maria, April 2019.}
Could Maria’s colleague’s sense of ethics and love for her family really be a product of her Buddhist beliefs? Are they marks of a genuine faith that can transform life the way Christianity can or are they simply inherent to her colleague’s personality? Maria’s struggle to articulate this difference reveals how tentative differentiating faith and superstition can be when situated in genuine relationships that bear witness to ethical growth that is thought to be exclusive to one’s own faith. What if the developmental scale between superstition and faith cannot be dichotomized so easily between superstitious Buddhists and faith-driven Christians? Maria may suspect that the implications her answers would require her to revise her understanding of Christian faith. Her reasoning evidences classic forms of cognitive dissonance with a preference for maintaining her current beliefs rather than changing them. If Maria’s colleague’s behaviors and values reflect a personality she always had, it would strip these traits from her Buddhist beliefs. This allows her to continue placing Buddhism in the position of the other, a religious tradition that, while perhaps not always superstitious and selfish, is nonetheless deficient in obtaining the distinctive self-cultivation of Christian faith.

In conclusion, this phase of research uncovers a complex landscape of experiences and beliefs beneath deceptively simplistic definitions of faith and superstition. The faith that my informants ascribe to is the product of multiple negotiations developed throughout one’s life, from early childhood education in Marxist materialism, across the multiple religiosities and values that animate traditional Chinese religions, through personal experiences of God and spirits foiled by the testimonies of church and scripture. These definitions show how my informants simultaneously seek to draw distinct boundaries between their own sense of faith
and identity against others while also acknowledging their developmental journeys across boundaries and worldviews.

Theme three: Extending familial bonds

A more thorough examination of the above two themes during this second phase research led me to realize a third dynamic at work: the family-like nature of relationships within Chinese Christian experience. Sprinkled across the numerous narratives shared was not only the presence of God, but also the presence of congregations. The familial like bonds that animate everyday faith begin with one’s immediate congregation and expand across great distances, culminating in an imagined community of the church as one large family of God.  

Filial piety to parents and to God

This image of the church as family inevitably frames one’s relationship with God as child to parent. The child-parent relationship is also one of the cardinal relationships of Confucianism enshrined in the concept of “filial piety,” the most common translation of the term “xiao 孝.” While the connection may not always be explicitly stated, the overlapping concepts that animate these relations between children and parents surely impact a Chinese Christian’s perception of their relationship with God. On this topic, a parental conflict from

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43 See Richard Madsen, “Secular Belief, Religious Belonging in China,” Review of Chinese Religion and Society 1, (2014): 13-28. Madsen explores how many Chinese negotiate the tensions of maintaining secular beliefs while participating in religious communities and spiritual practices. He concludes that, in China’s post-socialist society, religious community has emerged as one of the primary vehicles for reconstituting the deep sense of belonging once prescribed by the nation’s communist social structure. Religious community, therefore, plays a significant role in remedying the tension of belief and belonging in everyday life without fully resolving it.
Maria’s early professional life in Shanghai provides a unique window into the ways familial affects and religiosity can cross paths, resulting in a particular sense of God’s presence closely tied with one’s experiences of child-parent relations. Maria was terribly unhappy with her job for a number of reasons that eventually led her to resign. Instead, she began pursuing freelance work in an area she felt more personal passion for. The work was unstable and did not pay well, but at least she felt positive about what she was doing.

This situation drew the negative attention of her parents, both of whom are also Christians. Maria’s parents were not happy about their daughter’s career choice and expressed their worry regularly. Maria shares,

When my parents came to visit, they were very concerned about my job switch, the lack of stability and lower salary. They are very conservative and value these things. My mom kept asking me to return to my field – that I didn’t have to go back to the same company – but to go back to area of work. At the time I didn’t feel like I did anything wrong – I was just following my interests. She kept nagging me and I finally said I would give it a try. I don’t know why but suddenly I began to cry – like I had an overwhelming feeling of failure at my filial duties. How could I put my parents through so much worry?

Maria struggled between living an unstable career life to pursue her own dreams and honoring her parents’ wishes for a stable career in a field she felt disinterested in. Maria emphasized she didn’t feel she had done anything wrong in a moral or ethical sense. Despite this, she was increasingly distraught by the worry she caused her parents.

During this incident, Maria was thankful her parents never threatened her in ways she has heard other parents have done in similar situations. She feels blessed to have parents that share her Christian faith, something that aligns their values. Their shared Christian faith adds another layer of affect and belief resulting in the blurring of lines between honoring God and

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44 Interview with Maria, April 2019.
honoring parents. Amidst the conflict, Maria’s father recommended they seek pastoral counseling on the issue. The pastor encouraged Maria to view her career path as a matter of faithfulness to God’s mission rather than of personal interest.

By the end of this process, Maria came to an additional conclusion: “After all of this I still didn’t feel like I did anything wrong, but I got the sense I not only disappointed my parents but maybe also God.” Maria’s simple confession reveals collection of complex theological propositions. Regarding the subject at hand, Maria’s connection between her feelings of disappointing her parents and disappointing God run parallel. More fascinating is the exact language she uses. In both cases of parents and of God, Maria believes she hasn’t done anything “wrong.” This is language of morality – of the right or wrong decision or action in a given context. The matter at hand is not an ethical one by traditional standards. Instead, what drives Maria to submit to her parents’ wishes is an affective sense of disappointing them. This same language prefaces Maria’s conviction that she may also be disappointing God. Resigning from her job and pursuing her own interests was not a sin, but it also wasn’t what God was calling her to.

While common feelings of disappointment were shared between Maria’s relational sense to both parents and God, the reasoning behind Maria’s embrace of her parents’ concerns was not to attain a stable job with good benefits. Instead, Maria recounts that the most convincing dimension of the pastor’s counseling was that God does not call Christians to easy places or to places that only benefitted one’s self. Instead, God calls us to places that are

45 Interview with Maria, April 2019.
difficult for others. “My pastor emphasized Abraham’s faith over the long course, his hope for future generations. He gave an example of carrying one’s cross – that we don’t carry a cross for a little bit and then, because it’s too heavy, leave it behind to find another one. All of this really convicted me, not just because I wasn’t being filial to my parents but something deeper,” Maria says.46 Through her parents’ disappointment and the pastor’s counseling, Maria came to believe God was calling her to be a Christian light in a work environment struggling with a post-communist cultural malaise.47

The congregation as God’s family

In many of my interviews, experiences of close family-like relationships bind Chinese Christian life. Recall Norman’s experience of God’s peace, noted in chapter one. For Norman, experiences of God’s peace resonated the strongest when he was in community with his brothers and sisters in Christ. Being in the presence of his Christian family, regardless of the activity, is enough to bestow that sense of peace. David’s experience of faith has also been shaped by family-like bonds, including during his recovery from surgery shortly after becoming

46 Interview with Maria, April 2019.

47 See Becky Hsu, “Having It All: Filial Piety, Moral Weighting, and Anxiety among Young Adults,” in The Chinese Pursuit of Happiness: Anxieties, Hopes, and Moral Tensions in Everyday Life, edited by Becky Hsu and Richard Madsen (Stanford, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 42-65. The dynamics observed in Maria’s negotiation of filial piety and Christian faith parallels and builds on overarching observations regarding filial piety and young adult life in contemporary China articulated by Hsu. Hsu argues that for many Chinese young adults, happiness is not only tied to one’s personal fulfillment but also that of their parents. Maria’s predicament not only mirrors this dynamic but also includes the dimension of religiosity and faith that envelope God, her parents, and her own happiness together.
a Christian in university. The congregation’s accompaniment during this difficult season was especially formative. Reflecting on Christian life as a whole, David states,

I’ve also felt part of a bigger family. Our church has several branches, so no matter where I go I feel like I have family to welcome me and support me. When I have challenges with finances or relations or health, the church has people who are willing to guide me. Everyone is open to talk about all kinds of things and mentors are always willing to give advice. I imagine when I have kids, they will also gain a lot from Sunday schools. We are like harmonious family that encourages one another. In many ways, church relations are even closer than blood relations.48

As China’s many unregistered house churches have grown and networked across urban hubs around the country, congregations have become more thanjust places for worship, but also centers of hospitality and transition for the those making a new life for themselves away from home.49 David’s reflection takes stock of nearly every significant event or circumstance a young adult would have to face—from finances and health to child rearing.50

During my first interview with Maria, she was struggling with her Shanghai fellowship. While the congregation provided her rich friendships and family-like support, it did not provide the critical engagement with scripture that grew her faith so dramatically when she lived in Hong Kong. When I reconnect with Maria a few months after our initial interview, she had begun attending a new congregation that she felt was not only relationally rich but also deeply

48 Interview with David, December 2018.


50 For an example of how moral expectations and social ties can shape economic relationships, See Becky Hsu, Borrowing Together: Microfinance and Cultivating Social Ties (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Hsu’s observations of village social ties their influence on how microfinance is practices is also present in the congregational life of persons like David. In this sense, the Christian congregation is not only a family of care but also a surrogate village within the city that tends to all aspects of life.
engaged in scripture and its application to her everyday life. Reflecting on her transition, Maria shares,

It was really hard. It’s like changing families. It was a process of prayer and discernment. I changed churches amicably and keep good relations with those in my former church, which is really a blessing. At this new church, I visited a few services and bible studies and prayed. It is more like the fellowship I went to in HK. The focus is on bible study. Out of the four services of a month, we actually do bible study three times and only have a sermon once a month. This puts the impetus on us to learn for ourselves rather than just listen to whatever the pastor says. And even when the pastor does speak, he doesn’t put the focus on himself. It’s really about God and you. I really liked this church, it provided what I was missing in my past church. I felt a lot of spiritual nutrition here.51

The importance of maintaining strong bonds across churches during Maria’s congregational change was observable in one of the photographs Maria took for the photovoice project. In it, Maria is riding a carriage with a group of friends. The subtitle reads: “After switching churches, I felt so moved to be invited out to hang out with my sisters from my old small group.” For Maria, maintaining a working friendship with members of her previous church, her sisters, was an important testimony of God’s presence.

The image of the congregation as family is a powerful one in the Chinese imagination given the importance of familial relationships in Confucian culture. To call fellow believers “brothers and sisters” on a regular basis elicits the highest of expectations.52 In one of Maria’s journal entries, she writes about negative feelings she harbored toward a member of her church who had made some unintentionally offensive comments about. In the concluding

51 Interview with Maria, April 2019.

paragraph of the entry, Maria shares, “I need God to guide me – to really give me a ‘familial’ perspective from which to see and care for my little sister (rang wo zhende you yige ‘jiaren’ de yanguang qu kandai meimei 让我真的有一个 ‘家人’ 的眼光去看待妹妹).” The quotation marks around what I have translated as “familial” above are in Maria’s original wording. The term “jiaren 家人” is normally used as a noun and literally means “family person/member.” In the context of Maria’s statement, the term is being used as an adjective; to be able to see this Christian sister with family-like eyes.

**The church as global family**

The church’s all-encompassing family-like presence is not limited to congregations within China either. Whether coming back to China from overseas or leaving for a business trip, there is always an opportunity to find a Christian and a church to connect with. In this capacity, social media plays a role in strengthening already existing ties. For example, Maria comments,

[social media] makes life easier. When I feel like I don’t have avenues for spiritual growth it’s always easy to find materials online – whether it is from Chinese churches abroad or elsewhere. It also allows us to stay in touch with other brothers and sisters who are far away. This is all good… When I travelled to the Philippines for a work trip, I used social media to network over and see if I could find a church community – and I did. This was really nice.

For Maria, the church as a global network expands her sense of family beyond the confines of her immediate congregation or even her network of congregations within China. Advised by her pastor to reach out to a Filipino church he knew, Maria found an authentic welcome during

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53 Maria’s journal entry, May 2019.

54 Interview with Maria, April 2019.
her work trip abroad. Another photograph Maria shares in her photovoice is of her smiling with three Filipina women. The caption reads: “So happy to meet my Filipina sisters during my work trip. Different languages don’t make a difference – we are united in the spirit!”

This global sense of the church as the family of God is also present in May’s life. She shares that Christians from other parts of the world who also work for her American-based company have taken initiative to reach out through messaging boards to establish a global prayer group to exchange requests. May was invited to join and reached out to other Christians in her office to participate. Sharing about this network, she emphasizes the great value she places on seeing the church around the world united in care for one another, becoming one family despite the cultural differences and geographical distances that separate us.

This sensibility is actively fostered in May’s congregation via a prayer and mission team she participates in. Part of this team’s responsibilities is to research the church in other parts of the world, sharing news with the congregation so they can pray regularly for them. This was another important element that came to mind when chatting with May about social media:

Social media gives me access to the world and the Christian community around the world. For example, at my church I’m now responsible for collecting information and researching Christian life in other countries. We pray for a country every month. For example, this month we are focused on Germany. I can set my WeChat to send me news regarding the church there from history to demographics – like the reformation and the current state of the church’s decline – some church buildings become businesses. I’m learning all this through WeChat. Also, the issues around migration and how Middle East conflicts are impacting German society including how Islam is affecting the culture.55

55 Interview with May, April 2019.
May believes these prayers stand out because of the congregation’s relational investment in them. She remembers similar prayers and information being shared regularly at her Chinese American church when she lived in the United States, but without the same care and attention.

Perhaps it has to do with the oppression [we also experience], so we are also more concerned about other Christians who are suffering. I remember when I was in the US, we prayed very generally about Christians elsewhere and the challenges they faced, but we didn’t really know much. But when we look into it here in China, we are really invested. We want to get to know the culture and particularities of their challenges like how they begin ministries and work together. It makes the kinds of prayers we gave in the US kind of empty.56

What is it about the Chinese context that makes prayers for the global church feel so full when the same prayers lifted up in the United States feel empty? May’s suggests the answer is a shared sense of persecution for one’s faith and the level of investment the congregation puts into learning about ministry in those contexts. In addition, the close-knit nature of Chinese congregational life might extend the same genuine concern experienced together to Christians in other parts of the world. The experience of the local is projected onto the global.

**Constructive theological reflections: The liturgy of life and grounding the triple dialogue**

The three themes explored in this chapter can be sourced to a common experience of boundary crossing and the negotiations that must be pursued to form a coherent sense of Christian religiosity and identity across differences. These ecclesial, religious, and familial experiences require my informants to reconfigure practice and belonging in everyday situations, contexts, and relationships. Can these daily negotiations be utilized in constructive

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56 Interview with May, April 2019.
theologizing, however? Moreover, can they be theologized through a contextually appropriate model resonant with Asian experiences? Moving from scriptural reasoning to constructive theological reflection, this section draws from Peter Phan’s conception of everyday life as a source and summit of theological insight alongside his emphasis on Asian Christianity’s triple dialogue (with religions, the poor, and cultures) as tools for grounded theological reflection that is resonant with my informants’ experiences. In addition, Phan’s conception of the fourfold forms through which the triple dialogue is experienced provides a foundation from which my informants’ religious experiences, everyday life actions, and theological ponderings can be substantiated as evidence of an inward dialogue between God and disciple that is needed to facilitate outward dialogue with others as a modality for ecclesial and missional formation.

Building on the work of Karl Rahner, Phan argues that traditional conceptions of ecclesial liturgy focused on the eucharist as a focal point of theology are misguided (particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition). In this view, the life of the church has a trickle-down effect beginning with Christ’s power and presence embedded in the eucharist and distributed through the liturgy down to the people, providing all a sense of communion with God that ought to strengthen and guide Christian life. In contrast, Phan argues for a reversed conception of liturgy that grounds the source of God’s power and presence in the daily lives of the people.

This “liturgy of life as source and summit” is based on four assumptions. First, Phan argues that experiences of God are available to all: “the liturgy of life consists of experiences of God, available to all human beings, in the midst of life and in all concrete situations, from the most sublime to the most mundane, both positive and negative. It is called ‘liturgy’ because
these experiences are always sustained by God’s self-gift to the world.”  

Second, Phan believes these experiences are grounded in Christ. He states, “this liturgy of the world has a Christological character, for two reasons. The first is that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross or his liturgy derives its origin or emerged from the liturgy of the world… The second reason for the Christological character of the liturgy of life is the fact that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Logos brought it to its fullest fulfillment and constitute its supreme point.”  

Third, these experiences of God’s presence are embedded in the everyday. This means, “the liturgy of life is necessarily diffuse, unstructured, and therefore easily unnoticed. This characteristic flows from the transcendental nature of our experiences of God. The presence of God – silently present and silencing his presence – occurs as a nameless mystery in the depths of our everyday experiences and hence is frequently ignored, misinterpreted, and even suppressed.”  

Fourth, it is these experiences that animate and move forward the life and mission of the church: “this liturgy of life is the very source of fecundity and effectiveness of the liturgy of the church. Indeed, humanity’s ongoing communion with God in grace in daily life is, according to Rahner, the primary and original liturgy.”  

Phan believes these principles underly the very fabric of reality and composition of the church. They reflect the universality of God’s presence among all. This normativity is not, however, without its particulars. Given the world’s many cultures, religions, and societies,
different communities will experience God in their own unique ways. Phan has spent the majority of his career pondering what the liturgy of life looks like in modern Asian contexts and what unique insights into Christ these experiences can provide to the global church’s knowledge of God. His findings can be easily distilled in what is known as the triple dialogue of Asian Christianity. This emphasis on dialogue is the result of Christianity’s minority status in most of Asia paired with many Asian cultures’ strong emphasis on collectivism and community. Because Christians in Asia are surrounded by diverse cultures and religions that can be in constant tension, their capacity to represent their faith is best pursued through the witness of its close-knit community of care and its outward posture of listening and dialogue. The Asian church’s primary mode of being, its liturgy of life, is thus characterized by community and dialogue. Regarding community, Phan writes,

In terms of ecclesiology, the church is defined primarily as a communion of communities. Hence, this Asian way of being church places the highest priority on communion and collegiality at all the levels of church life and activities. At the vertical level, communion is realized with the trinitarian God whose *perichoresis* the church is commissioned to reflect in history. On the horizontal level, communion is achieved with other local churches, and within each local church, communion is realized through collegiality, by which all members, especially lay women and men, are truly and effectively empowered to use their gifts to make the church as authentically local church.61

For Asian Christians, Phan argues, the community is an embodiment of God’s communitarian nature of God represented in the mystery of the trinity. The close-knit life of the church is a theological statement to the entire world, speaking to the nature of God’s self. The powerful

61 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 17.
emphasis on familial like bonds present in my informants reinforces this observation as a living reality among Chinese Christians.

This inward posture is complimented by an outward orientation of dialogue that localizes the church in the concrete realities of culture and society. Phan writes, “The modality in which this process of becoming the local church takes place is dialogue ... (dialogue is) the modality in which everything is to be done by and in the church in Asia including liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue.”62 A modality of dialogue implies that theology can only be constructed from the church’s active engagement and critical reflection on daily realities facing them. The dialogues Phan believe to be most pertinent to the experience of Asians are that of liberation, culture, and religions. Articulated by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, this triple dialogue acknowledges and behooves Asian Christians to ground their theologizing in the everyday realities of poverty, diversity, and religious pluralism present in every Asian society.63 It is through this triple dialogue that the church in Asia becomes a locally particular yet indispensable part of the universal body of Christ, incarnated in the daily rhythms of Asia’s history and everyday experiences.

In what ways does this triple dialogue proceed in the everyday lives of Asian Christians and how are they experienced? Phan submits a fourfold experience of the triple dialogue in the following way,

62 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 17-19.

a. the *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.  
b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.  
c. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.  
d. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplations, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.  

Whereas the triple dialogue with the poor, cultures, and religions can be understood as the content of the Asian church’s dialogue, the above statement outlines experiences of these dialogues in everyday life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience. It is via these four forms or modes of dialogue that the insights rendered from Asia’s poor, cultures, and religions are contextualized/inculturated into the church’s theology.  

Phan’s proposal is inspired and echoed by many Asian theologians of the past century.  

It, therefore, serves as a promising beginning for pondering the theological value of the data collected thus far. When analyzed through the lens of liturgy, the lived experiences of my informants are rich sources for theological construction. If we view my informants’ experiences as a source and summit of theology, what can we learn? Their sense of God’s peace and ethical guidance coupled with their negotiations of ecclesial and religious diversity and belonging can be traced along Phan’s fourfold experience of dialogue as the foundational modality for theologizing.

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64 Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 19.

The key difference between Phan’s proposal and my application is the situational contexts and orientation in which these dialogues take place. For Phan, the dialogues of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience take place between the Christian church and those outside of it with a focus on ecclesial formation and mission. Dialogue forms an authentically Asian church inwardly while simultaneously expanding the reign of God outwardly. While these experiences of dialogue can be pursued by laypersons through embodied solidarity alongside others, Phan’s articulation also requires persons of religious expertise with inter-religious sensibilities to lead this building of the church.

In the context of this study, however, these forms of dialogue are applied as components of religious formation based on the individual’s internal dialogue between themselves and God as they make sense of their Christian identity, lifestyle, ethics, and relationships. My focus is on the important role that processes of individual formation play side by side with larger questions of ecclesial inculturation and missional engagement with others. In this arrangement, religious experience initiates this internal dialogue, defined in a phenomenological sense that emphasizes the beginnings of dialogue with God rather than dialogue with others. It casts the symbols and affects that activate my informants’ sacred consciousness as a form of everyday revelation and holy invitation. My informants’ experiences of peace in everyday life mark God’s abductive nature, inviting them to recognize and dwell in God’s presence.

Second, the beginnings of dialogue rendered by religious experience quickly expands into a dialogue of life and action as my informants begin exploring how their relationship with God ought to orient their everyday life, particularly in regard to matters of everyday ethics and
relationships. The inner dialogues of life and action are exhibited in my informants’ search for guidance in how to behave in the different contexts of congregations, work, and families. The content of this dialogue is drawn from the discourses and embodiments that populate and cycle through one’s daily routines. What this study has uncovered thus far is that the inward dialogues of life and action are most potent in two situations: first, in liminal states that require negotiating Christian ethical standards with societal norms and, second, in relational contexts of either heightened cohesion or cleavage. My informants seek peace and courage to navigate everyday challenges in ways that are pleasing to God and that strengthens the church.

Third, embedded in these dialogues are also theological exchanges among different Christian and non-Christian traditions. While they do not rise to the levels of sophistication religious professionals navigate, they are no less significant for discerning God’s work. My informants’ experiences across different cultures and Christian denominations prompt explicit theological reflections about the God’s work in the world, the role of scripture and the Holy Spirit, the nature of the church, and the nature of other religious traditions like Buddhism or other folk religiosities. These higher order questions touch upon the very structures that hold a cohesive religious tradition together in large communities across space and time, strengthening the sacred canopy that holds together a worldview believed to be grounded in God and, therefore, universal and global.

What these preliminary reflections reveal is the necessity of understanding the internal dialogue between one’s self and God as a prologue to actualizing the triple dialogue’s outward posture towards the poor, other cultures, and other religious traditions. The latter cannot be understood fully without a window into the former. Internal dialogues rooted between the
individual and God that are negotiated and expressed through the rhythms of everyday life are what grounds the triple dialogue’s larger ecclesial and missional ends. The emic findings featured in the previous chapter and the three etic themes observed in this chapter are starting points for expanded dialogues of greater theological, ecclesial, and missional significance that are not sourced to religious elites, tradition, or scripture, but in everyday experiences. The questions of ethical expectation my informants struggle with, and yet take pride in, lay the seeds for larger questions about faith and society including relationships with the poor. While the close-knit familial bonds that characterize my informants’ congregational lives signals an ecclesial inculturation of Chinese culture’s family-centric values, some of my informants’ transboundary experiences with different congregations and cultures introduces complicated questions of the church’s universal nature. Their negotiation of Christian religiosity and identity with Buddhism, communism, and other folk traditions also require dialogue with other religions and ideologies on a grounded everyday level. In all of these ways, the everyday dialogues my informants undergo to build the reign of God in their individual and congregational lives are tied to the larger theological project of expanding God’s reign in and through the world church. This connection provides a compelling basis from why the work of everyday lived theology ought to be substantially linked with larger projects in constructive theology.

Conclusion

As I expanded my research into the three themes explored in this chapter, themes of boundary crossing, making, and negotiation emerge throughout. First, a correlation has been observed between one’s transboundary experiences and their capacity to analyze cultural and
theological differences. Second, examinations of my informants’ perception of faith and superstition also yielded insights into the ways my informants negotiate the complexity of these terms in relationship with their Marxist materialist upbringing, their perceptions of other religious traditions, and their openness to the world of the spirits. Third, an extended inquiry across multiple interviews also revealed a larger dynamic surrounding the family-like bonds that animate Chinese congregations and the negotiation of belonging.

The conclusions rendered here have thus shifted the trajectory of this project from a single focus on how experiences of God’s presence influence everyday life to how one negotiates these experiences across various boundaries including religious, cultural, and geographical. Using a constant comparative process, the insights gathered from this second phase of research provide a number of new ways for understanding the various processes that contribute to the religious formation of these young adult Chinese Protestants. Individual experiences of God’s presence in personal prayer, bible studies, and workplaces reflect one dimension of lived faith. But larger dynamics of negotiating culture and ecclesial diversity, inter-religious relations, and congregational relationships signal a multi-faceted narrative made up of several processes taking place simultaneously. Religious formation is far from straightforward.

The research’s shift in focus also accounts for fast paced changes taking place in Chinese policies governing religion. This project began with a focus on Chinese Christian young professionals in the context of contemporary China centered on Shanghai and its surrounding regions. Over the course of this study, however, security concerns increased monthly as the current regime continued to tighten its oversight on Christian communities. Beginning in 2014,
authorities began tearing down crosses of established Three-Self churches and breaking up larger unregistered house church movements.\textsuperscript{66} By 2019, the well-known Early Rain Reformed Church in Sichuan province was closed and its publicly influential pastor, Wang Yi, arrested.\textsuperscript{67} On several occasions, I was warned by Chinese scholars that an extensive study of Chinese Christian communities in the mainland might prove difficult in the current climate, particularly if participant observation was involved.

After careful consideration, a decision was made to build and shift a third phase of research from the Shanghai region to Hong Kong. In addition to security concerns, the data I collected and analyzed during my second phase provided credible cause to turn my attention to the former British colony. Hong Kong not only provides a secure setting for open conversations about Christian life, it also exists as an alternative Chinese modernity. Although the location has changed, this project remains focused on mainland raised Chinese young professionals. This affords a unique opportunity to investigate the ways this generation of Christians negotiates faith in a place that is familiar, given its Chinese cultural foundations, yet also dramatically different. Because Hong Kong’s social and cultural life have been shaped by very different historical contingencies than that of mainland China, research in this context provides

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\item Wang Yi’s final statement, “My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience,” has been published by China Partnership and is available at: \url{https://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2018/12/my-declaration-of-faithful-disobedience}. China Partnership maintains a well organized English language website outlining the history and influence of Early Rain Reformed Church and Wang Yi’s theology, available at: \url{https://www.chinapartnership.org/early-rain-covenant-church}
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a rich comparative study on how mainland Chinese Christians negotiate religiosity and identity across boundaries of culture, religion, and community.

The three themes articulated in this chapter carry new questions that are well suited for further investigation in a new cultural context like Hong Kong. First, my informants’ transboundary experiences provided many new eyes to see how faith is negotiated once they have returned to their homeland, but I wondered what can be learned from those who have left mainland China but had not yet returned? What kinds of questions are they asking and how are they adjusting their faith lives amidst their new settings? Second, differentiating faith from superstition and the different questions that accompany this negotiation are complicated by Hong Kong’s unique context. In Hong Kong, communist ideology holds little sway on everyday life and traditional religiosities rooted in Buddhist and Daoist traditions continue to thrive. I wondered how mainland Chinese Christians might experience and process this diverse ideological and religious landscape. Third, this study has found that close-knit familial-like bonds animate many of my informants’ congregational experiences. Based on this finding, I wondered how these familial bonds are experienced and renegotiated across boundaries? Specifically, how might mainland Chinese perceive and navigate a Christian culture shaped by colonial privilege and religious freedom? Altogether, how does all of this shape mainland Chinese experiences of God’s presence?
CHAPTER 4: Everyday faith across boundaries of congregation, culture, and religion

Live in Hong Kong: Investigating religious formation across boundaries

Hong Kong is part of China, but it is not China. This simple, yet paradoxical, statement animates the next turn in this study; examining experiences of God’s presence among young professionals who were born and raised in mainland China but now live in Hong Kong. This demographic of Hong Kong dwellers are popularly known as “Hong Kong drifters” (港漂 gangpiao) or “inbetweeners.”¹ Most come to Hong Kong for higher education and some stay for career advancement. They “drift” through Hong Kong because they are not technically foreigners and yet they experience foreignness.² While they share common elements of Chinese culture and ancestry with local Hong Kongers, their mainland upbringing could not be more different. In Hong Kong, Cantonese is the lingua franca and English is preferable to Mandarin. Forged by its colonial history and global capitalism, Hong Kong society proudly owns its sense of freedom and rule of law as normative values in stark contrast to the mainland’s communist history and state-centered control. To broker a practical truce between these two worlds, the mainland Chinese government promised Hong Kong a large degree autonomy under


² There is not a lot of academic literature related to mainland Chinese experience in Hong Kong. A notable exception is the work of Cora Lingling Xu, who has studied the mainland Chinese student experience in Hong Kong at length. Given a significant portion of my Hong Kong informant sample is drawn from this demographic, this study builds on a number of her findings and insights. See Cora Lingling Xu, “Identity and cross-border student mobility: The mainland China–Hong Kong experience,” European Educational Research Journal 14, no. 1 (2015): 65-73. See also Lina Vyas and Baohua Yu, “An investigation into the academic acculturation experiences of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong,” Higher Education 76, no. 5 (2018): 883-901.
a “one country, two systems” framework. But with each passing year mainland-Hong Kong this fragile relationship frays.³

As Hong Kong and the mainland continue to negotiate their integration, the educated and upwardly mobile mainlanders that come to Hong Kong to study and work must wrestle with a complicated set of social and cultural tensions. In the early years following the 1997 transition, many Hong Kongers perceived Chinese mainlanders as uncivilized and poor. As borders between the mainland and Hong Kong have loosened, waves of mainland migrants began to visit the territory. Those on the lower economic stature were perceived to be “locusts” pillaging Hong Kong’s way of life. “Day traders” passed through Hong Kong to purchase mass amounts of goods unavailable in the mainland in order to sell them at a profit across the border. China’s new rich came to Hong Kong to spend their money, often purchasing extravagant homes. Pregnant mainland women traveled to Hong Kong to give birth so their children might benefit from the region’s alternative social system. In all of these cases, mainlanders were seen as takers that drove up costs and increased life’s difficulties with little concern for the local populace.⁴ Hong Kong drifters often find themselves caught in this crossfire. They battle stereotypes and bias from the outside while inwardly struggling with a

³There is a wealth of literature in Hong Kong studies that explores the unique sociocultural history and location of Hong Kong and its relationship to China and the world, a review of which is beyond the scope of this study. On Hong Kong-China political relations, see P. W. Preston, The Politics of China-Hong Kong Relations: Living with Distant Masters (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016). For a cultural and post-colonial analysis, see Robert F. Ash, Hong Kong in Transition: One Country Two Systems (New York: Routledge, 2003) and Yaowei Zhu, Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018).

sense of isolation.\textsuperscript{5} Since the 2014 Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement protests and 2019’s Anti-Extradition Law Protests, tensions between mainland Chinese and local Hong Kongers has only grown tenser as Hong Kong’s sense of identity shifts in response to mainland Chinese rule.\textsuperscript{6}

The border that separates mainland China from Hong Kong is thus one of the world’s most complex boundaries on multiple levels of politics, society, economics, culture, and even religion. In contrast to China, there is complete freedom of religion in Hong Kong. During British colonial rule, Christianity held a position of privilege. In 2019, Hong Kong’s Protestants numbers some 800,000 persons, about 10% of the region’s population.\textsuperscript{7} Despite its numerical minority, churches and their various schools and social ministries play an outsized influence in the city’s public life. Moreover, popular practices of Buddhism, Daoism, and other folk beliefs are vibrantly active in Hong Kong. Unlike the mainland, where decades of systematic persecution have rendered many temples into tourist sites and suppressed numerous practices, Hong Kong’s temples are still filled with worshippers. Traditional fortune tellers are consulted regularly and numerous shrines to the local gods and spirits litter the streets and businesses.\textsuperscript{8}


The endless contingencies that have shaped and reshaped Hong Kong over the past century make it a unique space for examining Christian religiosity and religious identity, especially for mainlanders raised in a completely different religious context. How Hong Kong shape the religious formation of Chinese Christians from the mainland? I spent the month of July, 2019, in Hong Kong expanding my study sample with an additional twenty-three participants spread across six different congregations. Three congregations can be classified as Mandarin speaking churches, mostly composed of persons from either mainland China or other parts of the Chinese diaspora. The other three can be classified as international Anglophone churches with a diversity of nationalities and ethnicities participating.

During interviews, I asked a series of questions similar to the ones used in previous phases of research, but with greater emphasis on comparing mainland and Hong Kong contexts. In addition to in-depth interviews, I also observed and participated in nineteen different events connected with the faith lives of a number of my participants including Sunday services, fellowship meetings, bible studies, and various social outings. Three of my new participants also participated in photovoice and journaling activities.

This chapter presents new insights from a month of fieldwork in Hong Kong, exploring how changes in context and environment impact this study’s earlier findings. While certain foundational elements of my Hong Kong informants’ faith experiences mirror those living in the mainland, there were also important differences that can be attributed to the spiritually

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9 While my time in Hong Kong happens to overlap with a number of significant protests and incidents in the Anti-Extradition Law movement, the impact of these events on my informants’ experiences of Christian faith is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study. I will only report that the most generalizable response I received during conversations and interviews with my informants was one of sympathy for the Hong Kong protesters, traceable to the mainland Chinese Christian experiences of government oversight and persecution.
formative power of boundary crossing. For most mainlanders, Hong Kong is experientially a different country requiring significant cultural adaptations.\textsuperscript{10} For Christians, this macro-level shift includes additional sub-categories of adjustment across boundaries of congregational, national, and religious cultures, all of which have bearing on their religious formation and experiences of God’s presence.

\textit{Crossing congregational cultures}

This section reviews two young married couples’ transition between mainland and Hong Kong congregational cultures, analyzing the various ways each person’s sense of religiosity and identity shifts. For many mainland Chinese, Mandarin speaking fellowships that share commonalities in language and culture are the most comfortable contexts in which to worship. Nevertheless, because of the region’s open religious environment, Hong Kong’s Mandarin speaking churches operate differently than the mainland. This can facilitate different worship experiences, even in congregations with a mainland Chinese majority. Organizationally, many of these Mandarin speaking congregations operate as ministries under larger local Cantonese speaking churches. This adds a layer of complexity where local Hong Kong church leaders and mainland parishioners must administer congregational life together.

In this third phase of fieldwork, I extended my network through existing mainland informants who had attended local congregations during their graduate studies in Hong Kong to

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other mainland Chinese who still resided in that region. For example, Daniel introduced me to Briana and Peter. Recently married, Briana and Peter came to Hong Kong for graduate studies in 2015 and stayed following graduation. They currently attend a small Mandarin speaking congregation connected with a local Cantonese speaking church. Because the fellowship is largely made up of transitory students coming and going from nearby universities every few years, Briana and Peter’s long-term presence has made them important lay leaders.

Briana and Peter’s experiences resonate with many of my mainland informants’ perspectives. Briana feels the best part of her faith is the sense of peace and security she experiences based on God’s sovereignty over her life. “The best part of being a Christian is no matter what good or bad happens in life, I know God is behind it,” Briana shares, “Good things are God’s grace to me and bad things are ways to build me up, so I can approach life with a sense of peace. And the hope of eternal life of course.”11 Peter finds in his faith an alternative value system that replaces selfishness with a God-centered worldview. He adds, “The best part for me is the new worldview. I see life so differently than before. So many people I know operate with self-interest as their goal… My values are different – I need to be humble and give glory to God. It’s really given me a new set of values.”12

Much of Briana and Peter’s faith lives have been shaped in the Hong Kong context despite becoming Christians in the mainland. Briana came to faith in a house church context just four months before beginning graduate school in Hong Kong. In those short months, she

11 Interview with Briana and Peter, November 2018.

12 Interview with Briana and Peter, November 2018
was especially passionate about her faith and was deeply committed to her church community in ways that mirrored what I heard from Maria and May. Peter, similar to Daniel, was a confessing Christian during undergraduate studies but did not attend any congregation or fellowship regularly. Instead, he read the bible and prayed on his own.

After spending five years in Hong Kong, Briana and Peter have developed different impressions of Hong Kong’s Christian culture. Briana still prefers the house church context she came to faith in. “Of course [all Christians] share the same roots of faith, the same foundation. Of course, freedom of religion is good too,” Briana begins, “But the house church community has always been under pressure, so our experiences of God are more passionate, shaped by these struggles. I didn’t like Hong Kong churches at first because people appeared fake to me, but then I realized it’s just a different attitude toward church.”

Briana continues, [In the house churches] there is an innocent but strong unity that comes out of love for God. Because of the suffering, preachers are more direct and want to preach what matters most. I feel like pastors in Hong Kong try to comfort congregants and won’t emphasize the challenges. They emphasize love but they don’t highlight God’s expectations of us. This was a huge change for me. In Hong Kong, the concept of sin becomes less important – people just feel they are always forgiven. So I don’t really like the teaching here. It doesn’t help me grow spiritually.

In contrast, Peter feels his Hong Kong fellowship has taught him how to be a Christian in community and enjoys the openness and resources churches provides for his spiritual growth.

“Coming to Hong Kong, for me, was a chance to grow my faith... I became a Christian in China, but I didn’t have a Christian community. So a lot of my growth has come here in Hong Kong,

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13 Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.

14 Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.
[I’ve learned] what it means to worship and fellowship and pray,” Peter explains, “Hong Kong is a better environment because the church structure is more established, which means it offers me more resources for growth… I don’t think I’d have these resources if I were in mainland.”

Briana agrees, “If our church isn’t able to provide what we need, there are many other classes and retreats held by other churches. I would never be able to have these different perspectives with my house church in the mainland… In Hong Kong there are Christian bookstores and resources that have help me grow, but it isn’t necessarily from our pastor’s teaching or care.”

As a point of comparison, Briana explains how in the mainland, house church communities often don’t have a full-time pastor. Normally one pastor will oversee a network of home groups, visiting different meeting points each week. When the pastor isn’t available, congregation members step up to lead bible studies. In order to fellowship together, Briana’s home church network would bring together congregations from various regions for two the three day retreats during holiday breaks. These concentrated times of prayer and worship fostered a deep sense of God’s presence in a large family-like setting.

Peter expands on this contrast between Hong Kong and the mainland. “Hong Kong is probably like other Western nations with freedom of religion… there are lots of churches everywhere. They have to compete for congregants like a market,” he observes, “So we don’t hear a lot of teachings on what it means to suffer and carry our cross. We aren’t challenged from the pulpit the same way because, with so many churches available to attend in Hong Kong, a pastor wouldn’t dare offend too many congregants. They’d just leave and go to

15 Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.

16 Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.
another church! And that really is the case – there are people who constantly hop from church to church. There are people who never feel any obligation to go deeper or to serve.”\(^\text{17}\)

This is not the case for Briana or Peter, however. Briana teaches Sunday School classes and leads worship. Peter helps to organize the church’s order of service every Sunday. Both liaison with the Cantonese pastor and congregational leaders as part of the larger church leadership structure. “I never thought I’d be so active as a leader of this church. Since so many [mandarin speaking] members of our church come to study and then leave, we have really had to step up... We feel God is preparing us for something through this,” Peter says.\(^\text{18}\)

For Briana, serving the church provides a way of cultivating personal spiritual growth she feels is lacking in other parts of congregational life. It is an opportunity for her to exhibit the values she fostered in her mainland house church. “I have seen God’s grace at work in our little congregation,” she says, “When we arrived, we had some great older brothers and sisters who discipled us, but they had to leave. I became the big sister all of a sudden and now I realize we need to grow through leading too... I know this to be grace of God. As for the future, I will go where God calls me.”\(^\text{19}\) This openness to God’s calling has led her on a path toward full time ministry. In the spring of 2019, Briana began working part time for their church in a formal capacity and began Master of Divinity studies at a local Hong Kong seminary.

Briana and Peter’s story point to what is both gained and lost in Hong Kong’s religious context. Briana misses the passion and unity of her house church experiences – valuing the

\(^{17}\) Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.

\(^{18}\) Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.

\(^{19}\) Interview with Briana and Peter, April 2019.
challenging teachings that regularly call parishioners to the high ethical standards of the faith. In Hong Kong the teachings lean toward God’s love, mercy, and comfort that is attributed to freedom of religion and a generally more individualistic culture. Peter, who never participated in congregational life living in mainland China, has thrived in this more open setting. As a result, Briana and Peter have both taken initiative to become lay leaders in their congregation and take advantage of many resources for spiritual growth made available in the city.

I join Briana and Peter for a number of Friday night fellowship gatherings. Each week some ten to twenty mainland Chinese young adults come together for worship, sharing, and bible study. Here, I am introduced to Susie and Alan, another young couple who just completed their graduate degrees and began working. Susie and Alan’s experiences are similar to Briana and Peter’s in many ways. They too see the open yet individualizing effects of religious freedom on their personal and congregational lives. Unlike Briana, however, Susie and Alan have found this new environment a refreshing change from the intensity of their house church experiences in the mainland. Their story provides an alternative look at how Hong Kong’s unique context shapes religiosities formed in the mainland.

Susie and Alan were both born in the same region along the mainland’s eastern coastline. The city they grew up in is well known throughout China for its large Christian population. Both Susie and Alan grew up in families associated with one of China’s largest house church networks. When Susie and Alan went to the provincial capital for undergraduate studies, they were quickly plugged into a student fellowship of hundreds, led by pastoral leaders sent from their hometown network. It was at this university fellowship that Alan and
Susie met, began dating, and married after graduation (encouraged by their parents to wed sooner than later). The newlyweds then moved to Hong Kong for study and work.

Susie’s Christian faith has been an intimate part of her life since childhood. She remembers playing outside her village church when she was just five years old. It was her schooling that drove the first wedge into her religiosity. Always a dutiful student, Susie has a vivid memory of failing one particular question on a class test. The question asked how the world was created. Susie wrote “God created the world,” and was strictly corrected. “After that I began lying on my tests, just giving the expected answer. I always felt so bad about it.”

Over time, Susie distanced herself from her faith to fit in better with her peers. She harbored increasingly difficult doubts about God’s existence. Despite these doubts, she found great comfort in her spiritual routines. “My mother forced me into a habit of scripture reading every night, so even when I didn’t believe it all I still read. I still sung a hymn. My roommates didn’t understand why but they said I always slept well,” she laughs.

During Susie’s senior year of high school, she became very ill and was worried she would not be able to pass her physical education exam (a requirement for graduation). After much prayer from her church community, she not only recovered but avoided the need to take the exam based on certain school policies. “At that point in my life, I felt very independent and successful, like I could do everything on my own. But after I was healed, I realized so much depends on God presence.

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20 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.

21 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
There is so much that I cannot control.”  

Thankful and recommitted to her faith, Susie left for university and became one of the primary leaders of the university fellowship.

Alan’s father and mother were often both away on business, leaving him in the care of his devout grandparents who made him go to church on a regular basis. This soured him to Christianity at a young age. When Alan began university in the provincial capital, he refused to attend the student fellowship set up by his family’s house church network. After repeated pleas from his parents he finally decided to visit and was pleasantly surprised by the number of hometown friends and classmates who were also there, so he continued attending the fellowship for social reasons. Over time, Alan took on leadership roles in the prayer ministry, taught bible study, and helped with outreach. He did all of this without fully committing to Christianity and was vocally reluctant to get baptized. “You could say I was serving while searching,” he remarks. While leading small groups during his third year of university, however, Alan says something changed. After serving the church for so long, he finally accepted baptism.

Susie and Alan moved to Hong Kong in 2016 for graduate studies and now call the region home. They both voice great thankfulness for the small Mandarin speaking congregation they attend because the mainland Chinese experience in Hong Kong can be very isolating. Alan notes their small, close knit, Hong Kong fellowship has been more important to his life than his large mainland house church network because it didn’t just offer Christian fellowship but also cultural familiarity in a foreign setting.

Susie was thankful that, because of Hong Kong’s religious freedom, she no longer needed to live her faith with a “hide and seek” mentality. She recalls how their mainland

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22 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
university fellowship needed to alternate meeting locations every semester to hide from authorities and used coded messages in their texts. On occasion, the fellowship leaders were arrested and later released as warnings. Most recently, the church building Susie grew up playing outside in her village was torn down by her local government authorities.

Susie and Alan also believe religious freedom fosters a more relaxed congregational culture when it comes to living out one’s faith. “In the mainland, our church emphasized God’s law and expectations, but it’s different here. For example, we don’t eat duck blood tofu because the bible teaches us not to. But I remember having hotpot with some local Hong Kong Christians who ate it without any concern. I was astonished. They laughed and told me those restrictions were Old Testament teachings and that, in Jesus, we are free, so don’t worry,” Alan says, “I still don’t eat it though, just to be safe.” Alan laughs at himself as he shares this, as if to imply he now knows better but can’t quite shake the habits his home church has formed. “(Mainland) Chinese churches are still very conservative, I guess,” he says, “I remember a lot of sermons about what it means to be a child of light versus a child of darkness.”

Susie shares similar experiences. “I think I was more afraid of God in the mainland. I always blamed myself for anything that went wrong as if God was punishing me... Once, I even thought the pimples I got on my face were God’s punishment. I look back now and it seems so silly. But in Hong Kong, I feel like I experience more grace and God’s love and I’m more relaxed.” Susie pauses and thinks a bit more before expanding on her answer.

23 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
24 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
25 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
I’m not sure if it’s good or bad, but I definitely prayed more in the mainland. In my old church we would all pray aloud together on our knees for like, forty minutes. During that time, we all felt a whole range of emotions... In the mainland, I think my relationship with God was closer. [But] I always felt I needed to work to experience God’s presence, to always be prayerful and active and to really feel it. In Hong Kong, life is so fast and busy. I don’t pray as much. The sermons are shorter and we all pray silently. Here I feel less intimacy with God... My faith is the same of course, but my behaviors are so different... 

Susie speaks slowly as she mulls over the pros and cons of her time in Hong Kong, what she has gained and what she misses. Alan chimes in cheerfully with a mischievous smile, “It’s like this: in the mainland the emphasis is, ‘Confess your sins! Be thankful God doesn’t punish us more.’ In Hong Kong it’s ‘Sin? God loves you, don’t worry.’ In the mainland we hear, ‘faith without deeds is dead,’ and in Hong Kong we hear, ‘Just have faith and you are saved.’”

It is hard to make out how Alan actually feels about these differences given his lighthearted and joking manner.

Susie smiles and takes the lead to paint a more serious and personal profile of his husband’s religiosity since coming to Hong Kong. “Honestly, I’ve seen a big change in Alan. He cites scripture more than he used to and I feel like he is also more aware of God’s presence. In university, the music he listened to rarely included hymns, but now they do. Amazingly, in a city that is busier, he has grown calmer and more spiritually mature.”

She describes how Alan will often text her photos he takes of the cityscape or the mountains on his daily bus commute, admiring the scenery and giving thanks for the opportunity to be where they are. Alan nods sheepishly. He tells me that, in Hong Kong, he is able to live out his faith in a calmer and more everyday way because in the mainland, their fellowship emphasized commitment, service, and

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26 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.

27 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.

28 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
being set apart. Being a fellowship leader meant setting aside entire weekends for planning and leading. “With so much responsibility, the pressure was very high. So, for me, Hong Kong has given me more space to focus on myself.” Because Susie and Alan did not have to serve and lead at the level of intensity they once did in the mainland, they were able to focus on their own spiritual journey.

What do Briana, Peter, Alan, and Susie show us about mainland Chinese Christian experiences of God’s presence in the context of Hong Kong? First, Hong Kong’s freedom of religion had a double-edged effect. On the one hand, this freedom provided the opportunity to live faith out in a new way without feeling singled out or pressured. All four also agreed the open environment provided a greater range of resources for spiritual growth if one desired to go deeper. On the other hand, this freedom also came with a heightened sense of individualism. If one desired deeper spiritual growth, you had to pursue it yourself. Those who came from a house church background observed this individualism dampened the collective bonding and passion they experience in the mainland. While Briana missed the focused passion and community of her mainland house church, Susie and Alan seemed to enjoy the more relaxed atmosphere of their Hong Kong church.

Their contrasting experiences can be accounted for based on the amount of time and intensity each had participated in their fellowships prior to their move in Hong Kong. Briana had only been active in her house church for a short time before moving to Hong Kong. She admits it was a sort of “honeymoon” period. As such, her preference for the congregational culture of her house church may be shaded by a degree of nostalgia. In contrast, Susie and Alan

29 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
served as fellowship leaders for most of their undergraduate studies and may have grown tired of the commitments it required. For Susie and Alan, the small yet open Mandarin speaking congregation offered them community and support in a foreign environment without the service demands of their house church. This dynamic was also true for Peter, who had never participated or served in a church in the mainland. In the mainland, Peter’s faith was largely private and rational, based on personal study of scripture. In Hong Kong, Peter’s faith grew through service even as Susie and Alan’s grew through stepping away from service.

Most notably, the Hong Kong congregational context appeared to dampen affective experiences of God’s presence. Briana shares, “After I moved here, I felt my prayers weren’t as effective, or I should say I felt God was farther away. But after I met Peter and we began dating and serving in the church, looking back, it’s clear God was present even if I did not feel it.”

Briana cites a recent challenge she and Peter faced a few months earlier. Peter needed to renew his residency permit to stay in Hong Kong, but if he did not meet a certain sales threshold at his job, the company would not support his paperwork. Briana and Peter prayed, but they didn’t receive much emotional comfort or sense of direction. “I think the hardest thing is prayer because sometimes when you pray you don’t always see any changes and I don’t really know what to do with that,” Peter admits.

Despite these uncertainties, Peter was able to renew his permit without any problems. This process gave Peter much food for thought.

Perhaps in the past we felt “why are we facing these challenges” but now we see challenges as God’s way of shaping us and forming us. Now we ask “what is God trying to teach us through this?”... At a personal level, I know I must depend on God to face

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30 Interview with Briana and Peter, July 2019.

31 Interview with Briana and Peter, July 2019.
challenges but if you ask me practically what that means – I don’t know how to answer it. If I go through three months of struggle and prayer and nothing changes, am I depending on God? But when you look back on those three months, you also realize you have made it through them after all. God provides things step by step, encouragement through people, little by little.32

Peter recognizes the importance of depending on God but also questions what practical behaviors ought to accompany such a trait, especially in the context of prayers offered without any sense of response or resolution. Alan shares a similar perspective, “Here in Hong Kong, God’s presence is much quieter, it’s experienced in hindsight. You see how God has brought you through life even when you didn’t feel it then.”33 Alan remembers an intensely difficult time following graduation when he and Susie needed to find jobs as well as a new apartment. Susie recalls how intensely they prayed together and how far away God felt during that time. But over time, things fell into place.

This concept of seeing God’s presence at work “in hindsight (shihou 事后)” presents a different sense in what it means to experience God’s presence than many of my previous informants in the mainland who shared their stories in a more forward or active way. Compared with the intense familial bonds that animate mainland Chinese house churches, Hong Kong churches can seem distant. In this setting, God’s work may not be as immediately recognizable because the Christian community that surrounds you is not as collectively invested. As Peter seemed to recognize, when praying alone, one’s dependence upon God can feel like perseverance against both objective evidence and subjective emotion. Only when looking back can one piece together a narrative of what God has been doing.

32 Interview with Briana and Peter, July 2019.
33 Interview with Susie and Alan, July 2019.
The different experiences Briana, Peter, Susie, and Alan shared were also noted by many others with noticeable consistency. Church life in the mainland is smaller and congregational life is more intimate, but it was also harder because church life felt set apart with high expectations. Amidst all of this, many recalled experiences of God’s presence in the mainland to be more emotionally potent when gathered together. In Hong Kong, many informants highlighted religious freedom as the primary social factor reshaping their experiences of church and God. Freedom of religion meant a greater diversity of churches available to choose from as well as more resources for spiritual growth that were unavailable in the mainland. My informants noted the professionalized nature of congregations in Hong Kong also made available a range of specified ministries for married couples, children, women, etc. Despite the open environment and resources, many of my informants felt it was harder to form strong relationships in Hong Kong churches regardless of whether it was Mandarin speaking or international. For mainlanders, the more individualistic orientation of Hong Kong life coupled with their own potentially transient status made it difficult to invest relationally.

When experiences of God are intimately wrapped up in the community you belong to, it can be easy to lose one’s affective sense of God’s presence in a congregational setting oriented toward the individual. This might be explained by a lack of what Durkheim famously calls collective effervescence. For example, some of Susie and Alan’s devotional practices and mentality appear to lose some of their power a few years of life in Hong Kong. Alan makes light of his ambivalent feelings toward eating duck blood tofu. Susie now laughs about how her former sensitivity to God’s possible punishment in the form of facial blemishes. While they

have moved away from some of these former beliefs, their faith remains strong as ever. But it is now embodied with different sensitivities. Separation from their mainland congregations has, in fact, given them course to deepen their faith on their own terms.

_Crossing national/ethnic cultures_

Intercultural faith dynamics are amplified in Hong Kong due to its international character and the city’s many prominent English-speaking international churches. In these contexts, a second important boundary is regularly crossed: national cultures. A number of my informants have chosen these international congregations as their church home. In these settings, Christian life is not only a matter of negotiating mainland-Hong Kong differences, but also international ones.

This section explores two cases of how crossing national and linguistic boundaries influence one’s religious formation and experiences of God. In the example of Katherine, we witness how a more open, outward, and individually orientated international church provides resources for formation that drew her away from the Mandarin speaking congregation she previously attended. This is an example of ecclesial diversity enriching religious formation. In Wendall, we witness a contrasting case. The international church Wendall attends is a safe haven of comfort for him because he spent the majority of his adult life outside of mainland China in both the United States and the United Kingdom. The inherent liminality of the international congregational context resonates with his global sojourn in a way that no Chinese majority church can. This is an example of the church as a stable home for the homeless, providing a rooted sense of belonging and identity in an increasingly fluid world.
Katherine is a long-term Hong Kong drifter. In her thirties, she decided to stay in Hong Kong after graduate studies and has been a Mandarin instructor at a high school for several years. For much of her time in Hong Kong, Katherine attended a mainland Chinese church with others like herself. There, she found a sense of belonging amidst the general displacement many mainlanders feel in Hong Kong. What was it that drew her out of this like-minded environment? How did her sense of religiosity and belonging change when shifting from a Mandarin speaking Chinese church to a larger, English speaking, international church?

The transition began with participation in a series of small group workshops held by the international church focused on how to better serve the city of Hong Kong following the 2014 Occupy Central/Umbrella Revolution protests. The social upheaval alarmed her, and she wanted to know how her faith should guide her response. The topic was not something explicitly addressed in her Mandarin speaking congregation. This workshop left a positive impression on her because of its more expansive vision of Christian ministry. Soon Katherine began visiting the church’s Sunday service on a regular basis. At the international church’s worship services, Katherine was deeply affected by the differences in style and content. In particular, the pastor’s sermons impressed her. As illustrations, he shared his own personal faith journey and family struggles, which drew Katherine into new ways of thinking through her own faith. “I really think vulnerability is important,” she shares, “Chinese have a lot of taboo subjects that, even in church, are not often addressed.”

In this new church setting, the example of the pastor and the personal care of a women’s ministry leader helped Katherine confront personal family trauma that included

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35 Interview with Katherine, July 2019.
experiences of abuse. “Listening to the sermons and stories shared by the pastor awakened me to something. I never knew how my faith ought to address issues of abuse,” she tells me, “My mom didn’t even know about [what happened to me] and I never felt like my Mandarin speaking congregation could support me. The [international church] pastor challenged me about what it means to carry our burdens as a community.”

She appreciated the church’s pastoral counseling program for its integration of psychology and spirituality and the women’s ministry for its focus on struggles specific to gender. The international church’s culture of openness and care for the individual provided Katherine pathways to addressing personal struggles she would have otherwise ignored while simultaneously integrating her into the community.

I ask Katherine if her new church experiences have changed her image of God. “No, it hasn’t changed,” she quickly replies, “I still see God as the one who loves me, who is patient with me, who treasures me.” She pauses to think a little bit more. “What has changed a little is how I feel toward God. I feel more honest and genuine than I once did.” Her answer mirrors what I have heard from other informants who have experienced significant differences in culture or congregational life; a belief that it is not God who changes but their experiences and relationship to God. “I think it’s about recognizing changing seasons,” she adds, “over time I am learning to be better and feeling out what I need from a church in different seasons of life. We are all sinners and not every place is prepared to deal with everything we struggle with.”

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36 Interview with Katherine, July 2019.

37 Interview with Katherine, July 2019.

38 Interview with Katherine, July 2019.
saying this church is the place she needs now because there is more concern for the individual. By learning to be vulnerable, she has learned to be more accepting of herself and also more trusting of others.

Wendall also attends an international church in Hong Kong, but unlike Katherine, the Anglophone church has played a much larger and longer role in his formation. Wendall was born and raised in mainland China but has lived a significant portion of his adulthood overseas in the United Kingdom and the United States. He moved to the U.S. for master’s studies and then to the U.K. for doctoral studies in mathematics. During this time abroad he also came to faith in Christ, got married, and started a family. He only recently moved to Hong Kong to begin a new job as a university professor. As a mathematician, Wendall prefers rationality and order and sees God in the logic of the world. But he also has experiences of God that cannot be easily explained by rational proof and is keenly aware that the relational dimensions of life are not always as formulaic as he would like.

Wendall came to faith in the United States while attending a Chinese American church. In hindsight, he says he did not experience much culture shock in the U.S. because the Chinese congregation provided a strong and culturally familiar social network. Everything changed after moving to the U.K., however, where Wendall and his wife struggled to adapt to the rural English culture of a small university town. “I asked God why He would bring me and my wife to such a strange and alien place,” Wendall remembers.39 They hated England at first because it seemed so small, quiet, and isolated. When their first child was born, Wendall also remembers being

39 Interview with Wendall, July 2019.
angry with God because he had no idea how to raise a child in this foreign place. “Looking back, there was this clear sense that so much of life was out of our control at that time.”

It was in this state of desperation that Wendall began attending a local English church. He remembers the amazing blessing of being welcomed and cared for despite the significant cultural differences that existed between his family and the local parishioners. Over time, the church became Wendall’s surrogate family. An important part of his congregational experience in England was learning how to become a parent. The transition to parenthood is a dramatic one and the church’s care for Wendall and his wife during this new season of life cemented his sense of Christian belonging. As new parents in a foreign land they relied on the advice and support of their adopted church family. “As a result, we speak to our children much differently than I was raised,” he shares, recognizing how radically different Chinese and English styles of child rearing can be.

Through the church’s deep care for his family, Wendell came to see the church as not only a foundational part of his individual identity, but of his entire family. “Thinking about all of this again makes me feel like, as I moved farther and farther out into the world, my faith grew and grew with it. It makes me think that all of this movement is part of God’s plan after all,” Wendall reflects, “Leaving and starting again may be hard, but it also grows us. In each new place, the parts of my faith that didn’t make sense before, God connected. Looking back, what seemed like disappointment became blessing.”

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40 Interview with Wendall, July 2019.
41 Interview with Wendall, July 2019.
42 Interview with Wendall, July 2019.
This dynamic continues to the present as Wendall and his family are in the middle of yet another transition to his new job in Hong Kong. It has been difficult to move again after establishing life in England. “It seems every time we thought we were going to stay somewhere, God moved us. My life is so very different than the way I imagined it. If God was not a part of this journey, I have no idea how I would have turned out,” he sighs. With all the big moves he has experienced, he has learned to value hospitality and community with a sensibility for the foreigner. Hong Kong, however, is not a place of such sentiment. “Hong Kong emphasizes efficiency,” he comments, “It is filled with people coming and going focused primarily on work and success.”

In response of this culture of advancement, Wendall is thankful for the English-speaking international church he has found. In his first half year in Hong Kong, he has been welcomed again by fellow Christian sojourners. The church’s Sunday school and family ministries are an important part of why he chose to join this particular church. “I don’t care so much about being part of an ‘elite’ culture anymore,” he shares, “My kids’ advancement is not as important to me as their growth in Christ – their experiences of God’s grace and love for others. We want them to feel secure in this.” He recognizes this is not very “Chinese,” given the culture’s reputation for high pressure academic life and advancement. “But we didn’t learn to parent in China,” he adds, “we became parents in England.” He admits that his children are more British now than Chinese and that he has also grown fond of the quiet English lifestyle. “Perhaps that’s also why I like the church,” he suddenly realizes, “It is also led by a British pastor.”

43 Interview with Wendall, July 2019.
“After moving so much with such different life experiences, I am increasingly hesitant to talk about where I am from or belong. In casual conversation I just speak of the last place I was – in this case from England,” Wendall confesses. “My wife and I obviously have sentiments for China, it is where we were born and raised. But now it is also so very unfamiliar. What’s more important to us now is how to love others the way Christ calls us to. We are still trying to figure out what this means for our cultural identity. We want to keep the best of Chinese culture without falling prey to its weaknesses. Hong Kong may be a good place to work this out because both cultures are a part of this place.”

Comparing Katherine’s and Wendall’s journeys to their respective international churches highlights again the importance of diverse experiences in a holistic process of religious formation. Katherine’s international church community provided her the resources to address long standing wounds and trauma, putting her on a path to reconciling family brokenness she had once ignored. Wendall’s journey across three continents birthed a devotion to the church as a global family that could guide and inform how he might raise his own children. In both cases, disorienting experiences played important roles in leading them to embrace new ways of faithful being that, in turn, shaped their perceptions of God’s presence in their lives. As their national and cultural identities became increasingly difficult to define, they both found solace in their Christian identity as transcending these boundaries.

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44 Interview with Wendall, July 2019.
Crossing religious cultures

In addition to congregational and national cultures, a third boundary negotiated by my informants includes philosophical and spiritual boundaries. For many of my informants, Hong Kong’s religious freedom and diversity provides an open context to compare and contrast religiosities and beliefs. For many Chinese, religiosity is often associated with practices from Buddhism, Daoism, and popular folk beliefs. In Hong Kong, many of these practices are vibrantly displayed in public life. In addition, because of its colonial history, Christianity is also a very public faith. Both temples and churches are actively engaged with many parts of Hong Kong society in ways that mainland Chinese may be startled by. This section examines some of the ways my Hong Kong based informants have negotiated their Christian religiosity and identities vis-à-vis Hong Kong’s larger religious and spiritual landscape. My conversation with Taylor and Melanie, two young ladies who attend a Mandarin speaking congregation, reveal the complexities of crossing from one religious worldview into another.

Taylor has only been a Christian for about half a year. She was a confessing Buddhist before becoming a Christian. As a result, her Buddhist religiosity was still being actively negotiated. In contrast, Melanie had been a committed Christian for several years, but she grew up in a part of the mainland where Buddhism and folk religiosity were especially strong. As a result, Melanie gave me a more nuanced reflection compared with Taylor’s more raw processing. Both became Christians in Hong Kong, which meant they had no mainland congregational experiences beforehand. Moreover, because I spoke with Taylor and Melanie at the same time, their responses to one another’s comments were equally revealing.
“I used to be a Buddhist, and when I walked by or around temples, I’d feel a pull, like a magnetic field. It was a certain feeling of fear and respect. I didn’t feel that anymore after I became a Christian,” Taylor shares. She laughs to herself and follows up, “Now I feel it at church.”

Despite the transfer of affect from one space to another, Taylor candidly voiced her annoyance with many elements of church life. She thought the sermons were too long and didactic and disliked long prayers that often seemed like selfish rambling. “But I’m a young Christian,” she sheepishly qualifies, “so I’m still learning.” Taylor did, however, fall in love with the music. She enjoyed the expressiveness of Christian worship and recently began learning drums and guitar as a result.

In contrast, Melanie had been a Christian for several years and recently took up a leadership position in the fellowship. In response to Taylor’s comments, Melanie noted her experience growing up in the mainland was very different than many others because religious practices were all around her. In her region of China’s eastern coast, temple festivals and rituals were very active. Despite the commonness of religious practices around her, Melanie’s coming to faith was a reasoned affair. As a physician’s assistant, she says she takes a very systematic and critical approach to everything. It took her nearly seven years of study and careful consideration before fully embracing Christianity. Melanie tells me that since her baptism a little over a year ago, however, her faith has really come alive. She is able to pray

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45 Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.

46 Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.
more easily and recognize when she needs to repent of sins. “There is a lot of peace that comes when you know you are forgiven,” she adds.\textsuperscript{47}

Compared with Melanie, Taylor was shyer about sharing her faith life. She was only just baptized a month ago. When asked how she first came to learn of Christianity, her answers were unexpectedly negative. Referring to when she first heard the gospel, she says, “I just thought they were trying to trick me. I’ve also worked with Christian colleagues at the school I teach at, and some are really good people, but others are not.”\textsuperscript{48} She seemed exasperated thinking about it. If her past experiences were so ambivalent, why did Taylor become a Christian? Her answer was vague. She tells me she has always believed God existed and that she has always been searching. “When I was a Buddhist, whenever I visited a new place, I wanted to go to the temples first,” she recounts. “I think people become Buddhists because they want blessing and peace for their family… Buddhist thought is deeply engrained in Chinese thinking and ethic. A lot of important philosophical concepts are based in Buddhism, like karma and reincarnation. These concepts still influence my thinking, if I am honest.”\textsuperscript{49}

Melanie smiles and playfully hits Taylor in the shoulder, commenting, “But you’re a Christian now! You shouldn’t believe in that stuff anymore.” Melanie adds that she has also read a lot of Buddhist scriptures. It was part of her systematic process of coming to faith in Christianity. “It’s true though,” she adds, “I have a lot of respect for devout Buddhist who live out their faith. I think the Buddha’s enlightenment is worth respecting in the same way as

\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.

\textsuperscript{48} Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.

\textsuperscript{49} Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.
Jesus’s teachings.” Melanie begins to list off other comparisons between Buddhism and Christianity like the similarities and differences between their concepts of suffering and sin. She says one of the most important differences for her, however, is their orientation to life. “For Christians, it’s about having/gaining (you 有) and for Buddhism it’s about emptying/losing (wu 无),” she explains, “There is a lot of wisdom in Buddhism if you read it as a philosophy.” Melanie’s thoughts are well presented, reflecting wide reading and thought. “Yea,” Taylor agrees, “There is a deep wisdom in it, but I guess it just became so mythological.”

Taylor and Melanie described their Christian religiosity in very different ways. Taylor’s comments were generally made with a degree of uncertainty while Melanie was confident and direct. Taylor’s recent conversion seemed tentative as she was still making sense of what Christianity was actually about despite the fact that she had already been baptized. Melanie’s faith seemed not only assured but well learned. Taylor’s tone and body language communicated a sense that she was still actively processing, nervous about what she was sharing in response to my questions. Melanie was confident and genuinely happy to share about how her faith had been forming her in recent years.

Taylor’s and Melanie’s personalities reveal different ways of negotiating their religious boundary crossing. Despite Taylor’s uncertainties, her responses to my questions revealed an experiential process at work similar to other informants who were still actively piecing the fragmented experiences of their life into a whole. As Taylor lives into her new Christian identity, she has been mindful of the positive and negative feelings that have affected her, 

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50 Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.

51 Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.
nervously discerning what it means to be a Christian. She is also testing her previous
religiosities while trying new ones. I wondered if she, like Alan, is experimenting with belonging
before belief and serving while searching. In contrast, Melanie stepped into her faith through
reason, including a well thought out comparison of the Buddhist and Christian beliefs. Raised in
a more spiritual environment than most mainland Chinese, Melanie’s decision to become a
Christian was a rational choice. “I take a long time to make a final decision because I want to
consider everything first, but when I make it, I am very committed,” she shares.52

The above comparison is not only based on a single interview, but also by observations
at the many bible studies and social outings the fellowship convened that I was privileged to
join. Despite their differences in personality, Taylor and Melanie are both working out their
religious formation by participating actively in the life of the church. During Friday night
fellowship and bible study, Melanie is beginning to lead worship in addition to the bible studies
that she facilitates. Speaking from the front, Melanie appears less confident and shyer than
during our interview as she shares personal experiences of God’s presence at work in her life to
prepare the congregation for worship. One evening, Taylor plays a box drum to accompany the
music. Her rhythm, like her newfound faith, hints at nervousness. Both are leaning into their
faith, so to speak, by taking on more challenging roles. As Melanie takes on more visible
spiritual leadership, she is also stepping out of her more cerebral and reasoned approach to
faith. Strikingly, Taylor’s demeanor during the fellowship’s bible studies is particularly engaged,
opposite the timid responses she gave during our interview. As verses are read and questions
are discussed, Taylor is very animated. She speaks up often to share her ideas and ask

52 Interview with Taylor and Melanie, July 2019.
questions. Despite being a new Christian, Taylor has also led bible studies with competence, perhaps a reflection of her profession as a teacher’s assistant. All of this affirms that what Taylor and Melanie share with me in words is only a small part of a more active process of formation through participation.

**Re-negotiating religiosity and identity from the inside out and outside in**

One important dimension of everyday faith observed throughout the accounts reviewed above is the multiple ways physically embodied Christian practice relates to the confessed beliefs. Religiosity is something that is both felt and embodied. It is sometimes socially imparted from the outside in, formed by rituals and behaviors that are meant to discipline the body toward certain sensibilities. But sometimes religiosity springs from the inside out, rendered by affects that compel us to act in response to some sense of transcendent otherness. For many of my informants, both experiences are evident.

This section highlights two case studies in the faith journeys of Walter and Lena, both of whom have become prominent leaders in their Hong Kong congregations after traversing different spiritual terrains and boundaries. Whereas Walter’s faith was deeply shaped by the cultural norms of mainland Chinese house church and university fellowship settings, Lena’s faith was forged in the context of the United Kingdom and the Anglican church. Both brought their sense of Christian religiosity and identity to Hong Kong, where new situations and experiences further shaped their faith as church leaders.

First, for some, daily participation in Christian life brings about one’s commitment to faith. This dynamic can be seen at work in Alan’s and Taylor’s cases. Embodiment and
belonging comes first and beliefs arise later. In Hong Kong, a number of my informants expressed a heightened personal awareness of this process. There is something about experiences of displacement that fosters critical reflection, including a greater individual ownership of religious identity that goes beyond collective belonging. Walter, a doctoral student studying in Hong Kong, exemplifies this dynamic. Despite having been a fully active member and leader of his mainland house church congregation, Walter tells me he did not personally own his Christian faith until his struggle with depression and subsequent experience of God’s presence in Hong Kong.

Walter was raised in a poor village in southern China. Because he was physically smaller than his classmates, he was often picked on, but he excelled at academics and tested into a top university in Beijing. He says he had absolutely no sense of Christianity growing up. In Beijing, he first attended a student fellowship for less than spiritual reasons. He was primarily interested in making foreign friends with the American teachers, to improve his English, and to attend new social events for expanding his social network. As he got to know people in the fellowship, he increasingly participated in worship, bible studies, and numerous other social events. He liked the people and the sense of community. This was the main draw. Walter confesses that even at the height of his participation he did not actually believe.

“Once, I was praying together with my fellowship and I began to cry. I have no idea why. Tears just started flowing. Looking back, I think it was God touching my heart even though I wasn’t in any real posture of seeking,” Walter notes.53 The way Walter recounts this

53 Interview with Walter, July 2019.
incident, somewhat coldly, was striking. It was as if his physical body had internalized the emotions of the community while his mind remained uninterested in the spiritual matters that were supposedly driving them. “But I did feel a sense of peace,” Walter adds, “it had been a long time since I had cried like that, not since I was a child and was always teased.”

Walter says he finally began to take the beliefs of Christianity seriously when the pastor of the congregation challenged him become more vulnerable and accept care from others during a difficult time in his life. “He told me, ‘You’ve come to church for a long time,’” Walter remembers, “‘You’ve learned everything you need to know, but it’s not in your heart. We’ve made you our brother but you have yet to accept us.’” It was then Walter realized the uniqueness of Christian community and began to let its teachings penetrate his heart. He was baptized shortly thereafter, but even then, he wasn’t really sure if he believed in God.

Arriving in Hong Kong for doctoral studies, Walter became a leader at a Mandarin speaking church near campus, but he grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of commitment he felt from others in the church. Coupled with difficulties in his studies and a poor relationship with his dissertation director, Walter struggled with severe depression for months. He had never felt more isolated and finally began to think critically about his participation in the church and the faith behind it. He tells me he prayed in a way he had never prayed before, genuinely petitioning for help.

One day, Walter received his answer. He describes an experience of transcendence that covered him in peace and lifted the burden from his shoulders. He had never felt anything like

\[54\text{ Interview with Walter, July 2019.}\]

\[55\text{ Interview with Walter, July 2019.}\]
it. Walter says it was in that moment God became real, when he finally embraced the Christian faith that he had been a part of in the preceding years and yet never fully understood. Since that moment, Walter feels his service at church comes from a different place, and though he still feels he struggles with pride and loneliness, he has also learned what it really means to depend on Christ.

The most notable part about Walter’s narrative is the way he frames his journey to faith as a multi-year saga from community participation to genuine faith. He also recognizes the unique role Hong Kong’s larger socio-cultural environment has played even though his church community is mostly made up of Mandarin speakers from outside the region. Walter’s burn out, experience of God, and subsequent growth were forged by a personal struggle he does not think he would have faced had he remained in the mainland. Through this struggle, he had to engage faith on a personal level separate from that of the congregation. He learned to pray for himself. And he has become more self-critical and aware of his emotional state with the help of counseling.

In contrast to Walter, Lena’s initial experience of Christianity and God’s presence came without any substantial community contact. Lena recently moved to Hong Kong from another part of southern China to work full time for an international church’s Mandarin speaking ministry. Before this, Lena had spent most of her adult life in London. She had moved to the United Kingdom for university and stayed afterwards to become a successful banker. Disillusioned and stressed with her work, Lena began studying psychology to try and find a sense of peace but perceived it to be too mechanical. Later she turned to Buddhism,
meditating often and visiting temples. While rich in practice and principle, Lena was unable to emotionally connect with the tradition. She felt it was just a coping mechanism.

Lena knew only one Christian at the time, a colleague at work. She began to pepper her with questions, hoping to find a point of resonance, but didn’t not receive any satisfactory answers. With a thin sense of what Christianity was, she decided to visit a nearby Anglican parish. There, during the service, she experienced an overwhelming sense of emotional release that brought her to tears in the middle of the service. “It felt like a presence lifted me up, like a veil was lifted. I had this deep sense of supernatural safety, a feeling of peace that affirmed a God of love,” she remembers.\(^\text{56}\) It seemed as if God had personally taken the initiative to reach down and touch Lena’s heart in a surprising and powerful way. Lena perceived the real presence of another in her tears, unlike Walter who, in hindsight, can only acknowledge God may have been working in that moment. This experience changed the entire trajectory of Lena’s life. She left the banking industry and began serving full time in the Anglican church. Immersed in the faith, she went as deep as she could go, just short of being ordained in the Church of England.

In the end, however, Lena says she “ran away” from ordination because she was afraid of the messiness of pastoral life. Instead, she felt compelled to return to the mainland to be closer to her aging parents. Bringing her British form of Christian religiosity back to the mainland was a difficult shift. She had to slowly adjust to the close-knit, passionate, and highly accountable congregational culture of house churches already noted throughout this study. “I was used to the daily eucharist, with wine, and evensong. I missed those parts of the liturgy a

\(^{56}\) Interview with Lena, July 2019.
lot,” she says. Even the worship felt forced for Lena, with lyrics and styles that clashed with what she had become accustomed to. She wasn’t able to connect with God in any of it.

In China, the congregation emphasized the community’s need to self-sacrifice for one another and to hold one another accountable. “They had this practice of ‘checking in’ (daka 打卡), like when you check into work at the beginning or end of the day. On a daily basis, you needed to notify others that you had prayed and read the bible.” These kinds of practices felt terribly legalistic to Lena at first, but she remained committed to the church. “I had to be patient. At first it seemed like God was absent. But over time I learned to see God in new ways. I had to stay put and trust,” Lena recounts. She remembers a day she needed to lead worship, to sing these Chinese hymns that her heart could not resonate with. She prayed that God would go ahead of her and lead because she felt unable. “And God answered,” she says, “that day when I led those songs, I could feel them. I was really able to sing and hear them in a way I couldn’t before.”

The transition was jarring, but Lena recognizes that the Chinese house church setting provided opportunities to experience God’s presence in a collective way that she had never sensed when serving in London. “In the U.K., one attends church with an emphasis on one’s personal relationship with God, but Chinese churches are about relationships,” she explains. Instead of learning about God through a sermon or one’s own study, you learn about God

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57 Interview with Lena, July 2019.
58 Interview with Lena, July 2019.
59 Interview with Lena, July 2019.
60 Interview with Lena, July 2019.
through the relationships themselves. “The bible does teach that we are to love God and love one another,” Lena reflects, “and I feel like in the Chinese church setting, people emphasize the second part as a way of living and experiencing the first part.”

The social and cultural variables that accompany Lena’s faith journey from London back to the mainland, and now in Hong Kong, are too many to account for here. Grounded by her initial abductive experience, Lena’s religious formation is one shaped by multiple communities with different ritual repertories and orientations. Each has wired her sensibilities to different aspects of who God is and how God acts. In London, she participated in both evangelical-charismatic and high liturgical branches of the Church of England. In the mainland, she slowly adapted and appreciated the house church’s distinctive ways of worship and community as well. Today, Lena has brought her diverse experiences of the church into a ministry focused on reaching out to Hong Kong drifters overseen by an international English-speaking congregation. In many ways, it could not be a better fit.

When compared, Walter and Lena’s faith narratives display different processes of religious formation. The various levels of their individual, everyday, and societal/traditional experiences of God are tied together in unique arrangements. Walter’s journey spirals from the outside in through consistent everyday participation in Christian community where discourses, embodiments, and an increased sense of belonging oriented his sensibilities in such a way that formed the conditions for his dramatic experience of God’s presence in Hong Kong. Lena’s faith narrative features the opposite movement, from a distinct and largely isolated experience of God’s presence outward across multiple boundaries. In each setting, the distinctives of the

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61 Interview with Lena, July 2019.
congregation’s culture bestowed upon her new ways of framing and understanding the God who changed her life in single moment and who continues to use each new experience to orient her sense of vocation to serving the church.

Intercultural theological reflections: Inward dialogue and the transpositional Gospel

This chapter has highlighted various facets of boundary crossing experienced by mainland Chinese Christians living in Hong Kong, navigating and negotiating their Christian religiosity and identity in ways that have been unique to the distinctive cultural character of the region. What influence do these processes have on theologizing? In this study’s first theological reflection, my informants’ experiences of God’s peace are grounded in God’s character as portrayed in scripture. In the second reflection, my informants’ inward dialogue and negotiations with God are explored as a constructive basis for grounding the ecclesial and missional priorities of the Asian church’s triple dialogue with the poor, culture, and religions. In this chapter, my Hong Kong informants’ boundary crossing negotiations regarding congregation, culture, and religion are reflected upon through the lens of intercultural theology.62 The intercultural posture assumes that theological construction is not only a matter

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62 The field of intercultural theology is closely related to fields of missiology and world Christianity and can be said to have its beginnings in the challenges posed by pluralization and globalization toward theological contextualization and inculturation. First proposed in the 1970s by Walter J. Hollenweger, Richard Friedli and Hans Jochen Margull, the concept of intercultural theology was built on a post-colonial impulse that sees theology and cultures as mutually influential. See Walter J. Hollenweger, “Intercultural Theology,” Theological Renewal 10, (1978):2-14, where he states that intercultural theology, “a) is that scholarly theological discipline that operates within a particular cultural framework without absolutizing it; b) will select its methods appropriately. Western academic theology is not automatically privileged over others; c) has a duty to look for alternative forms of doing theology (such as non-Western and narrative forms; d) must be tested in social practice and measured by its capacity for bridge building between diverse groups; and e) must not be confused with ‘pope-theology’ that escapes from self-critical reflection.” See also Richard Fredli, “Intercultural Theology,” in Dictionary of Mission, eds. Karl Muller et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 219-222, where he defines intercultural theology as, “...a method which addresses forms of expression of the eternal message of the gospel (salvation of God for all people
of dialogue but also of hybridity and transformation. When boundaries of culture are crossed and experiences of God and church shift, what emerges is intercultural theologizing as both a form of outward dialogue with new cultures and inner dialogue about the particularities of faith with a universal God.63

In order to build a foundation for intercultural theologizing from an Asian perspective, I adopt C.S. Song’s conception of the “transpositional” Gospel as an extension of God’s compassion. Song pairs God’s compassion with God’s mission to animate his Christology and theological method, a story-based theology that embraces the triple dialogue’s focus on liberation, inculturation, and interreligious relations.64 When applied to my Hong Kong informants’ experiences, their stories of boundary crossing become vehicles for spiritual formation driven by God’s abductive spirit. Their view of God, the church, and the world are widened as they struggle with the implications of this expansion on the nature of their faith.

63 This study relies heavily on Henning Wrogemann’s articulation of intercultural theology and his conception of intercultural hermeneutics which draws heavily on cultural semiotics and discourse theory. See Henning Wrogemann, Intercultural Hermeneutics, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016. In specific, I work from the posture of Wrogemann’s “appropriation model” with its emphasis on “intuitive inculturation.” In the context of this chapter, I attempt to examine the intuitive manner in which my informants adapt their theological worldviews to the Hong Kong environment as an example of transboundary inculturation.

Song has spent his life working toward a theological framework that is fully resonant with the peoples and cultures of Asia. He reframes theological reflection and construction with an intercultural sensibility by highlighting the Gospel’s transpositional nature. For Song, a transpositional Gospel is defined by three traits centered on the concept of movement. First, at its most basic, the Gospel has the ability to shift in space and time.\(^5\) It is able to both change in response to such shifts and render change. Second, the Gospel message is able to shift in style and manner of communication.\(^6\) It is infinitely translatable. Third, and most importantly for theology, it is the basic principle at work in Christ’s incarnation. Song argues, “...no healthy cultural assimilation could take place without the two cultures becoming ‘incarnate’ in one another. It is neither simply a matter of imitation nor a matter of uncritical fusion. It is a matter of an alien culture ‘become flesh’ in a native culture. A metamorphosis must take place in the cultures concerned.”\(^7\) This means that Christ’s incarnation is an intercultural act par excellence. The Christian Gospel that is initiated through incarnation and advanced through the church is thereby an inherently intercultural process of hybridizing change; one in which God’s very nature is fused and made complete with humanity’s many cultural ways of being across space, time, and language.\(^8\) Song summarizes his conclusions in this way,

The gospel, when transposed from its biblical world to other worlds, undergoes change itself as well as causing these other worlds to change. The gospel is a very powerful thing. It not only changes human institutions and creates new values, but also changes

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\(^7\) Song, *The Compassionate God*, 11.
the hearts of people. But it is not so powerful that it becomes change-proof. A change-proof gospel would be a very awkward thing. It could only fit into one situation. If it were rectangular in shape, it could not be fitted into a circle. If it came in white, it could never be in black or brown. The wonderful thing about the gospel is that it could come in any shape and in any color... In our mission and theology, we have constantly underestimated this enormous changeability of the gospel. But it is this changeability that makes the gospel what it is – the good news that God loves and saves people.69

Song grounds this changeability, this intercultural nature, of the Gospel in God’s compassion, capable of connecting, empathizing, and incarnating through all of God’s creation.

Building on these principles, Song interprets the biblical narrative as a story of God’s compassionate presence at work, disrupting and dispersing the oppression and suffering caused by sin. For Song, the Hebrew Bible narrates the particular story of God’s disruptive presence in the lives of the Hebrew patriarchs and the people of Israel among many times, places, and cultures. It provides a template for understanding how God works among all peoples. The Christ event is then framed as the “great disruption” that universally upends sin’s dominion on all humanity, providing a foundation from which to understand God’s disruptive presence in every culture and people. What is the point of this pattern of disruption and dispersion in Song’s transpositional gospel imagination? Again, it is animated by the compassion of God. For Song, the status quo of human experience is suffering, and it is only through disruption that God’s salvation can break through. The transposition of the gospel may appear to be dispersive from the standpoint of human history, but through the eyes of God it is a gathering of a “communion of love” founded on Christ.70

69 Song, The Compassionate God, 11.

70 Song, The Compassionate God, 260.
For Song, this arc of disruption and dispersion is a hermeneutical key from which the transpositionality of the Gospel is revealed in intercultural theologies particular to people’s histories and cultures. In *The Compassionate God*, Song recounts the history of the Chinese people with special attention given to religio-cultural developments that emerge during periods of disruption. This includes the emergence of the Mandate of Heaven during the Zhou dynasty, Buddhism’s inculturation process during the six dynasties period, the Taiping uprising’s form of charismatic Christianity during the late Qing, and modern China’s democratic movement embodied in the “fifth modernization” during economic reforms of the 1980s and 90s. In all of these historical periods, Song believes God was at work disrupting patterns of sin, moments when the Gospel and Chinese culture converged in transpositional ways that point to God’s compassionate presence.

The evolution of Song’s work moves from a post-colonial critique of missiology to an intuitive “third-eye” posture capable of discerning this “transposition” of the gospel in history and narratives. All of this sets the stage for a larger theological project: a “story theology” rooted in the popular myths and parables of Asia’s many cultures and histories. This theological method follows Song through nearly all of his latter works. Unlike post-liberal theology’s use of narrative, which advocates an alternative community separated from the world, Song’s story theology grounds theologizing in an intercultural dialogue with a liberative bent oriented toward engagement. The indigenous stories of Asia are markers of God’s compassionate presence.

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71 See, for example, Cheon-Seng Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), and *In the Beginning were Stories, Not Texts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).
presence that are fundamental to the Gospel’s transpositional mission. They are the gateways for intercultural theologizing.

To construct meaningful story theologies, Song proposes theology must be done from “the bottom up” based on ten positions. First, he argues that “the totality of life is the raw material for theologizing.” Second, he argues for an expansion of the church’s historical horizon, one that must encompass every culture. Third, Christ must serve as the center of theological construction. Fourth, there is no such thing as a culture neutral theology. All theologies are culturally grounded and, thus, subjectively limited to particular times and places. Fifth, the church’s role is the continuation of God’s mission in the world. Sixth, Christian theology must be open-ended, by which Song believes theologizing cannot be trapped in pre-conceived categories of traditional theology. Seventh, Christ’s salvific work must not be limited to a linear conception of time as the basis for God’s work in the world. Rather, “God moves in all directions: God moves forward, no doubt, but also sideways and even backward. Perhaps God zigzags too.” Eighth, theology must be future oriented. Ninth, ecumenical theology’s goal, in particular, ought not to be simply a synthesis or confluence of culturally specific theologies. Tenth, ecumenical theology’s emphasis on diversity holds a special place in contemporary Asian experience.

These ten positions serve to disrupt traditional theological construction as a normative and universal endeavor based on a supposed “view from nowhere,” the idea that our words

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74 Song, *Tell us Our Names*, 17.
about God somehow stand above and beyond earthly matters. While God’s nature might be unchanging, human perception of God is always changing. The Gospel is, therefore, transpositioned in and through the world’s many cultures in ways that cannot be ordered in linear or systematic terms. For Song, sources of theology are dispersed among many cultures. To participate in God’s active work is to be presently aware and future oriented. His conception of ecumenical theology is one that respects real differences as not simply incommensurable but reflective of God’s diverse nature distilled and expressed throughout creation. Gathering a holistic understanding of God thereby requires the stories of all cultures, read through the frame of God’s mission to disrupt sin and gather a people, a church, to advance God’s reign.

Song’s proposed lens and method provides important tools for understanding the theological worth of my informants’ intercultural experiences as they negotiate their faith across cultural boundaries. Seen through Song’s theological framework, my informants’ literal transpositions from mainland China to Hong Kong brings with them a transposition of their faith. The cultural differences that make Hong Kong a unique space require intercultural reflections on who God is and what God is doing amidst change. The shift in the compositions and actions of different congregations embedded in different cultures raises ecumenical questions regarding the role of ecclesial diversity in God’s plan. For my Hong Kong informants, negotiating these differences is an important exercise in growing their Christian faith, expanding the universality of God’s presence and guidance among culturally distinct contexts. Their participation and reflection in Christian life constitutes an everyday theological praxis across boundaries guided by God’s compassionate presence, a means for God to expand one’s faith to encompass a polycentric and fractal conception of Christian belief and practice.
In my previous theological reflection, I emphasized the importance of the internal everyday dialogue that takes place between my informants and God for theological construction. This inward dialogue is also foundational to the intercultural nature of theologizing across boundaries. The ways in which my informants dialogue with God to discern how everyday life ought to be lived in a monocultural setting become negotiations of intercultural dissonance in multicultural settings. In cases of cultural boundary crossing, questions of God’s universal nature are foregrounded as a means to establishing stability. Nearly all of my Hong Kong informants voiced questions about why God might bring them to Hong Kong for this season of life, rooting their interpretations in God’s character. Most often, they saw the new experiences of congregation and culture as God’s means to help them grow spiritually – to know and love God is ways they had not experienced or understood before. To use Song’s theological language, boundary crossing experiences transpose my informants’ faith, thereby bringing a deeper understanding of the gospel. What first appears as a disruption and dispersion from their initial beliefs and practices is, in fact, an abductive act of God’s compassion. It is an invitation to a deeper dialogue with God that may not have been possible in a familiar monocultural setting.

Song also identifies seven stages to dialogical conversion, a process of dialogue with other faiths and cultures that strengthens and enriches theological reflection. Inspired by Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, these seven stages emphasize the fundamental importance of engaging and processing boundary crossing experiences as a means to experiencing God’s transforming power.75 While Song’s process is originally intended to guide Christians in

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75 Cheon-Seng Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 121-142.
interreligious dialogues, I apply these stages to intercultural relations more broadly in hybridized cultural contexts like Hong Kong where boundaries are difficult to define. Moreover, I argue these seven stages are not only a matter of an outward dialogue with cultural and religious others, but also important stages of one’s inward dialogue with God.

The first stage is seeing the room from the other side or seeing the other from afar. There is no real engagement with difference but only an elementary awareness. In this globally connected world, it is easy to be aware of cultural others without any sensible relationship. For many mainland Chinese, perceptions of Hong Kong are framed by a combination of popular media and nationalistic history. The second stage is the search for the familiar in the unfamiliar. For many of my informants, the Hong Kong experience is initially disorienting because its cultural fabric is woven of both Chinese and non-Chinese threads. It can be easy to enjoy the elements of Hong Kong that are familiar to their Chinese heritage while avoiding the uncomfortable elements. Congregational life with other mainland Chinese Christians is an example of such familiar culture of the mainland as well as shared values and beliefs. The third stage consists of not only acknowledging differences but engaging them. For a few of my informants, this meant learning Cantonese and participating in events with local Hong Kongers. Most often, this meant connecting with local Hong Kong or international Christians. Christian faith provides shared values for exploring differences.

Song’s fourth stage of dialogue signals the beginning of theological inculturation or hybridization, what he calls “writing our own story in a foreign land.” As the foreign becomes increasingly familiar, one finds their own way of being in the world shifting. The capacity to

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76 Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 131.
articulate and chart that journey is an important one for recognizing God’s presence. The stories I collected from my informants all resonated with this stage of dialogue. Their words trace the outlines of a narrative regarding God’s guidance and the unique formation taking place during their sojourn through the familiar and foreign in Hong Kong. The particularities of Hong Kong’s religious environment are woven into their Christian identity and religiosity. Through this process of storytelling, the differences that first appeared foreign are made familiar in such a way that they become a natural part of one’s spiritual experience.

This process of piecing together one’s story lays the foundations for the latter three stages of dialogue Song labels “blessed ignorance,” “bilateral agreement,” and “dialogical conversion.” These three final stages are the most difficult because they require critical reflexivity be applied to the earlier four stages. Blessed ignorance requires one to recognize that the new story they are writing will likely mischaracterize the other that they are integrating into their new sense of self. It is a recognition that acknowledging one’s continuing ignorance of the other is a form of blessing that fosters humility and openness. My mainland informants may come to appreciate and embrace elements of Hong Kong that deeply reshape their faith life, but they cannot understand the larger context out of which Hong Kong exists. The habitus of an international congregation may bring about new understandings of God, but it does not mean that one can fully identify with the Hong Kong expat experience. Bilateral agreement asks that differences that were ignored or misunderstood be recognized, even if they remain conflicted. There is an acknowledgement that another’s differences cannot be fully understood

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Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 133-142.
or synthesized with one’s own newly emerging religiosity and identity. This is a very important element of Song’s view of ecumenical theology noted above; that intercultural and interreligious exchange will not lead to any neat and tidy synthesis. All roads may lead to God, but these roads will not always intersect. Dialogic conversion, the final stage, emerges when both parties recognize that, in spite of very real differences, the process of taking seriously and engaging the other brings mutually transformative change. The conversion that takes place is not from one side to another but something new that is rendered by dialogue. The roads to God may not intersect, but they are part of a larger landscape and ecology that ultimately shape one another over time.

Moreover, Song’s seven stages of dialogic conversion serves not only as a pathway for dialogue with the other but also an internal dialogue with the compassionate God whose transpositional Gospel abducts and beckons us to transformation. In the first stage, the universality of God is taken to mean a simplistic homogeneity. God is rationally understood to be the same at all times. In the second stage, we recognize God’s traits as familiar. This provides Christians a sense that God is with them and for them. In the third stage, God’s transcendent character is also acknowledged. God’s ways are not our own. These three basic theological tenants are sufficient for many Christians seeking to relate to God, directing their experiences and orienting their dialogues across the various situations that make up everyday life. Over time, a relationship emerges and a story of God’s presence and guidance is articulated. These four stages are evident in many of interviews with my mainland informants as they share their experiences of God’s peace and moral guidance: a faith in God’s faithfulness characterized by both closeness and mystery.
The story of one’s relationship with God is, however, disrupted by dramatic transpositional experiences. What my Hong Kong informants experience in their internal dialogues with God can be characterized by Song’s latter three stages of dialogic conversion. Surrounded by a new culture with its own unique religious ecology, mainland Chinese Christians are not only challenged to adapt to this new environment. They are also confronted with new questions about God that force a re-evaluation of what they think they know about God. In Hong Kong, God grants the blessing of acknowledging one’s ignorance; the realization that God is so much bigger than what they have experienced thus far. When God’s presence is not experienced in the ways that they once were, they must admit how little they really know. In this arrangement, the sixth stage of bilateral acknowledgement is not bilateral in same sense as between Christian and other. Instead, it signifies an awareness that what one knows about God can be true and yet one can also admit, in equal measure, that they cannot fully know God. The duality of experiencing God and knowing God collapse, particularly when reflecting on the dual nature of Jesus Christ who was both limited in his humanity (captive to a particular time and place) and yet complete in his divinity. This collapse makes the final stage of dialogic conversion possible, an openness to God’s abductive presence that forms Christ-likeness through our ever growing relationship and dialogues with the living God in multiple cultures, times, and places.

Based on this reflection, what theological insights can be drawn from my informants’ boundary crossing experiences in Hong Kong? Taken together, they show that God’s compassionate presence is one that oscillates between familiarity and foreignness. The familiar provides comfort and peace while the foreign invites growth and change. As one settles, the

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other disrupts. One, like the logos, grounds us while the other, like the spirit, cannot be contained and blows as God wills. This relationship is what animates the transpositional nature of the Gospel, its capacity to become firmly embedded in a particular time and place and yet simultaneously transcend it. The cross-boundary experiences highlighted in my Hong Kong informants’ reflections is thus a foundational component in spiritual growth and Christ-like formation. Through intercultural encounter and dialogue, both with other cultures and with God, the truth and power of the Gospel is revealed in ever greater ways.

**Conclusion**

What does it mean to take one’s faith across boundaries and what impact does it have on religious formation? This chapter has taken the various themes and hypotheses discerned from my interviews and observations of Chinese Christians in Shanghai region and tested them against the backdrop of Hong Kong. The previous chapters have explored the religiosity of several protestant Christians from mainland China, their experiences of God’s presence, and the various boundaries they negotiate as they seek to live into their conception of Christian identity. Some of the conclusions rendered from these observations include the prominent experience of peace as a signal of God’s presence. Out of this posture of peace, many also aspired or struggled to live out high moral and ethical standards of Christian faith in the contexts of their work and family life. In addition, for many of my informants, the role of the congregation as a community of familial bonding played an important role in both what it meant to experience God’s presence and living it out. In sum, for many these young
professionals, the Christian life is a continuous process of inward moral cultivation and outward ethical action grounded in God’s peace and the support of the church.

In the context of the People’s Republic of China, confessing Christian identity can be a radical differentiation from standard social-cultural norms. In a sense, mainland Chinese Christian life can be understood as an important process of boundary marking, a religiosity oriented toward establishing a firm identity rooted in Christ that is exemplified in ethical living and inviting others to join it. This study has found that Christian identity produces passionate, close-knit communities that are treated with the same reverence as familial relationships. This identity provides its adherents an alternative ethic for life and support one another in living out the everyday in ways that they believe reflect Christ’s love and mission.

During the latter phases of my research in Hong Kong, however, I discovered shifts in orientation and focus. In the Hong Kong setting, many mainland Chinese students and young professionals “drift” and struggle with what it means to be an outsider. In Hong Kong’s comparatively more individualistic culture and religiously open environment, experiences of God’s presence became less associated with collective situations.78 Most of my informants agreed that freedom of religion in the Hong Kong setting offered them stronger ecclesial structures and more resources for spiritual growth than the mainland, but also less group cohesion and purpose. As a result, their sense of Christian faith and congregational cultures underwent significant re-negotiations.

In Hong Kong, mainland Chinese Christians discover multiple forms of Christian community. The diversity of ecclesial and cultural norms elicits a renegotiation of their sense of God’s presence. Instead of boundary marking, the primary motif gathered during my Hong Kong research is boundary crossing. The degrees of boundary crossing my informants experience correlates with the degree of critical introspection expressed in their sense of God’s presence. Many of my informants expressed a more self-reflexive faith when talking about their faith journeys. For some, like Briana, Peter and Walter, this reflection led them to serve as leaders of their mandarin speaking congregations, providing spiritual anchors in transient congregations. Others, like Katherine, joined international English-speaking churches because they resonated with particular elements of the culture that strengthened their sense of self.

These findings gathered in Hong Kong affirm the correlation observed in earlier phases of research in the mainland context: with greater experiences of diversity comes a deeper sense of both individual questioning and spiritual growth. In Hong Kong, less concern is given to the ethical clarity needed for Christian living and more attention is given to finding the right place for one’s own spiritual journey. As experiences of the Christian world becomes larger and more diverse, particularization of one’s faith identity and practices follow even as openness to ecclesial and theological differences increases. There is the need to not only recognize one’s particularity but also to structure it.

The data and analysis rendered from this third phase of research sets the stage for this study’s tentative conclusions: a triple negotiation of Christian faith in everyday life worked out along the boundaries of re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitan ethics, and familial bonds. For my informants in and around the Shanghai region, personal experiences of God’s presence
spiraled out into everyday discourses and embodiments that required them to reconsider the spiritual nature of reality, the ethical basis that ought to guide their work and relationships, and the familial bonds that undergirded their congregational community vis-à-vis biological family ties. In the context of Hong Kong, these themes remained present but were injected with more complex questions of social, cultural, and religious diversity unique to their experiences of migration as Chinese mainlanders in an alternative Chinese modernity.
CHAPTER 5: Migration and the triple negotiation of liquid religiosity in modern China

What can the Chinese Christian experiences explored in this study teach us about contemporary religiosity and identity in an age of globalization and late modernity? Regarding lived religion’s emphasis on interconnectedness and intersubjective meaning, McGuire states:

We might hypothesize that certain societies and certain historical eras would have social conditions that promote extensive bricolage in all aspects of culture, while other societies and eras would have conditions that reduce the motivation or freedom for individuals to be creative with religious meaning and practice. It may also be that certain cultures begin from values that emphasize collective religious bricolage while others encourage religious bricolage by individuals. Historical and cross-cultural comparisons of such religious hybridity would be welcome for expanding our understanding of religious eclecticism and blending.¹

McGuire’s observations set the stage for analyzing Chinese Christian experiences in its larger sociocultural contexts. How has China’s unique history shaped dynamics of religious bricolage and negotiation that might differ from the trajectory of Western civilizations? Lived religion’s focus on the micro dimensions of everyday religious life thus brings new insight into how the macro dimensions of China’s complex modern history have transformed religiosity and identity.

This chapter analyzes this study's sociological conclusions through the lens of migration experiences of boundary making and crossing, framed by the larger context of modern Chinese religious history. It argues that contemporary Chinese religiosity and identity requires a triple negotiation of boundaries along spiritual, ethical, and familial lines. These negotiations are respectively identified as processes of selective re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitanism, and familial belonging between heaven and earth. Together, they make up a late modern condition I label “liquid religiosity,” a state of flexible spirituality that must ebb and flow

through and around late-modernity’s rigid institutions and pluralistic worldviews. Moreover, the triple negotiation of liquid religiosity is most pronounced during migration across multiple forms of modernity as exemplified in the differences between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong.

**Understanding religious formation as migration and boundary making/crossing**

The differences in religiosity and identity observed across this study can be interpreted through the lens of migration and boundary making/crossing. Migration can be understood broadly as a form of movement from the familiar to unfamiliar including processes of adaption to the foreign so that a new life can emerge. In her review of migration and religion studies, Martha Frederiks identifies three general types of research: “a) theories about personal faith as spiritual and social resource for people actually crossing borders; b) theories that study the role and significance of religious communities for people who migrate; and c) theories that focus on migrants’ transnational networks, leading to conceptual reflections, what notions like ‘context’ and ‘locality’ might actually entail for migrants and migrants’ religious communities.”

Moreover, Frederiks argues studies in religion and migration must move beyond the contexts of Western nations, and turn toward the non-Western world.

While my informants do not fit the classic definition of a migrant, this study’s broad conception of migration as an experiential metaphor still resonates with all four of these

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themes. First, at the individual level, I have observed differences in how my informants’ experiences of God’s presence foster purpose and direct life decisions as they cross everyday boundaries of family and work as well as geographic and cultural boundaries around the world. Second, the congregational cultures my informants participate in play an important role in shaping boundary crossing experiences, emphasizing certain elements of Christian faith over others. Third, my informants’ senses of the church as a global community experienced in diverse ways attests to the complexity of holding together a sense of normative ethical unity amongst many different settings, blurring the lines between what constitutes global and local experiences of God’s presence. Fourth, this study focuses on experiences of boundary crossing set in the People’s Republic of China with a focus on the internal impact of these movements with minimal reference to Western contexts.

Boundary marking and crossing are fundamental processes in migration experiences. Boundary making encircles to strengthen inward cohesion while boundary crossing expands outward into differences. These two processes should not be viewed as a dichotomy, however. They are, in fact, two sides to the same process. In order to cross boundaries, they must first be made. In order to make new boundaries, old ones must be crossed. The boundary making process that takes place in the mainland setting begins with crossing pre-existing boundaries set by traditional Chinese religiosities and party state ideology. The boundary crossing process exhibited in Hong Kong is an attempt to mark boundaries in a new environment. One cannot be done without also doing the other.

For example, in the mainland, boundaries are marked in congregational life that provides peace and purpose. The moral ethic that Christianity provides anchors my informants’
faith lives, even when realizing this ethic is difficult. There is a clear center, and the struggle is how to expand that center into other realms of life. In Hong Kong, however, the center of ethical and collective faith experienced in mainland congregational settings cannot work the same way because the boundaries have changed. In Hong Kong, mainland Christians find themselves immersed in a new marketplace of Christian religiosities embedded in dramatically different social structures. This results in a feeling of displacement that necessitates boundary crossing as a normative way of life in order to piece together a new center.

Thomas Tweed’s conceptions of “dwelling” and “crossing” as elements of religious formation enriches this broad understanding of religion and migration.4 Utilizing metaphors of boundaries and liquid, Tweed defines religion as, “…confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.”5 This definition addresses the important role affect and presence play in religiosity. Joy and suffering are rendered by the presence of God or gods, directing our movements toward dwelling or boundary crossing. Tweed continues,

Religions, I suggest, are not only about being in place but also about moving across. They employ tropes, artifacts, rituals, codes, and institutions to mark boundaries, and they prescribe and proscribe different kinds of movements across those boundaries. I argue that religions enable and constrain terrestrial crossings, as devotees traverse natural terrain and social space beyond the home and across the homeland; corporeal crossings, as the religious fix their attention on the limits of embodied existence; and cosmic crossings, as the pious imagine and cross the ultimate horizon of human life.6


5 Tweed, Crossings and Dwellings, 54.

6 Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling, 123.
By adopting Tweed’s definition of religion, the categories of the RF frame used to analyze my informants’ experiences of God’s presence across different situations become features and resources of the many migrations that make up faithful living. Personal affects and symbols orient one’s sensibilities of where and how to cross. The discourses and behaviors of everyday life help map, build, and inhabit a religious identity for dwelling. The narratives, texts, and rituals of established traditions suggest the boundaries and pathways that make up the journey.

Tweed’s conceptions of dwelling and crossing provide new lenses for understanding my informants’ religious formation. Chinese Christian religiosity in the mainland setting is centered on the community as a central place for dwelling. This dwelling does not, however, imply an aversion to boundary crossing. On the contrary, for many of my informants, it is God’s moral and ethical call that the church manifest its religiosity across boundaries of work and family life. For the most devout, this boundary crossing is animated by a sense of mission to evangelize, inviting others to dwell with them. In contrast, for Christian mainlanders living in Hong Kong, numerous boundaries are crossed in everyday life that require constant negotiation. In this setting, forming a safe place to dwell and call home is vital. Hong Kong congregations provide mainland Christians this safety through their shared identities as followers of Christ.

Following Arjun Appadurai’s theories on cultural flows and the various components that make up one’s worldview, Tweed also describes religions as a “sacroscape.” This language frames religious formation in a geographic register. Accordingly, Tweed defines “dwelling” as “...three overlapping processes: mapping, building, and inhabiting. It refers to the confluence of organic-cultural flows that allows devotees to map, build, and inhabit worlds. It is homemaking. In other words, as clusters of dwelling practices, religions orient individuals and groups in time
and space, transform the natural environment, and allow devotees to inhabit the worlds they construct.”\textsuperscript{7} Expanding on this geographical metaphor, Tweed imagines religions as “watch and compass” that guide their faithful through time and space.\textsuperscript{8}

This metaphor of sacroscapes, watches, and compasses is apt for parsing the dynamics my informants experience in their spiritual journeys across various settings. In the mainland environment, my informants find in their Christian faith a dependable watch and compass for journeying through China’s difficult but nonetheless familiar terrain. But in Hong Kong, the landscape changes. Settings where religion is restricted are different than places with religious freedom, just as climbing a mountain is different than crossing an ocean. In both cases, watch and compass are indispensable, and yet each terrain requires different skills in addition to these basic tools. So too is the experience of taking one’s devotion to Christ across boundaries. Jesus Christ is the same savior, but the church that bears his name will be different. Each is shaped by a unique environment and will have developed its own set of skills and tools to traverse its social terrain.

Lastly, migration is also an inherently abductive experience because, as one moves across boundaries, one always encounters differences that draw one into new ways of thinking, feeling, and being. When migrating from the familiar to the foreign, one is challenged to make a new home in the unfamiliar. The surprises that lead one into embracing new ways of living is the basis of an abductive experience. Abduction plays a key role in transforming the foreign

\textsuperscript{7} Tweed, \textit{Crossing and Dwelling}, 82.

\textsuperscript{8} Tweed, \textit{Crossing and Dwelling}, 99.
into the familiar so that a new dwelling can be built that is still tied to one’s past. This is homemaking in a foreign land, the very essence of migration.

A triple negotiation of religiosity and identity

Building on migration and boundary making/crossing as foundational metaphors, this study identifies three forms of negotiation present in my informants’ experiences of Christian religiosity and identity. The first is a critical or selective re-enchantment of the world. The second is a reconstruction of everyday lives built upon a cosmopolitan sense of Christian ethic. The third is a reformation of community belonging and filial ties within a larger sense of God’s family and mission. These three negotiations parallel dynamics articulated in Tweed’s conception of boundary crossing and homemaking: mapping, building, and inhabiting. This triple negotiation also resonates with the dimensions of religious formation illustrated in my RF frame. As the spiritual world reorients one’s perceptions and experiences, it must also be expanded and negotiated in everyday life and eventually cemented as a holistic worldview. Moreover, the methodological process that directs this study’s analysis can also be discerned in the personal processes my informants undertake in these negotiations (see table 2).

Based on this table, this chapter will address two objectives. First, it will summarize the dynamics of each of the three negotiations in relationship with the data collected and analyzed in previous chapters. This ties the study’s conclusions with the RF frame’s first two levels of analysis, the individual and the everyday. Second, this triple negotiation will be examined in the context of modern China’s distinctive religious history in order to realize the RF frame’s third level of analysis at the macro level of society and tradition.
Table 2: The triple negotiation of liquid religiosity and identity in relationship with conceptions of religious formation and methodology

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**Selective re-enchantment: Negotiating spiritual presences and secular absence.**

First, selective re-enchantment is defined in this study as an engaged process of negotiating one’s conceptions of the spiritual and the secular in response to abductive experiences of God’s presence. At the individual level of religious formation, experiences of God render new affects that must be channeled into new symbols capable of reframing the world one lives in. From the perspective of mapping, it is a selective erasing or redrawing of boundaries between two ways of being that modernity has argued cannot coexist in a single space; where spirituality can be private, but public secularity must be maintained.

Instead of pivoting from a disenchanted worldview to a wholly enchanted one, however, selective re-enchantment is the thoughtful discernment of what spiritual elements ought to
break into one’s public, everyday life and what parts are best kept private or even ignored. This is not the wholesale rejection of one map or landscape for another, but an accounting for newly discovered terrain over and on top of the original. The terrain of family, work, society, and culture remain as they were, but now must include new routes to account for the mountains of God, the pathways of Christ, the rivers of the Spirit, and potentially a whole host of other spirits and deities. This is the creation of a new sacroscape that is not set apart from the everyday but also does not overrule the secular logic that governs modern interactions.

Discussions regarding the concept of disenchantment are rooted in one of Max Weber’s initial observations of secularization’s effects on society.

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental.\(^9\)

In short, as society becomes more rationalized, so too shall it become disenchanted with the religious worldviews that claim supremacy over all of life. This includes not only a rejection of transcendence in the form of God, gods, or spirits, but also a devaluing of the character traits and priorities that accompany them. In a disenchanted world, humanity is left to construct its own world, test its own values, and forge its own direction independent of the so-called holy.

Weber’s famous utterance specifies that disenchantment is not complete. It is an exile of religiosity from public life, not all of life. Belief in God becomes a private matter and religiosity is best lived without disrupting the secular order. In this context, I define re-enchantment as a movement toward reordering one’s public life through the logic of God’s

active presence in the world. This re-enchantment is selective because the believer must themselves discern what spheres of public life ought to be spiritually influenced and guided.

The initial inquiry that directed this study was how Chinese Christians experience the presence of God. This emphasis on presence as the starting point for discerning my informants’ religious formation begins with a question of their relationship to the transcendent and, in turn, how this relationship reshapes my informants’ public lives. I argue young Chinese professionals undergo a process of critical or selective re-enchantment by oscillating between the secular logics of their modern professionalized lives and the abductive experiences of God’s presence to discern the degree of spiritual direction they can comprehend and credibly live within.

Robert Orsi argues that the study of religion ought to incorporate a sense of real presence where God, gods, and/or spirits act as important players in the intersubjective formation of one’s everyday lived experiences.\(^\text{10}\) He defines religion as a network of relationships between heaven and earth where the presence of spirits, gods, saints, and other supernatural entities are real and active. This preference for presence is especially coherent in Chinese conceptions of religiosity. China’s traditional world of ghosts and spirits have never dwelled on other planes of existence. They are always right here with us, as close as family. In fact, they often are family (in the form of ever present ancestors). Ancient China was, as Michael Puett calls it, a “haunted world of humanity.”\(^\text{11}\)


But contemporary China is not the haunted world it was centuries ago. Today, the People’s Republic of China is a modern secular nation-state built on science and technology grounded in Marxist materialism. The party’s hegemonic presence prescribes a de jure sense of absence upon all. The spirits don’t dwell in other realms. They don’t exist at all. The only real presence that matters is the party. Yet for the average Chinese citizen, life is often experienced on both sides of absence and presence. This is a nation of atheists who light incense, praying for their university entrance exams, and materialists who burn paper iPhones for their grandparents’ spirits. How do Chinese Christians live in between absence and presence?

The implications of putting Orsi’s preference for presence in relationship with abductive analysis is this: in a disenchanted world, any encounter with the real presence of God, gods, or spirits is an inherently abductive experience that leads you from one worldview into another. When the surprising presence of God breaks through, a process of abduction begins, leading one into unmarked territories. An experience of real presence ripples out like the tremors of an earthquake, shifting and shaking one’s mental and emotional landscape with a shot of spirituality that requires new definitions and constructs. It is a process that requires a person to re-negotiate a complex web of values and beliefs that run through various social, cultural, and political legacies. Different personalities, each with their own unique histories, are going to go about this process in their own ways, resulting in various shades of real and symbolic presences operating at different times and situations.

The Christian faith that my informants confess to, and the degrees of enchantment that accompanies them, are products of multiple negotiations developed throughout life. Every day is a process of negotiating their place in between the haunted world of humanity and the
empty world of communism. This begins with an early childhood education in Marxist materialism as well as the multiple religiosities and values that animate traditional Chinese religions. In particular, the Buddhist and Daoist forms of religiosity cast a long shadow in the Chinese imagination of what it means to be “religious.” More importantly, experiences of the Christian God open the doors to a whole community of other possible spirits that must be classified and engaged in a manner that is not only appropriate to my informants’ understanding of Christianity, but also their modern lifestyles.

*Everyday cosmopolitanism: Negotiating universal ethic and particular identity.*

Second, this study defines everyday cosmopolitanism as a pragmatic negotiation involving how a universal set of moral ethics can be discursively deployed and embodied through a particular identity across multiple situations of everyday life. This everyday form of cosmopolitanism oscillates between a universal sense of God’s moral standards and a particular sense of Christian identity. It is, therefore, both a form of boundary marking and crossing. As my informants deepen their Christian identity, a boundary is marked between them and others who are not Christian. But as they seek to live a holistic Christian life, they must also extend what they perceive to be God’s universal standard across boundaries into new situations.

This process of differentiating one’s identity from others while also living an avowedly universal ethic resonates with the cosmopolitan quest: the search for a unity of morality and ethics amidst a diversity of worldviews and societies.\(^\text{12}\) Cosmopolitanism is often defined as a

\(^{12}\) The conception of cosmopolitanism employed in this study is based largely on Anthony Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), and grounded in the historical analysis
sense of citizenship to the world and a concern for global community that can temper differences of culture and nationality based on a universal ethic that can be constructed out of the common ground all persons stand upon. Cosmopolitanism has been an important ideological engine behind modernity’s expansion, particularly in its application to the global economy, humanist thought, and the global human rights regime. In practice, however, global modernity’s system of nation states has also reified boundaries of identity tied to nationalism and culture, resulting in ideological wars similar to the wars of religion it sought to avoid. Its dependence on a global secularism can be argued to be a form of fundamentalism.13

Religion’s role in the cosmopolitan quest has been difficult to process, especially in modern times.14 In many cases, religiosity has produced the type of exclusivist fundamentalism dreaded by cosmopolitan commitments to diversity. The violence and suffering rendered by such religious movements is real and cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the belief in a transcendent reality that undergirds humanity is also becoming an unexpected hope for cosmopolitanism’s future. Religious communities, unlike nation states, are not necessarily bound by geography or culture. Instead, their shared sense of identity is rooted beyond the reach of modern sensibilities.15 Opposite fundamentalism, an inclusivist sentiment of religiosity


14 For an example of the historical link between Christian religiosity and the development of the cosmopolitan quest, see Winter Jade Werner, Missionary Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century British Literature (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2020).

15 See Leonard Francis Taylor, Catholic Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Taylor provides a historical survey of Catholicism’s role in shaping the cosmopolitan quest,
and identity expressed through interreligious dialogue has brought different traditions together to identify the common ground on which their confessions can stand, the very hope of cosmopolitanism. This emerging sense of humanity’s shared transcendence is becoming a safeguard to modern conceptions of human rights, themselves the products of religious sensibilities. All of this makes religion a unique player in the cosmopolitan quest.¹⁶

My informants’ negotiation between global and particular belonging, between universal ethic and everyday situations, is rooted in the complexities of religiosity and identity seen through this cosmopolitan lens. First, as Christians, my informants experience and believe in a form of global belonging and universal ethic. Many of them believe their Christian faith ties them to a greater family of Christians around the world. This sense of global belonging across different nations and cultures affirms in them the universality of the Christian worldview, including its moral and ethical values. Their cosmopolitan sensibility is built on their belief that God created all things and that inherent in God’s sovereignty is a normative standard for life.

Alongside this sense of global Christian belonging and ethic, however, is a more operative everyday sense of particularity as Chinese Christians living in the People’s Republic of China. As a minority community, my informants were both proud of their particularity as God’s chosen people but also mindful of the great difficulties that came with it. I repeatedly heard from my mainland-based informants: the best part of being a Christian was its ethical arguing that these religious foundations are now needed to undergird and strengthen the international laws that structure the modern human rights regime.

¹⁶ See Maria Rovisco and Sebastian Kim, Cosmopolitanism, Religion and the Public Sphere (New York: Routledge, 2014), for a collection of interdisciplinary essays exploring the ways in which the concept of cosmopolitanism plays out in contemporary questions of religious diversity and public life in a global society.
grounding. This awareness of right and wrong grounded in God’s presence and scripture strengthened their sense of Christianity’s universality even as it was experienced particularly.

One of the great questions of cosmopolitanism is how one ought to construe their obligations to those outside of one’s immediate community of concern. In the Chinese context, this question is especially relevant given the culture’s collectivist orientation expressed in in-group out-group dynamics. My informants’ discussions of everyday challenges were often punctuated by struggles of this nature. Instead of articulating a comprehensive ethic based on reasoned principles or utilitarian political/economic interests, they were primary motivated by what they believed God expected of them. Christian values prioritizing love were the most resonant guide in determining how one ought to treat others. This orientation comes from a relational understanding of God’s love for all. God’s love is universal and to be a follower of this God is to foster that same character, to try and see and relate to others as God would.

Because most of my informants are young adult professionals, the dual spheres of workplace and family were the most common contexts in which they sought to apply their faith. Throughout my conversations, the challenge of responding to difficult colleagues or family relations dominated their negotiations regarding how to live as a Christian. They struggled with how the particularly Christian way of living they have embraced as universal ought to be expanded across boundaries. Those with a more devout faith pondered questions of how to facilitate cultural change in their workplace to better reflect Christian values. Yet many also recognized their Christian identities were beholden to heavy state scrutiny, making such explicit witness difficult.
As a result, many believe the best way to witness for Christ is to model it, both individually and collectively, as a contrast community to dominant norms. At the individual level, when interacting with non-Christians, a life of outstanding ethical integrity was the most important avenue to exhibiting one’s Christian identity. Cultivating the moral strength to live a Christian ethic was a major priority for many. Additionally, at the collective level, many of my informants also believed that the love and care a Christian community exhibits for one another provides a strong testimony for Christianity’s unique yet universal vision. While individual moral cultivation was recognized as a common feature of many Chinese religiosities, Christian community was perceived to be a unique example of God’s real presence. Particularly in urban centers like Shanghai, made up of individuals from all over the country, the witness of familial-like bonds among non-family members is considered a testament to the truth of a shared transcendence.

The everyday cosmopolitanism sought by my informants is simultaneously global in scale and yet narrow in scope. It is global because it belongs to all of God’s creation but local because it is the church tasked with living it out. Negotiating an everyday cosmopolitanism is a process of adopting God’s vision for the world in the particularities of everyday life. It is the building of a sacroscape with clear but porous boundaries where the alternative ethics of the community are lived out with an integrity that evidences its universality.

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Familial belonging: Negotiating identity between heaven and earth

Closely related to cosmopolitan conceptions of global citizenship is a third negotiation: the reconfiguration of familial sensibilities and relations in the context of congregational life. This third negotiation also struggles with how boundaries ought to be crossed and made, a challenge representative of what Tweed calls inhabiting. For Chinese Christians, to inhabit one’s Christian religiosity fully is to take seriously one’s identity as belonging to God’s church and mission. This allegiance can, however, conflict with Chinese culture’s traditional emphasis on filial piety to one’s biological family and, in the modern setting of the People’s Republic of China, one’s nation. This is a struggle of belonging between my informants’ conception of a heavenly family under God and an earthly family under households and nation states.

Throughout this study, a number of my informants confess the paramount importance of their congregation’s presence in shaping their religiosity and identity. Their conception of Christian identity is most often framed through the language of family belonging. The conflicts that arise between Christian belonging and other forms of belonging are thus filtered through the lens of family. Through this lens, sensibilities related to filial piety and duty are amplified by the presence of Christ as the head of a larger family. For those whose faith conflicts with their family’s expectations, senses of filial piety and duty were sensitive subjects. In one difficult but telling incident, one of my informants casually mentioned a conversation she had with her father who had confronted her about her faith. “He asked me, ‘what is it with you and Christianity now? How can you be so quick to toss aside your father? Is that what you are doing?’” She began sharing this incident with a smile, as if to indicate a sense of pride in her faith, but midway through her statement her tone suddenly changed. She laughed nervously.
“Yea, I guess I kind of am doing that,” she mutters as she casts her eyes downward, followed by a short yet piercing moment of silence.\footnote{Interview with Dora, July 2019.} This shift from non-verbal features of pride to shame in seconds was one of the fastest I have ever observed.

In contrast, in situations where parents accepted an informants’ Christian faith, even if they did not become Christians themselves, robust narratives were shared with both relief and pride. Many of my informants also expressed struggles with theology regarding the spiritual well-being of non-Christian family members. For example, those formed in Calvinist traditions struggled with questions of eternal salvation and damnation because of the finality of familial separation it implies. On several occasions, I witnessed my informants emotionally wrestle with the teaching that their loved ones who reject Christianity were certain to go to hell. More than any other subject, it was this topic that would elicit long pauses of difficult ambivalence.

Less dramatic but ever present was my informants’ negotiations regarding their dual belonging to Christian family and the Chinese nation state. For many, the fact that the Communist authorities continue to be suspicious and controlling of Christian faith is enough to engender sustained skepticism of the government, even among those who confess attending Three-Self congregations. Thus, very few of my informants expressed any nationalistic sentiments in conversation, especially those with international experiences. What was present, however, was a sense that Christianity has a role to play in shaping China’s future. This ranged from a general responsibility to foster moral integrity and care for one another to a deep charismatic belief in the Chinese Christianity’s greater role in God’s salvation plan. In all cases, there was the sense that Christianity’s growing presence in China was a sign of God’s love for
the Chinese people. While no explicit conflict between religion and state was on the minds of my informants, God’s headship, an eternal one, over that of the Communist party, was palatable.

All of this points to the importance of the family in structuring Chinese culture and society.¹⁹ At the level of society and tradition, much of traditional Chinese religiosities can be argued to be an expression of filial piety, devotion to the family over all other matters. The nature of Chinese narratives, texts, and rituals are often oriented toward reinforcing such family ties to such an extent that the presence of generations of ancestors continue to dwell among us. These familial sensibilities lay at the heart of Chinese religiosity regardless of whether they are directed toward one’s ancestors, the building of the nation-state, or service to the kingdom of God. In all of these arrangements, there is a keen sense of being a child of what comes before you and a duty to lean into the collective vision of this whole.

The close knit, familial like bonds that animate so many Chinese congregations thus blurs and challenges the boundaries that separate peoples based on biological, cultural, or nationalistic ties. It is only natural that these same rhythms of religiosity infuse Chinese Christian congregational life. The Christian family is not linked to blood or nation but to the communion of saints spanning heaven and earth. This gives my informants unique struggles where familial loyalties are divided but also an aspiring sense of cosmopolitan identity and mission.

Negotiating the boundaries of modern China’s “religious question:” A historical survey

This chapter’s second main section presents the three aforementioned negotiations in their larger historical and sociological contexts in order to understand them as products of China’s contemporarily modern yet post-secular environment. This assumes that the triple negotiation is not a product of individual experiences alone. It is embedded in China’s larger social and cultural history of extended struggle with the “religious question” of how to understand the role of religion in a modern world writ large and the modern nation-state in specific. Drawing from Vincent Goossaert & David Palmer’s landmark historical study, I define the religious question in modern China as the search for a culturally resonant yet modern definition for the concept of “religion,” and a practical application of this definition to the formation of a Chinese nation state that is global and modern in strength and stature and yet distinct in its history and cultural way of being in the world.\(^\text{20}\) The history of how the Chinese state has worked out this religious question undergirds the logics that guide and complicate my informants’ triple negotiation across the boundaries that separate the secular from the spiritual, the universal from the particular, and the biological family and nation from the church.\(^\text{21}\)


\(^{21}\) This historical overview draws heavily from Goosaert and Palmer’s analysis of the history of religion in modern China broadly with substantial but still limited references to Christianity’s specific development. For historical surveys focused on Chinese Christianity’s development within this larger context, see Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Kim-Kwong Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019); and Nicholas Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume One 635-1800* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2001); and R. G. Tiedermann, *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume Two 1800-present* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2009). For critical reflections on the importance of framing Chinese Christianity in the
Elements of all three negotiations can be traced to China’s sustained attempts to modernize, beginning in the late 19th century on to the present day.\textsuperscript{22} During this period of time, multiple government regimes have sought to either displace, utilize, or banish China’s traditional senses of religiosity and belonging in favor a secular sense of reason directed toward science and technology. Over time, the sensibilities of those living within the bounds of what would come to be the modern Chinese nation-state were transformed through strategically deployed policies. To use the language of the RF frame, the emerging state apparatus employed top down strategies of nation building that prescribed new narratives, texts, and rituals to direct everyday discourses and embodiments in order to foster a modern sense of loyalty to the Chinese nation state as a symbol of collective Chinese identity. This dynamic is common to all regimes of the period from the imperial Qing to the Nationalist party of the Republican era to the Communist Party of the current People’s Republic of China. The difference between them lay only in degree and ideological ends.\textsuperscript{23}

This story begins with late Qing reform policies, including the 1898 “Smash Temples, Build Schools” campaign that sought to replace institutions of public religiosity oriented toward local communities and human-spirit relations with a nationalistic curriculum designed to foster


\textsuperscript{23} See Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), for a range of case studies and analysis of this dynamic in throughout different periods of modern Chinese history.
greater devotion to the Qing imperial court as the sovereign rulers of a Chinese nation state. The goal was to reform the Chinese worldview from a diffuse sense of multiple identities existing “under heaven” to a more precise sense of citizenship to a large sovereign nation. This contrasted with Chinese religiosities focused on building social cohesion at local levels in relationship with local deities and generations of family ancestors.

In 1912, after the fall of the Qing dynasty, the Republic of China was established with new structures of governance and policies that sought to help define modern life. National religious associations were created to provide religious leaders and government officials channels for communication and collaboration. In theory, this provided religious leaders an avenue to express their interests to the central government and, more importantly, gave government leaders a means to orient the priorities of religious communities toward nation building. The inherent bias of this system, however, lay in the definitions of religion used to structure these associations. Modelled after Christianity and European Enlightenment ideas, religion was thereby defined as a system of doctrines, scriptures, and ethical teachings relating


humanity with the transcendent. This definition reoriented discourses and forced religious communities to adopt institutional models with centralized authorities and hierarchical structures, a radical departure from the diffuse traditional Chinese religiosities that rendered humanity, earth, and heaven in an interconnected cosmos. The result was the rejection of lived practices and beliefs that appeared incoherent to the new modern logics of religion. These incompatible practices and beliefs were then formally defined by the authorities as “superstitious,” spiritual elements that needed to be banished because they were viewed as obstacles to cultivating the scientific worldview necessary for a modern nation state. Meanwhile, the so-called higher elements of religiosity that resulted in ethical morality remained important for instilling a sense of duty to the nation. 

During the May Fourth and New Culture movements of the late 1910s through 20s, Chinese national consciousness reached a fever pitch. The well-oiled gears of the modern global system appeared to be crushing the young Chinese nation state as colonial powers continued to expand influence and dominion on Chinese soil. The only response was to accelerate the modernization process through technological advancement and impassioned

28 The term, “zongjiao 宗教,” was used as a rough equivalent to European ideas of religion. The term can be roughly translated as “sectarian teaching,” giving the concept of “religion” a connotation of otherness. It was first used by the Japanese in their translation of European texts on religion.


patriotism. In this setting, “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” became the new idols of the era. Meanwhile, the disdain previously reserved for “superstitious” practices and beliefs spread to established religions, including Christianity. During the anti-Christian movements of the 1920s, the Christian religiosity that was credited with ushering in logic, reason, and ethics by many early Chinese reformers was suddenly cast out as an imperialist appendage operating in the service of foreign powers.32 There is little wonder that it was in this same environment that the Chinese Communist Party was formed and grew.

In 1928, the Nationalist party tentatively united China under a central government system. During the Nanjing Decade (1928-38), the government implemented a series of nationalistic narratives and rituals with a hybrid Christian-Confucian ethic called the “New Life Movement.”33 Yet again, religious ethics were recruited in state building despite being emptied of their transcendent orientation. As the state advanced its modern ambitions, Chinese Christians were beginning to advance their own indigenous theologies and communities.34 While the newly convened National China Christian Council sought steps toward ecumenical

32 The Anti-Christian Movement is widely understood by many scholars of Chinese Christianity to be one of the major impetuses for indigenization of Protestant Chinese theology. It is under these conditions that many prominent Chinese theologians began articulating a Chinese cultural basis for Christianity to counter accusations of the faith’s association with Western imperial powers. See Wing-Hung Lam, Chinese Theology in Construction, Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1983. Lam’s argues that it is in this context that a Christo-centric theology emerges in response to Chinese nationalism.


union among the various missionary led denominational churches, new grassroots expressions of Chinese Christianity emerged bearing the marks of Pentecostal revivalism.\textsuperscript{35} A time of vibrant theological and ecclesial diversity, it was in this era that many prominent Chinese theologians found their voices including Zhao Zichen (T.C. Chao) and Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee).

The Nationalist project would not last long. Following the second World War and the Chinese Civil War, the Communist Party arises victorious. The founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 solidifies the Marxist vision of materialism as orthodoxy for this latest iteration of the Chinese state. The national religious associations instituted during the Republican era were reformed to adhere to the Communist Party’s United Front ideology. This includes the Three-Self Patriotic Movement for Protestant Christians and the National Catholic Association for Roman Catholics. In this new arrangement, religious institutions are further expected to uphold and advance the state line.\textsuperscript{36}

State domination of all forms of religiosity and identity reaches a destructive climax during the Cultural Revolution in 1966. During the Maoist period, religions of all kinds were dismantled and driven out of every imaginable corner of public life. In this setting, the basics


contours of Marxist dialectic materialism were merged with a cult-like veneration of Mao. But Chinese religiosities continued to find a way to survive in private.\(^{37}\) This is the era of China’s underground house church movements that preserved their faith against overwhelming odds.\(^{38}\)

Finally, in 1982, Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms usher in a period of religious toleration. As China transitions to a state-centric market system, it also expands select personal freedoms including freedom of religion. This begins a period of negotiated religious resurgence, a time of religious revival and political restructuring seeking a productive equilibrium for religion and state.\(^{39}\) Inherent in this new party line is an acknowledgement of both religion’s ethical and seditious potentials.\(^{40}\) National associations are revived and given more agency to negotiate their standing with the newly established Religious Affairs Bureau. Private religious life arises as a “zone of indifference,” where individual believers are given autonomy so long as loyalty to the state is evidenced within religious institutional structures.\(^{41}\)


\(^{39}\) Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution protects religious freedom, but also gives the state the right to restrict those who use religion to “engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with educational system of the state,” and that “Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.”

\(^{40}\) In addition to changes in the constitution, the Communist Party publishes an important policy paper, “The Basic Viewpoint on the Religious Question During Our Country’s Socialist Period.” Known as Document 19, this statement outlines the government’s attitudes and policies toward religious persons and communities. It acknowledges religion as a naturally occurring social phenomenon that cannot be artificially removed but must fade in due course with the development of socialism. Under these circumstances, it is the nation’s role to both shepherd religions toward strengthening a socialist vision while also restraining and eliminating dangerous “cults” or “foreign elements” which seek to undermine social order under the guise of religion.

From the 80s onward, the leaders of religious institutions recognized by the government slowly reclaimed their presence in the Chinese public, particularly in the form of reopening religious buildings with their respective ritual routines.\textsuperscript{42} For the Protestant community, the leadership of Ding Guangxun (K.H. Ting) was instrumental in the robust re-emergence of the TSPM.\textsuperscript{43} To advance the church’s outreach, Ding helped found the Amity Foundation, China’s first faith-based NGO. To manage the church’s internal matters with greater care, he helped establish the China Christian Council (CCC) as a partner organization to the TSPM. Ding attempted to bring out the best of Christian religiosity side by side with the party’s socialist vision. TSPM congregations were not the only churches to experience revival in this time. The underground house churches that had weathered the Cultural Revolution also began to grow through their relational networks. One of the most prominent voices of the house church was Wang Mingdao, known to many as the “Dean of the House Churches.”\textsuperscript{44} Contrary to Ding’s collaborative spirit, Wang believed the church ought to exist as a contrast community to the world. While Christianity certainly promoted an ethical way of life, it was not for the building of a nation. Rather, it was to bring glory to God alone. Many Christians, weary of the persecution of previous decades, agreed.


\textsuperscript{43} See Philip Wickeri, \textit{Reconstructing Christianity in China: K.H. Ting and the Chinese church} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), for a biography of Ding with a focus on his role in leading the rebuilding of the registered Protestant church in the post-Mao era.

\textsuperscript{44} See Thomas Allen Harvey, \textit{Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdiao’s Stand for the Persecuted Church in China} (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002).
The split between state registered churches and unregistered house churches continues to the present.

As government regulations continued to ease through the 1990s, Protestant Christian life has re-emerged in diverse forms with stronger institutional structures and public presence, leading to a complex new ecology of Christian religiosity and identity across multiple boundaries.\(^{45}\) When members of the house church communities expanded into urban areas, their presence as communities of ethical living and collective care drew the attention of many of the country’s migrating middle class. Urban house churches would soon become refuges of sorts for many Chinese experiencing forms of displacement.\(^{46}\) As congregations grew, what began in private homes soon expanded into rented facilities at hotels and office buildings. Christian ethics were soon applied beyond the household and congregation in the form of Christian business leaders eager to foster a positive ethical environment and sense of community into their companies. The expansion of Christian ethics into the public realm has, in turn, reshaped congregational cultures. Many urban house churches have shifted their sense of spirituality from Pentecostal to Reformed orientations signaling a change in focus from

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\(^{45}\) See Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Hunter and Chan’s analysis is based on what is likely the most extensive fieldwork of Chinese Protestant experience in the late 1980s/early 1990s, providing a comprehensive snapshot of Christian life during this period. Their findings regarding Chinese Christian experiences of the power of Christ to heal and protect believers from evil spirits are especially germane to questions of selective re-enchantment in the context of China’s early economic reform period. See, also, Francis Ghek Gee Lim, *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-Cultural Perspectives* (New York, Routledge, 2013). Nearly every essay in Lim’s edited volume intersects with the triple negotiation I have observed in my informants in some way. See also Fuk-Tsang Ying, “The Regional Development of Protestant Christianity in China: 1918, 1949 and 2004,” *China Review* 9, no. 2 (2009): 63-97, for a comparative assessment of shifts in Chinese Christianity from a historical perspective.

individual and congregational holiness to overcome domination to more systematic ways of conceiving God’s activity in the world through the church. Moreover, the witness of Chinese Christians has caught the attention of the Chinese academy in the form of “Sino-Christian Theology” pursued by “Cultural Christian” scholars who find intellectual resonance in Christianity’s theological teachings as a philosophical resource for social and cultural development.

Protestant Christianity has become the fastest growing religious community in China today with estimates ranging between 50 to 70 million believers. This story of religious resurgence is not exclusive to the Christianity, however. Since the 80s, China has become an increasingly pluralistic religious landscape with steady growth across all five official religions (Protestant Christianity, Roman Catholic Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam).

47 See Brent Fulton, *China’s Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot be Hidden* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015). See also Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018). Both contain accounts and anecdotes that provide a window into how Protestant Chinese Christians perceive their experiences of faith amidst the sociopolitical and rural-urban shifts that have taken place in Chinese society.


50 See Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). MacInnis brings together a vivid collection of translated Chinese policy papers, research reports, and journalistic accounts of religious life in China during the 1980s, providing a window into both lived experiences and the official narratives being negotiated at the time.
Throughout China, Buddhist and Daoist temples have been rebuilt and popular religious beliefs and rituals have also returned in both rural and urban settings. The diffuse folk practices of grassroots religiosities in the form of temple festivals and local deities has also returned.

The return of religion to contemporary China has unsettled the officially atheist regime. Over the course of the past three decades, the regime has utilized different strategies to govern this growth. To balance the material and economic growth of the 80s and 90s, the CCP turned its attention to the social ills that appeared to follow and promoted the building of a “harmonious society,” which included the contributions of religious communities. It was during this period, from roughly 2000-2010, that many Christians from both the registered and unregistered church ventured to live out their morals in public service and discourse. It was also during this time that Confucianism experienced a noticeable rehabilitation, lifted up as Chinese civilization’s base for morality and ethics. This concerted effort by the party to use

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53 In 1997, the “White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China” was published by the State Council stating, “Religion should be adapted to the society where it is prevalent” and religions must “conduct their activities within the sphere prescribed by law and adapt to social and cultural progress.” See Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China.”

54 See Gerta Wielander, Christian Values in Communist China (New York: Routledge, 2015).

the positive aspects of religiosity to push forward its agenda seemed to encourage more interest in religion than socialism.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the CCP has reversed course in the 2010s. The previous focus on building a harmonious society has given way to a vague but powerful idealism expressed in Xi’s “China Dream.” The practical implementation of this dream has been a return to the CCP’s ideological roots with strong centralized oversight of all aspects of society, including religion.\footnote{See, for example, Kin Shueng Chiaretto Yan, “When the Gospel Meets the China Dream: Religious Freedom and the Golden Rule,” \textit{International Bulletin of Mission Research} 42, no. 3 (2017): 212–19, for a study of how Xi’s “China Dream” rhetoric has influence Sino-Vatican relations.} The result has been a series of new policies that curtail religious freedom and prioritize the role religious institutions ought to play in realizing the party’s socialist vision.\footnote{In 2018, the State Council published another white paper entitled, “China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief.” The title gives a positive gloss to the position that religious freedom is best protected when the party retains complete control of it.} This includes new calls by the government to “Sinify” religion, coded language for making explicit each religious institution’s loyalty to the party.\footnote{See Zhibin Xie, “Religion and State in China: A Theological Appraisal,” \textit{Journal of Church and State}, (2020), and Benoit Vermander, “Sinicizing Religions, Sinicizing Religious Studies,” \textit{Religions} 10, no. 2 (2019).} Religious associations like the TSPM have had to draft developmental plans with evidence of structural changes that would bring the church in closer alliance with the party’s priorities.\footnote{See the Three-Self Patriotic Movement’s “Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinification of Christianity (2018-2022),” English translation available at China Law Translate (accessed September 20, 2020): \url{https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/outline-of-the-five-year-plan-for-promoting-the-sinicification-of-christianity%EF%BC%882018-2022%EF%BC%89/}} In practice, this has included the removal of public symbols of Christianity including a sustained campaign to tear down the crosses of church buildings and, in some cases, entire church buildings.\footnote{See Fenggang Yang, “The Failure of the Campaign to Demolish Church Crosses in Zhejiang Province, 2013–2016: A Temporal and Spatial Analysis,” \textit{Review of Chinese Religion and Society} 5, no. 1 (2018): 5-25; Zhidong
The triple negotiation and modern China’s “religious question”

Based on this historical survey, it is clear the religious question continues to play a significant role in shaping how Chinese religiosity and religious identity are formed at multiple levels from the global and national down to the individual. There is a waxing and waning between the state’s views of religion as either an obstacle to state loyalty that must be removed or a tool to be utilized for ethical formation. The religiosity and identity of Chinese Christians have been formed amidst this push and pull, showing how seemingly private dimensions of the triple negotiation are also embedded in China’s larger struggle with the role of religion in modern society. The marks of modern China’s greater struggle with the religious question are thus mirrored in my informants’ negotiations between the transcendent and the immanent, the universal and the particular, and the public, everyday, and private dimensions of life.

**Selective re-enchantment and the collapse of the transcendent and immanent**

First, this history sheds light on the ways my informants are negotiating their sense of Christian faith as a process of selective re-enchantment. All of my informants were raised with a basic list of definitions that have been largely defined by China’s modernization processes drawn from global modernity’s binary understanding of the transcendent realm of religion and

the immanent realm of the secular. This study has observed that, out of this dualism, a three-tiered hierarchy emerges that sifts one’s beliefs and behaviors into categories of the scientific, the religious, and the superstitious. These categories continue to organize the logic of many of my informants’ conceptions of faith.

Abductive experiences of God’s presence complicate this neat and tidy worldview, however, because they blur the assigned modern boundaries. Crossing this boundary opens up a hybridized place for dwelling that was previously unimagined. The presence of God is one that collapses the transcendent and secular spheres, if only for a moment. It requires a renegotiation of how many other ways one might experience this convergence. In tandem with the guidance of their pastors and congregations, my informants must consider what other ways God speaks and what other spirits might also be present among them.

But for modern professionals working in global cities, the presence of God and the spirits cannot always abound in every setting. Outside these points of transcendent-immanent convergence, new everyday criterion must be assigned as evidence of God’s guidance. Given religion’s modern association with morality and ethics, language of righteous behavior and community become the most convenient and resonant discourse. It is God’s real and abiding guidance in ethical matters that evidences God’s presence in the everyday, providing a suitable middle ground between what some might consider superstition and science.

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61 This division between the secular and the immanent and the modern context in which they are expressed is drawn primary from Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Beknap Press, 2018).
Everyday cosmopolitanism and the dissolution of private/public ethics

In the same way selective re-enchantment breaks down modern definitions that keep the transcendent and the immanent from meeting in the realm of daily life, the discursive boundaries that separate Christian faith from public life are similarly contestable. In contemporary China, the boundary between religiosity’s influence on private and public life may be policed by the state but in practice, they are entangled. This frames my informants’ complex expressions of the second negotiation, everyday cosmopolitanism. In the eyes of many of my informants, Christian faith is their most effective technology for moral cultivation precisely because it is based on their unique relationship with God instead of some self-evident universal rationality. The ethical system Christianity provides resonates because its source is not only transcendent but also relational. This means everyday cosmopolitanism is expressed as an oscillation between registers of both universality and particularity. This contrasts with high modernity’s vision of singular ethic based on science and reason alone.

This search for a universal ethic fully applicable to all people at all times has a distinctly modern sensibility. In Stephen Toulmin’s historical genealogy of modernity’s rise and expansion, he argues this sensibility has its start in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, forged by a quest for certainty and order over and against humanistic pluralism and tolerance.62 Modernity’s rationalistic mindset rages for order out of diversity. Taken to its extreme conclusions, this produces domineering ideologies and institutions. Modern China is an example of just such a trajectory, particularly under the Communist Party. Adopting modern

reason as the pathway to national salvation has raised the universality of scientific logic and bureaucratic order to the level of religious dogma. This has resulted in a devastatingly negative perception of everyday Chinese religiosity’s pluralistic practices and non-systematic beliefs. These incoherent loose ends must therefore be tied and held together in support of a unitary modern logic, by force if necessary or cut off completely.

In this search for rational unity, Christianity has played an ambivalent role that continues to trouble the Chinese government. It was Christian missionaries that helped instill modern sensibilities in China through their universities and hospitals, but they were also collaborators with colonial powers. When Christianity’s sense of ethics and reason is associated with modernity, it becomes an important ally for reform. But when Christianity is associated with foreign powers, it becomes a target of wrath. Even when Chinese Christians indigenize their faith in Pentecostal expressions, they are deemed superstitious, fundamentalist, and backward.

The boundaries set by Chinese state for what constitutes a legitimate religion that is free of foreign influence continues to shape perceptions of Chinese Christian religiosity and identity today, particularly among educated professionals. Christians are commonly viewed as ethical exemplars in the eyes of many Chinese but also as suspect for their belief in a transcendent and present God associated with foreign cultures. The Communist party is willing to support the church’s social initiatives to orphans and elderly while also removing public symbols of faith. Chinese academics are drawn to Christian theology for its cultural and ethical systems without interest for the supernatural foundations that hold them up.  

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63 Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*. 
discourses may even adopt elements of Christian language as a base for cultivating ethical civic engagement while simultaneously demanding churches adopt party line language.\textsuperscript{64}

While Chinese leaders, academics, and elites continue struggle with Christianity’s legacy, many of my informants are convinced that their faith in Christ gives them a universal ethic that is particular to their relationship with God. The particularity of this relationship is important because it exists completely outside the supposedly universal truths mandated by science, reason, or the party line. The Christian way of living may be universal in its source, but it is not beholden to modernity’s conception of universality for its legitimacy or the nation state for its ends. The result is a sense of freedom that comes from the security of a firm foundation, even when the faith’s ethical expectations are higher than what they believe they can live up to. This acute sense of strength in moral and ethical certainty is all the more pronounced in contemporary Chinese society because of the dissonant experience of negotiating a capitalist economic system based on competition stacked upon an authoritarian government shrouded in socialist messaging. In this setting, everyday pressures are compounded by shaky moral foundations rendered by contemporary China’s rapidly transforming society.

\textit{Familial belonging and Christian identity as alternative community}

What is the relationship between familial belonging and Chinese religiosiy and how does the Chinese state’s pursuit of political unity affect it? In the history of China’s modernization process, secularization of the public realm has included the implementation of

\textsuperscript{64} Wielander, \textit{Christian Values in Communist China}. 
new rituals and narratives that uphold an imagined sense of the unified Chinese nation-state. In sum, modern Chinese regimes have sought to form a sense of religiosity and identity centered on the nation-state as its ultimate concern. In the Communist party’s vision of a socialist utopia, the party state acts as parent to the nation in the same way the Confucian dynasties of the past imagined an emperor uniting all under heaven.

Under the Communist party, however, the obsession for unity has gone so far that it has attempted to deconstruct the very foundations of traditional Chinese society: the biological family. In the Confucian worldview, the emperor may be the head of the family, but his power was built upon a relational hierarchy that also relied on well-ordered families beginning with the relationship between parents and their children. During the Cultural Revolution, the Confucian building blocks that framed Chinese civilization was denounced in favor of a God like chairman above a supposedly class-less society. The layers of hierarchy in between were demolished, leading children to turn on their elders both figuratively and literally.

In light of this history, contemporary Chinese Christian identity cannot help but foster a radical break from state-centric belonging because, as the bible teaches, no one can serve two masters. At first, Christian belonging may simply provide a form of comfort and community. This appears harmless. State authorities may ignore this form of religious identity as but an expression the popular Marxist saying that religion is an opiate of the masses. But for those who benefit from the community’s safety and comfort, the seeds of familial belonging are

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65 See Analects 7:11, Mencius 2B:2, and the “Doctrine of the Mean” (中庸 Zhongyong).

66 Matthew 6:24
planted and watered outside the realm of the party state. With a greater sense of safety and
meaning comes a greater sense of loyalty and faith to the community that provides it.

This is where the party state has sought to utilize religiosity in its favor, to deploy
Christianity’s impulse for charity in the service of patriotism while attempting to ignore,
downplay, or coopt religious identity’s supra-state character. The great paradox of this strategy
is that the state must claim God is on their side to achieve such an arrangement, something
functionally impossible in an officially atheist regime. God cannot technically be on anyone’s
side because God does not exist. For Chinese Christians serious about growing in their
relationship with God and with one another, the party has no credible word to give. As a result,
the ultimate concern of Christians simply cannot align with an atheist nation state, though it
may certainly assist the state in matters it finds common. This is the critical impulse behind
every Chinese Christian’s experience of God and church. It is, by the party’s own making, an
inherently alternative community. The Christian church as alternative community becomes
most potent when it is fused with the sense of familial belonging characteristic of Chinese
culture. And the power of this community takes on transcendent notes when the head of the
family is God rather than any human institution.

The triple negotiation as components of liquid religiosity

It is in this context of modern China’s sorted religious history and recent resurgence that
this triple negotiation can be understood as a part of a post-secular way of being I call “liquid
Liquid religiosity can be defined as an observable component of late modern society’s return to religion and spirituality, a way of being that mediates everyday experiences of post-modern pluralism with high modernity’s global regime. In this arrangement, religion and spirituality stabilize one’s sense of being and belonging in a liquid state between an ephemeral relativism, comparable to the boundary-less nature of gas, and the rigid exclusivism of modernity’s single dominating narrative, comparable to the concreteness of solid states. This form of religiosity is not beholden to traditional institutions of religion forged by modern definitions reliant on doctrines set by a set of elites and texts, though it may rely on them. Instead, it is a negotiated and flexible form of religious embodiment and belonging that responds to an individual’s felt needs, daily routines, and social expectations.

This conception of liquid religiosity draws its inspiration from Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of global dynamics in a contemporary age where modern institutional structures sit in ambivalent relationship with an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic experiences of everyday life wrought by technology and migration. Bauman labels this condition a state of “liquid modernity,” where humanity’s social experiences of post-modern relativism must flow around

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67 The concept of liquid religion has also been proposed by Kees de Groot as a means for analyzing the diffuse nature of religious practice in contemporary society. See Kees de Groot, “Three Types of Liquid Religion,” Implicit Religion 11, no. 3 (2008): 277-296, where de Groot argues, “The first type consists of liquid phenomena in the religious sphere: religious events, small communities, global religious networks and virtual communities. The second type consists of phenomena on the boundaries between the religious and the secular sphere, such as religious services in a hospital or a prison. The third type consists of meetings and collective activities outside the religious sphere, such as those in the political and cultural spheres, which nonetheless have important religious qualities.” The concept of liquid religion has also been deployed in ritual studies in, for example, William R. Arfan, “Liquid Ritualizing: Facing the Challenges of Late Modernity in an Emerging Ritual Field,” Journal of Religion in Europe 7, (2015): 1-25, and Adam Possamai and Bryan S. Turner, “Authority and Liquid Religion in Cyber-space: The New Territories of Religious Communication,” International Social Science Journal 63, (2012): 197-206. Compared with these studies, the present work deploys the concept of liquid religiosity as an individual process of negation and expression in religious formation.

and through the bureaucratic structures and rational logics that dictate global systems of
governance and economy.

In the People’s Republic of China, the paradox of liquid modernity is especially
pronounced. While state structures and ideological narratives have become increasingly rigid,
integration into a capitalist global system has also formed a populace that is plagued with a
liquidizing of values and ethics common to many globally integrated nations. This has reignited
forms of Chinese religiosity that have much in common with traditional notions of Chinese
religions as people seek new foundations to inform their lives. What makes today’s Chinese
religiosity different is how it is being employed as a response to exclusivist modernity instead of
the de facto way of being it may have been centuries ago. Today, Chinese liquid religiosity is a
matter of pragmatic coherence. It seeks out moral grounding, local community, and/or global
belonging in response to pluralizing effects of China’s rapid industrialization and integration
into the global system.

In a liquid religiosity, the variables worked out in the triple negotiation are
interdependent. For example, everyday cosmopolitanism can be understood as a horizontal
negotiation focused on the ethical expression of the vertically oriented process of selective re-
enchantment. As a Chinese Christian negotiates his/her relationship to God, they also
negotiate their sense of relating to the everyday world around them. Everyday
cosmopolitanism takes place amidst daily routines because one must test and reflect upon how
a Christian worldview can be lived across different situations and contexts. The greater one
experiences the presence of God along the vertical axis, the more compelled one is to expand
God’s standards to other spheres of life along the horizontal axis. Set in the context of a
collective community, this cycle can energize its members by fostering belonging to something that is both unique and universal. In this way, re-enchantment brings with it a universalizing momentum capable of realizing a cosmopolitan worldview, a single community under God throughout the world. As boundaries of denomination, geography, and culture are crossed and flowed through, the universality of God is deepened through the church’s particularities.

Liquid religiosity is, therefore, an embodied process of praxis that accounts for behaviors and intuition drawn from and applied to one’s personal goals, relationships and routines. It ripples out from the personal to the everyday with implications for state formation at the societal level. Negotiating the presence of the spirits, ethical life, and familial belonging are all matters of collective concern for Christian lives and congregations that expand and spill over into public lives.

As a result, liquid religiosity’s various forms emerge in direct response to state structures and narratives. In a state-centric culture like the People’s Republic of China, no decision can be made without considering its political implications. The degree to which my informants are able to acknowledge the presence of God in their everyday lives, the ethics they consider living out, and the degree of loyalty they place in their congregations are, inevitably, also responses to the party-state’s vision. During the 80s and 90s, the Chinese government took a softer approach toward religion to leverage the positives of Christian religiosity while hushing its public identity. The Xi Jinping regime, however, is taking a harder stance, pushing to colonize Christian religiosity with its vision of “socialist values” while eliminating Christian symbols from public life altogether. But what about other visions? What other forms might liquid religiosity take while flowing through different systems?
Liquid religiosity in the context of China’s multiple modernities

The idea of multiple modernities is another concept birthed from the fraught relationship between globalization and pluralization. Modernity, in this sense, does not refer to the progressive expansion of some theoretically normative ideology. A prescriptive modernity assumes traits of state-based governance, participation in the global economy, technological advancement, and humanist individual growth and fulfillment as normative and inevitable with globalization. Instead, multiple modernities discourse is a description of the differences that exist between modernized societies, emphasizing the large variations these traits can exhibit when they are embedded in diverse socio-cultural histories. In other words, modernity is not homogenous. Modernization is a hybridized affair.

Multiple modernities discourse provides a critical perspective on religion and secularism’s contentious relationship. To perceive the world as containing multiple forms of modernity is to also admit multiple expressions of what constitutes “religion.” In his study of global religion, Peter Beyer argues that definitions of religion and modernity are deeply embedded in the ways that political, economic, cultural, and other social spheres have been differentiated and ordered through processes of modernization, globalization, and secularization. Whereas premodern religiosities provided a single holistic worldview that accounted for all spheres of life, secularization has carved this whole into different systems, each operating by its own logic, untethered from their religious origins.

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As a result, modern experiences of “religion” are framed by the various ways these different spheres are arranged and related. Every culture has renegotiated what ought to be defined as spiritual, superstitious, magical, scientific, moral, ethical, rational, and a whole host of other terms meant to mark the boundaries between religion and the secular. The result is as many functional definitions of religion as there are cultures, all of which can be considered modern creations. What constitutes “religion” in one context may not be the same in another. Jose Casanova describes this phenomenon succinctly when he states,

Indeed, in the rest of the world, the globalization of the immanent frame is not necessarily accompanied by “the exit from religion,” that is by the privatization and decline of religion. It may be accompanied, rather, by all types of religious transformations, in different directions, as the religious/secular binary system of classification that emerged within Western Christianity enters in dynamic transformative interaction with all non-Western systems of classification, pre-axial as well as axial. All the religio-cultural systems, Christian and non-Christian, Western and non-Western, have been and continue being transformed through these global interactive dynamics.72

It is thus argued that multiple modernities have and will continue to render multiple forms of religiosity and identity: diverse ways of being religious or spiritual that can sit comfortably within a modern worldview while also challenging it when needed.73

This implies that all experiences of religion in the modern world are, by necessity, experiences of liquid religiosity. These transformed religious sensibilities mix and match logics from modernity’s differentiated spheres to foster a practical coherence that is stable enough to


73 See Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” The Hedgehog Review, (Spring and Summer, 2006). In this article, Casanova lays out some of the concepts and mechanics he believes are needed in order to study the multiple modernities, their unique secularization processes, and the diverse relationships they render between religions and societies.
ground one’s being in fragmented and pluralistic world. When boundaries are crossed and new homes need to be made, a liquid religiosity ebbs and flows in response to new social arrangements. This includes the triple negotiation’s focus on organizing experiences of spiritual presences, particular applications of a universal ethic, and the sense for belonging that comes with religious identity and community. In a world of multiple modernities, liquid religiosity is a requirement for the migrating faithful.

The very concept of a “modern China” is itself a tangible example of multiple modernities.74 Today, what is sometimes referred to as “greater China” is made up of different systems and worldviews despite being raised out of the common cultural worldview that may have dominated late imperial China. This geographical and cultural entity includes the Han dominant parts of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and, contestably, Taiwan.75 While outside its geographical center, the reality of multiple Chinese modernities can even be extended to other parts of the Sinophone world including Singapore and large diaspora communities around the world.76 This conception of contemporary Chinese culture and society


75 I am using “Greater China” here as a heuristic placeholder to describe the major regions of the Sinophone world as a whole, bracketing contested issues of nationality, ethnicity, and other socio-political matters that always plague discussions of Chinese-ness in contemporary scholarship. The author is not endorsing any particular view of what constitutes “China” as modern nation-state or civilizational whole.

76 See Shumei Shi, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 54. The term “Sinophone” and the field of Sinophone Studies has emerged as an analytical counter-concept to the idea of a single Chinese cultural civilization. Animated by a post-colonial critique and the diverse cultural and institutional expressions of Chinese-speaking diaspora, Shu-mei Shih states, “Sinophone studies takes as its objects of study the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China as well as ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed.”
provides a notable example of how multiple modernities discourse can frame this complex dance between religion, tradition, culture, and globalization.

At the turn of the last century, all of greater China can be argued to have become fully modernized places. The People’s Republic of China, the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau, and the Republic of China in Taiwan are all governed by state-based bureaucracies. They have also become irreplaceable nodes in the global market. They each develop some of the world’s most advanced technologies. Each provides enough freedom and resources for its citizenry to advance their well-being via higher education.

Behind this shared modernity is, however, a diversity of social, political, economic, and cultural systems wrought by endless historical contingencies. The Chinese mainland is politically dominated by the Chinese Communist Party with little interest in systems of representative democracies so often attached to economic liberalization and integration. Hong Kong and Macau, shaped by longstanding colonial rule, became global economic hubs with their own unique cultural traits long before the mainland’s economic reforms. Like the mainland, Hong Kong and Macau have no tradition of democratic governance. Hong Kong’s very existence as a modern place is wholly dependent on its position as financial center in the middle of Asia. The city’s unbridles capitalistic spirit can be traced to British rule. Since 1997, Hong Kong has had the difficult position of negotiating its global colonial legacies under mainland Chinese governance. Taiwan is a particularly difficult place to make sense of when one begins to realize its many modern contradictions. Taiwan can boast of itself as being the only place of Chinese ancestral legacy that is governed by democratic principles and yet, given its contentious relations with mainland China, has no seat in the international political system.
of nation states, unable to even declare itself sovereign despite a de facto independence in nearly every sphere of modern life.

It follows that greater China’s multiple modernities have thus formed different experiences of religiosity and identity unique to their histories and social differentiations. At the most fundamental level, freedom of religion in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan have allowed modern religiosities to evolve based on their own standards. Taiwan, in particular, is home to a robust diversity of religiosities from the emergence of socially engaged Buddhisms to vibrant folk religious practices.77 It has been widely recognized that traditional forms of Chinese religiosity have thrived in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan compared with mainland China where the CCP’s dominant hand religion’s definition and governance. The role of Christianity in these different locations is equally complex. Christianity’s privileged role in Hong Kong’s colonial government has given it a stronger public facing posture than other traditions.78 In Taiwan, Christians played a key role in the region’s democratization and independence movements even as its public prominence has declined.79 All of this speaks to the complex ways religious formation takes place across Chinese modernities, each with its own conceptions of religion and its role in private and public life.80

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78 See Lida V. Nedilsky, *Converts to Civil Society: Christianity and Political Culture in Contemporary Hong Kong* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).


80 This discussion of multiple modernities and religious formation in this section has only addressed the contexts of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as examples. The reality of Chinese Christian experience, however, stretches far beyond these locations. In a globalized and interconnected world, the Christian faith of Chinese diaspora or Sinophone communities are affairs that stretch beyond national or even geographic treatment. To this
Peter Berger’s revised theory of religious pluralism and secularization provides a better understanding of how China’s multiple modernities exhibit and manage their unique systems of religion.81 Berger proposes two forms of religious pluralism operating in today’s global modern world. On the one hand, there is the more traditional sense of religious pluralism that recognizes a diversity of religious traditions occupying shared spaces, negotiating their relationship to one another and with themselves. On the other hand, there is also a larger relationship between religions and secularism generally associated with secularization theory.

Berger’s grand revision of secularization theory regards the relationship between these two types of religious pluralism. Berger, following the insights of Casanova, accepts the resurgence of religion as an unavoidably public phenomenon with greater implications for social and cultural life.82 Differentiation has clearly not led to the privatization and/or decline of religion. He argues that in the first type of religious pluralism (among different religious traditions), the potential for violence between exclusivist leaning sects will continue to rise. In this new wild west of modern religiosities, a sheriff must ride into town to assert some sense of end, Fenggang Yang’s call for new “global east” paradigm for the study of religion is noteworthy. See Fenggang Yang, “Religion in the Global East: Challenges and Opportunities for the Social Scientific Study of Religion,” Religions 9, (2018). This orientation takes seriously both the rootedness of many East Asian sociocultural habits and beliefs shaped throughout history and the rapid changes that can take place when such dispositions are intermingled and remade throughout the world. This reorients researchers to see East Asian religious formation as not only a product of a geographically bound East Asia, but as a fluid transformation of global religiosities and identities. A prominent example of this paradigm can be seen in David Palmer and Elijah Siegler, Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Palmer and Siegler examine modern practices of Daoism in both China and the United States, by both Chinese priests working out old traditions in a Communist state and Anglo-American practitioners who have adopted Daoist practices in response to the pressures of American capitalist society. Palmer and Siegler’s work challenges us to reconsider what East Asian religion is and does in the world’s multiple forms of modernity.


peace and order. It is here that secularism becomes the peacemaker rather than the conqueror. Instead of banishing religion from the public square, secularism now acts as religion’s benevolent negotiator. For Berger, secularization is as important as ever because it is only within a religion-neutral space that religious diversity can be managed and cared for in such a way that all rights and freedoms are protected.

Berger calls this relationship between secularism and religious diversity the general scaffolding from which “formulas of peace” can be constructed: ways in which multiple religious traditions can coexist alongside secular modernity in ways that protect the rights of individuals and communities to pursue a fulfilled life by their own standards. This is a tacit acknowledgement of the reality of multiple modernities, each with its own particular way of making sense of the relationship between religions, religiosity, and secularity. Berger’s dual pluralism model is a useful lens for making sense of the multiple Chinese religiosities that have emerged in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Each has formed their own formula for peace during their modernization processes.

Another one of Berger’s most well cited concepts is his articulation of the “plausibility structures” that keep worldviews intact. Religious faith relies on such plausibility structures to negotiate, for example, faith in God with modern scientific advancements. In the context of Berger’s dual pluralism model, each formula for peace also relies on distinct plausibility structures regarding the nature of religion. When one migrates across the boundaries of

83 Berger, The Many Altars of Modernity, 79.

different modernities, the foundations upon which such plausibility structures are built are inevitably shaken. This requires one to adjust and retool their plausibility structures. Doing can render new ways of understanding and expressing Christian faith in one’s everyday life.

The three negotiations explored in this study are components of shifting plausibility structures related to one’s perception of religion and modernity across boundaries that are both global and local. They are global because they all contain modern assumptions regarding religion’s differentiation from other aspects of life and the presence of alternative logics. Modernity and religious pluralism are global conditions. It is local, however, in the specifics of those differentiations. What constitutes religion and how these definitions fit into other systems of society are unique to their specific locations. Religiosity and religious identity are, following Roland Robertson, glocal affairs.85

There are two ways to conceive of religious formation in the context of Berger’s insights. In one, formation helps maintain the boundaries that differentiate religion from other spheres of life. This is religious formation as privatization. The other trajectory can be seen as a reversal of the differentiating process ushered in by modernization and secularization. It is a process of reclaiming religion as a holistic worldview. This is religious formation as a form of public expansion. This expansion requires one to adjust and expand the logic and values of religious faith into other spheres of life. Over time, faith comes to inform more and more of one’s everyday discourses and behaviors. The plausibility structures that govern how religious faith is experienced undergoes complex negotiations as this expansion takes place.

Following the liquid metaphor, a privatizing religious formation seeks to contain liquid within a clearly marked container (an existing plausibility structure) with only a few pathways that will allow controlled distillation of religiosity into appropriate contexts where religion is expected to play a role. An expanding religious formation is one that, in varying degrees, will break from the delineated pathways, following undefined routes to fill other spheres of life. The response to an expanding liquid religiosity is not a hands-off process, however. Even in a free-flowing setting, new structures are still needed to guide flows. In other words, plausibility structures are not rejected but renovated to account for expanding flows with just enough practical coherence to keep the liquid from flooding the system. A flood might wreck the entire structure, effectively dislodging a person’s way of life from the patterns of a modern world that still differentiates religion from other spheres of life. As one of my informants so thoughtfully shared, “it’s okay to believe, but don’t believe too much.”

As with any complex system, however, this restructuring does not follow any single process or end in any one form. Dependent on context and situation, certain elements of one negotiation may become more prominent than others. Liquid religiosity, as with all phenomenon, can be parsed in degrees. Rigid conceptions of religiosity and identity tethered to large institutions will have difficulty adjusting and changing amidst such movements, though they inevitably do. For example, religious elites work out such negotiations with due diligence to the resources of their tradition, carefully constructing and renovating the theological systems they have come to rely on. But for those who already hold a liquid sense of religiosity and identity, these negotiations are likely to flow more easily. For laypersons, such negotiations are likely to be less rational and more practical. They may flow and change in ways that elites
might claim syncretistic for the very reason that they are not bound down by theological systems or historic precedence. Some religiosities are more liquid than others.

**Conclusion: Comparing the flow of liquid religiosity in Shanghai and Hong Kong**

This study’s comparison of how mainland Chinese Christians live out their faith in both the mainland and Hong Kong illustrates dynamics of liquid religiosity amidst multiple modernities. The plausibility structures that hold up mainland Chinese experiences of Christian religiosity and identity is closely tied to the party state’s attempts to oversee all spheres of life. The PRC’s formula for peace advocates for an authoritarian watch over religion. In the mainland setting, I observed a process of religious formation from the inside out. Selective re-enchantment generally begins with experiences of God’s presence, either individually or in community. These experiences go against the explicit narrative of the modernity advanced by the party but are still resonant within Chinese cultural norms. Whether spiritual or ethical, religiosity abducts my informants out of the party’s state-centric vision.

For some, the spiritual peace, community belonging, and ethical guidance found in Christianity is enough to form a firm but privatized religiosity and identity for everyday life. But for others, this abduction leads farther afield, beckoning an expansion of Christian logic to other spheres. A process of reorienting everyday life under God’s expectations begins. Selective re-enchantment is negotiated as experiences of God and other spiritual presences are integrated into social life. A sense of everyday cosmopolitanism emerges as a normatively perceived Christian ethic is negotiated amidst life’s many situations. In addition, a sense of unique familial belonging is fostered in congregational life, both to God and one another.
In Hong Kong, religious formation takes place differently for mainland Christians depending on whether they came to faith before or after their arrival to the region. For those I interviewed who either became Christians in Hong Kong or did not have a congregational life before coming to Hong Kong, experiences of religious formation were similar to what I observed in the mainland. For them, Hong Kong is where their Christian religiosity and identity is first formed. For those who became Christians in mainland China, however, the Hong Kong context rendered changes to my informants’ religiosity, identity, and formulations of the triple negotiation. Characterized by religious freedom and a more individualistic orientation to life, my informants’ experiences of Christian faith in Hong Kong migrates from an active/collective spirituality oriented toward ethical cultivation and familial belonging to a more individualized spirituality moved by God’s grace and personal vocation. At the same time, their confidence in Christianity as a global identity is reinforced and strengthened amidst such diversity. While it may appear counter intuitive, their experiences of boundary crossing and home making had the overall effect of deepening both their particular religiosity and their universal Christian identity.

First, for mainland Chinese Christians making a home in Hong Kong, it is the differences in experiences of familial belonging that beings reframing the triple negotiation. Initial questions regarding how Christian religiosity and identity work in new congregational settings lacking the communal intensity experienced in the mainland instigates new questions about what it means to be a Christian in everyday life. While my informants responded to these questions differently, all needed to forge a more individually oriented posture of faith less dependent on collective devotion. Second, Hong Kong’s religious freedom and individualism also introduces new questions for negotiating everyday cosmopolitanism. In a setting where
Christian faith is not only freely accepted but also publicly active, the discourses and embodiments that marked Christians as unique in the mainland lose their potency. In this setting, my informants shared far less about how their Christian ethics influenced their witness in work and family life. Less attention was also given to the obligations of Christian community. Instead, my informants were more likely to speak about a sense of personal vocation and what God might be calling them to. Here, the desire to live out a sense of God’s universal ethic is personalized to the individual. Lastly, Hong Kong’s religious diversity provided my informants a greater range of ecclesial and spiritual resources for negotiating their selective re-enchantment. Unlike the mainland, where spirituality and secular materialism are dichotomized in extreme ways, Hong Kong’s formula for peace is far more fluid. The practical effects of Hong Kong’s religious market for some of my informants was a more critical engagement with different denominational traditions and conceptions of the spiritual world that would not have been as easily accessible in the mainland.

The young adult Chinese Christians I have listened to throughout this study are rising in the ranks of Chinese modernity while simultaneously afflicted by a post-modern malaise. This condition arises from the ambivalence of negotiating the rigid exclusivist vision of the party-state at odds with the individualistic pursuits of the global market. They have, however, found a liminal space in Christianity. It is a worldview that balances the rational demands of global modernity with an enchanted and transcendent frame capable of securing moral foundations to build an ethical everyday life. It is an identity that cuts across borders of nationalism and ethnicity to foster a feeling of global belonging that is not tethered to secular modernity and yet still acceptable in the global system. Moreover, my time with mainland Chinese Christians
in Hong Kong show why liquid religiosity is so important in a world of multiple modernities. When adapting their senses of religiosity and identity across the larger social and cultural boundaries found in Hong Kong, both the particularity and universality of my informants’ faith was expanded. Different experiences of congregational cultures resulted in different experiences of God that expanded both their conception of what the church can be and the vastness of God’s character. The distinctive traits of Hong Kong’s formula for peace between religion and secularism also led my informants to renegotiate the dynamics of the triple negotiation in new ways that both specialized and enlarged their sense of Christian life.
CHAPTER 6: Crossing disciplinary boundaries – building an everyday lived theology

“I must say, hearing that you want to do that kind of work is really encouraging,” one of my informants says. He is referring to my project’s focus on “everyday theology (richang shenxue 日常神学),” a concept I use to introduce my research. “Normally when one thinks of theology, people think of philosophy and eternal truths. At another level people talk about biblical studies, history, and ethics,” my informant muses, “But when I ask an educated pastor or scholar about what these things mean for my work life or my relationship with my wife – I get the impression they think these questions are shallow. To have a theology that is based on the everyday is something I have never thought about, something I didn’t think any scholars thought about.”

For this young man, the idea of a lived theology based on everyday experiences was difficult to conceive. Questions of how God’s presence ought to guide everyday life were certainly important to him, but what could these everyday matters possibly reveal about God’s nature? He perceived theology to be a higher science not to be penetrated by the mundane. But if God is truly the Lord of all and not only of the rational intellect, then surely God’s activity among the masses speaks as much to God’s nature as the select few that are privileged enough to ponder and write about it. This is the grounded perspective from which this study springs. This research cannot only be a study about the sociological dimensions of religiosity and identity at play in contemporary China. It should also provide pathways to understanding the universality of God and how God relates to young Chinese in their particular times and places.

This chapter pivots from the descriptive sociological registers that have dominated this study thus far to a theological register focused on God and God’s relationship to us. First, I
present a series of methodological reflections for bridging the divide between sociological and theological logics and imaginations, proposing a process of “semiotic parallelism” as a possible solution for facilitating fruitful cross-disciplinary analysis. Second, building on the multidisciplinary nature of practical theology, I utilize Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen’s conception of ethnographic method as source, substance, and self-critique of theology to construct semiotic parallels between the triple negotiation of liquid religiosity discerned in this study and the theological language of incarnation, revelation, and the image and mission of God. This parallelism bridges sociological conclusions with theological inquiry, creating a unique opportunity for theologizing how God’s presence might work through experiences of boundary crossing in the context of world Christianity. Third, I highlight migration as a key metaphor for deploying theological ethnography in the world Christianity context by reframing my analysis of lived Chinese Christian experience in light of Todd Whitmore’s anthropological theology. Finally, this chapter concludes by reframing this study’s sociological conclusions by shifting its methodological focus from religious formation to Christ-like formation. This shifts registers from a descriptive account of the triple negotiation to a theo-social hypothesis regarding God’s presence at work in migration experiences built upon conceptions of abductive Christology, adaptive missiology, and participatory ecclesiology.

**Social science and the pursuit of theology: An experiment in semiotic parallelism**

As we begin this disciplinary boundary crossing, it is important to be mindful of my theoretical position regarding the relationship between the universal/normative posture of theological inquiry and the descriptive particularities that animate social scientific research.
First, Tweed provides a useful summary of theory’s role in defining the tenuous relationship between universalist and particularistic sense of knowledge in social research, stating,

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have understood theory in a variety of ways, and one helpful overview lists five primary notions of what theory is and how it functions: (1) the deductive-nomological view, which understands theories as systems of universal laws deduced from axioms and corresponding to mind-independent external reality; (2) the law-oriented view, which trumpets the same ideal but suggests we cannot identify universal laws but only “law-like regularities”; (3) the idealizing notion of theory, which further refines the deductive-nomological view by suggesting that the regularities—not laws—should be understood as “ideal types,” or the scholar’s idealizations of human motives; (4) the constructivist view of theory, which goes further still in rejecting the ideal of attaining universal laws as it challenges correspondence theories of truth and proposes that theory offers only “contextual understanding of interacting motives”; and (5) critical theory, which agrees with constructivists in their criticism of the deductive-nomological approach but emphasizes power relations and ethical issues.¹

Assessing these five orientations, I identify most classic theologies as generally resonant with the deductive-nomological view of theory. God is often understood as a “mind-independent” reality that humanity approximates in its search for knowledge of the divine. The theologian’s degree of confidence often determines the degree of universality associated with their theological assertions, whether they are truly “universal laws” or “law-like regularities.” On the opposite side of the spectrum are constructivist and critical perspectives that argue the particularities observed in empirical research cannot be extrapolated to any level of universality. In between is the “idealizing notion of theory” that sits between the universal and the particular, beholden to the researcher’s discernment of broader, overlapping ideal types.

This classification is useful for social scientists considering the degree to which they are willing to claim real knowledge of the world in correspondence with their observations. In the

¹ Tweed, Crossings and Dwellings, 7.
context of this study, for example, I am inclined to argue that migrative experiences of boundary crossing and home making influence religious formation with law-like regularity. Migration inevitably reshapes religiosities and identities. The contents of the triple negotiation I observe are, however, better understood as ideal types formed out of my particular standpoint. The content of these negotiations is resonant with elements of universality but are filtered through my particular arrangement of the variables being observed. Furthermore, I acknowledge the constructivist nature of these negotiations as specific to my informants’ experiences, products of interdependent factors I can only see in part.

When attempting to bridge empirical studies with theological claims, a paradox emerges. In a post-modern era that is skeptical of dominating meta-narratives, theological claims are often marked with contextual and critical qualifications. What can be said about God is, at best, contextually conditioned by interdependent circumstances and, at worse, mired by dynamics of power. And yet theology, even with a healthy dose of humility, is a discipline that cannot but trend toward the universal if it begins with the Christian proposition that God is the alpha and omega of all creation. Theologians who persist in arguing for God’s universality are oft accused of close-mindedness and fundamentalism. And yet theological claims made from a constructivist or critical standpoint are, at best, a hopeful gesture toward the transcendent without insurance. Contemporary Christian theologians have deployed various ways to hold this tension in balance.

Clodovis Boff’s method of correlation is one prominent example of this endeavor to balance the universal with the particular.² Boff proposes five different orientations for dealing

with the tenuous relationship between theology and the social sciences that center on the concept of mediation between the two. On the two extremes are “empiricism” and “methodological purism.” Both argue, in their own ways, that no mediation is necessary. The first because the empirical is all there is and the second because divine revelation provides all this is truly necessary for Christian life. Boff’s third category, “theologism,” attempts to collapse both previous categories with a “substituted mediation” where a theo-centric view of the world ought to guide all empirical inquiry. Compared with methodological purism, which might be described as radically exclusive of empirical input, theologism can be viewed as radically subversive, forcing theological logic into all spheres of life. Theologism is thus a top-down imposition of theological logic on all spheres of life, reasserting a comprehensive worldview fragmented by modernization.

In between empiricism, methodological purism, and theologism, Boff describes two other postures of mediation: “mixed semantics” and “bilingualism.” For Boff, mixed semantics are is an insufficient form of mediation because it traffics in two different linguistic worlds, mixing and matching social scientific logic with theological logic in ways that are biased toward one or the other. The results are projects that fulfill neither theological nor sociological criteria. This can be viewed as Boff’s warning against simplistic conceptions of interdisciplinary work. Bilingualism, in contrast, does not attempt to mix semantics but, instead, advises one practice both in their integrity, side by side. It advocates an “unarticulated mediation” by allowing both discourses their analytical dues, relying on their juxtaposition to produce mutually enlightening conclusions.
Boff is dissatisfied with all five of these categories. In response, he proposes a “socio-analytical” mediation where, “the text of a theological reading with respect to the political is prepared and furnished by the sciences of the social. Theology receives its text from these sciences, and practices upon it a reading in conformity with its own proper code, in such a way as to extract from it a characteristically, properly theological meaning.”\(^3\) In this arrangement, social analysis is necessary for theologizing because it provides the raw materials of human experience needed for theologizing. For Boff, it is the ethical dimension of theology that most readily intersects with the empirical realities of functionalist descriptions human life. This is the dynamic from which Boff articulates his “preferential option for the poor,” a cornerstone in his well-known liberation theology.

In Neil Ormerod’s estimation, Karl Barth’s theology approximates the methodological purism position, John Millibank’s theology is an example of theologism, and Roger Haight’s “ecclesiology from below” is an admirable yet failed attempt at bilingualism. Ormerod observes that Haight’s ecclesiological endeavor fails in its lofty aim because his analysis leans too heavily on church history without the necessary fluency in the social sciences. Haight’s shortcomings are not a product of his theoretical construct, however. Theoretically, a side by side reading in both sociological and theological is possible. The difficulty comes in relating these readings appropriately. Similarly, Ormerod pronounces Boff’s attempt at socio-analytical mediation another valiant but inadequate attempt at correlation due to his alleged wholesale

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\(^3\) Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 31.
adoption of Marxist logics. In such a conceptual and methodological minefield, who dares continue the quest to bring together the theological and the empirical?

In fact, these failures have not deterred theologians in their quest to render a mutually enriching correlation between knowledge of God and human experience, between heaven and earth. Recognizing these previous attempts helps frame one’s own attempt at untying this theoretical and methodological Gordian knot. Based on the above categories, my mediation adopts elements of both semantic mixing and bilingualism in an arrangement I call “semiotic parallelism.” Unlike semantic mixing, I concur that the social sciences and theology work with different linguistic systems that operate with different logics. To mix them is to risk losing the trajectory of one or both. Unlike bilingualism, however, I do not believe side by side readings will naturally provide the sort of social-theological cross-pollination one desires.

The theo-social method deployed in this study attempts to resolve these shortcomings by deploying semiotic parallelism as a middle way between mixed semiotics and bilingualism. This method requires the researcher to identify resonant parallels in meaning between terms and concepts from both the social sciences and theology. Each remains intact within its own linguistic system and logic but are nevertheless utilized as markers capable of keeping both tracks alongside one another. To follow the metaphor of mapping and building, picture two blueprints for parallel roads across different terrain. For example, one mountainous and one desert, metaphorically aligned with the sociological and theological imaginations. Construction on these roads require different materials and methods dependent on numerous factors

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unique to their environments. In order to build bridges between disciplinary languages, the roads must not only be parallel. They must also contain points of common elevation and stable substance from where one can reasonably cross from one discipline to the other and back. Semiotic parallelism’s effectiveness depends on not only a single point of crossover but as many as can be identified. Multiple points of crossover provide further insurance that the two disciplinary roads remain parallel and that different analytical insights are compared, contrasted, and synthesized at regular intervals.

What follows in this chapter is an experiment in semiotic parallelism applied to the largely sociological analysis of Chinese Christian experiences to identify specific points of similar meaning for cross-disciplinary reflection. The previous chapter articulated selective re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitanism, and familial belonging as parts of a triple negotiation of liquid religiosity taking place among my informants as they navigated their faith across different boundaries. These can be imagined as components of the first road that has been constructed through sociological terrain.

To build pathways for cross-disciplinary thinking, theological concepts unique to the Christian worldview must be identified that resonate with this study’s sociological conclusions. Based on a careful review of the literature in theological ethnography, this study identifies the theological concepts of incarnation, revelation, and the image/mission of God as semiotic parallels to the sociological dynamics noted above. These concepts must now anchor the theological analysis of the empirical data. They are the points from which a theological road can be constructed in parallel the sociological (see table 3).
Table 3: Semiotic parallels between sociological and theological foundations

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<tr>
<th><strong>Sociological Conclusions:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Theological Foundations:</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mapping: selective re-enchantment</td>
<td>The surprise of the incarnation as source of theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building: everyday cosmopolitanism</td>
<td>Studying general and special revelation in relationship as substance of theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhabiting: Familial belonging between heaven and earth</td>
<td>Embracing the Image and Mission of God to co-construct grounded critiques of theology</td>
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Admittingly, this use of semiotic parallelism can still be critiqued as but revision of Boff’s socio-analytical mediation. As introduced in earlier chapters, my theo-social method relies heavily on symbolic interactionist and materialist paradigms developed by sociologists of religion and lived religion scholars. The primary difference I dare appeal to, however, is that my analysis is not reliant on a pre-articulated macro-theory of society in the same way Boff relies on Marxist frameworks. The RF frame promoted in this study operates as scaffolding for arranging the various components of my informants’ experiences. It does not, however, dictate their precise causes and effects. Instead, I have sought to allow the voices and experiences of my informants to lead and even abduct my analytical gaze. It is from their experiences of God’s presence that this project has its beginnings. It was by following these experiences across various boundaries that the larger themes of selective re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitanism, and familial belonging emerge. And it is through this triple negotiation that bridges can be built for theological reasoning and imagination to flourish.
This humble attempt at forging a theo-social middle path relies heavily on David Tracy’s focus on human experience as gateway to theologizing in a pluralistic world, his conception of the “classic,” and the processes that animate the “analogical imagination.” First, Tracy frames theological construction as a matter that requires correlative thinking between human experiences of God in negotiation with the resources of the Christian tradition, its symbols, texts, narratives, and rituals. By prioritizing the processes of negotiation that takes place between the individual’s experience of God and the Christian tradition’s collective construction of God, the social processes I define as fundamental to religious formation can also be understood as a theological process.

Second, for Tracy, Jesus Christ is the “classic” event through which all human experience ought to be measured. A classic is a person, text, event, melody, or symbol encountered in everyday experience that contains an “excess of meaning.” In other words, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is semiotically rich and capable of being received in numerous forms across times and places. As a result, Christology becomes the primary pathway for all interdisciplinary Christian thinking. This is the grounds from which I identify the doctrine of Christ’s incarnation as a source for empirically based theological reflection and a semiotic parallel to abductive analysis and negotiations of selective re-enchantment.

Third, the ability to construct semiotic parallels between theology and other disciplinary logics is rooted in an analogical imagination. This process involves both analogical language and

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dialectic language. The former points towards the commonalities that can be found in seemingly different linguistic worlds. The latter directs focus toward differences, the disruptions that separate meanings despite what might appear similar. Tracy argues theological construction must work with both the analogical and the dialectic in order to render insight into God and God’s relationship with humanity and creation. This oscillation between analogy and negation, between manifestation of what is familiar and proclamation of what is unfamiliar, is the engine that drives semiotic parallelism as a theological endeavor. While certain elements of the triple negotiation will analogically resonate with theological concepts of incarnation, revelation, and God’s image/mission, their dialectic differences are equally important and productive. In analogy, bridges are built from the sociological to the theological. In dialectics, the distinctions of theological logic can cross back to reform the sociological. Both are foundational to Tracy’s analogical imagination. Following Tracy’s work, this study begins with human experiences in dialogue with Christian tradition, centers itself on the person of Jesus Christ, and then expands via an analogical imagination to provide new insights into how God’s active presence might be working among contemporary Chinese Christians.

Theological ethnography: Bringing together words about the world and God

The social-empirical work in this research begins from a lived religion perspective, but its ends are a lived theology. Theo-social method must, therefore, reflect theologically on what

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8 Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, 414-17.
my informants’ experiences of God and boundary crossing can teach us about the nature of God and how God’s presence engages, abides, and abounds among them. This process begins by forging semiotic parallels between the sociological conclusions of this study on one side and resonant theological concepts on the other. The most appropriate theological discourse from which to identify these parallels is from the literature on theological ethnography birthed from broader disciplinary field of practical theology.

Just as lived religion has become an influential theoretical posture and method in religious studies, an empirically grounded method of theological inquiry has also emerged as a discernable stream of thought and practice. This empirical turn in theology can be traced to developments in the field of practical theology. Practical theology can be defined as the branch of theological inquiry most readily concerned with the ways in which concrete ecclesial communities practice their faith in the world and the implications of those practices for both the Christian church in particular and society at large. In between the church and society, the task of practical theology, from an academic standpoint, has taken the form of critical reflection on the question of how God’s presence animates Christian practice at all levels of life.

9 Precedents for practical theology can be discerned as early as the 1600s in the four volume *Christian Directory of British puritan*, Richard Baxter, who wrote extensively on the role of the Christian in society from multiple standpoints including ethics, family life, and politics. Practical theology has since become closely related with pastoral theology in a broad sense: concerned with the pastor’s role in both the parish and the public square. The beginnings of practical theology as an academic field can be traced to the three-fold disciplinary division of theology promoted by Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*. In contrast to “philosophical” and “historical” theology, practical theology was conceived by Schleiermacher to be focused on the administration and ministry of the church at work in society. Practical theology’s sub-disciplines have since corresponded with both parish and public contexts including the study of homiletics, pastoral counseling, and spiritual formation for congregations as well as community outreach and ministry for society at large.

10 See Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). For example, Osmer has proposed a four-fold model for framing the goals of practical theology around four tasks: the descriptive-empirical, the interpretive, the normative, and the pragmatic. Driving each of these tasks are four orienting questions: “What is going on?” “Why is it going on?” “What ought to be going on?” and “How might we
Practical theologians are thus charged with providing means and methods to guide Christians in their discernment of particular situations and the directions of their corresponding action.¹¹

Altogether, the field of practical theology has become a crossroads at the intersection of what David Tracy has called the “three publics” of church, society, and academy.¹² Practical theology can therefore be viewed as an applied process that draws resources from one of these three spheres to address issues and concerns in another, assuming the presence and agency of God is active in all. To fulfill this intersectional role, practical theology necessarily draws its theories and methods from multiple disciplinary standpoints including the social and political sciences as well as the humanities.¹³

When answered within the constructs of Christian theological language, these four tasks animate the four functions of the church and its mission: priestly listening, sagely wisdom, prophetic discernment, and servant leadership. This framework is driven by a posture of praxis, a rhythm of movement between action and reflection. Because of all this, practical theology’s focus on the impact and interpretation of Christian practices on our conceptions of God and God’s relationship with the world make it one of the most complex fields of theological inquiry.

¹¹ According to Mark J. Cartledge, “Practical Theology,” in The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization, ed. George Thomas Kurian (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), contemporary practical theology has been especially influenced by the twin paradigms of “empirical” and “liberation” theologies. The latter has opened up practical theology to larger questions regarding the nature of belief, values, and practices with the explicit adoption social science methods to examine concrete expressions of Christian religiosity in multiple contexts. The former has directed practical theology toward power dynamics and the marginalized. In the liberation paradigm, practical theology works to bring the voices and experiences of minority groups to bear on theological questions of church and society in order to address matters of social injustice. Movements within empirical theology signal an increasingly sophisticated way of engaging what Osmer has called the descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks of practical theology. Liberation theology has, in turn, provided a prescriptive agenda for Osmer’s normative and pragmatic tasks. In the preceding decades, these two paradigms have shifted the attention of practical theology from church leadership to laypersons and from life within congregations to the various realms of life outside them.

¹² David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, 5.

Theological ethnography, a particular form of empirical theology, has become an important sub-field of practical theology in recent years. Paralleling religious studies’ turn to lived religion and embodiment, Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen define the ethnographic turn in theology as a movement, “to discover truth revealed through embodied habits, relations, practice, narratives, and struggles. And as it is joined with a theological sensibility… each particular life, situation, or community is potentially, albeit only partially, revelatory transcendent or divine truth.” In other words, the empirical truth of the particular serves as a real channel to universal elements of divine truth. It is a “process of attentive study of, and learning from, people – their words, practices, traditions, experiences, memories, insights – in particular times and places in order to understand how they make meaning and what they can teach us about reality, truth, moral responsibility, relationships and the divine.”

This assumption provides the launching point for elaborating on the semiotic parallels of incarnation, revelation, and God’s image/mission presented above.

In order to reclaim the holiness of the worldly, Scharen and Vigen argue ethnographic method ought to be viewed as a source, substance, and self-critique of theology. This tripartite framing of theological ethnography provides the initial linguistic resources needed for

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16 Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 16.

bridging lived religion with lived theology. The following sections explores how various studies in theological ethnography have exhibited these three traits. This literature review also serves to thicken the semiotic parallels linking the theological foundations of incarnation, revelation, and God’s image/mission to the triple negotiation of selective re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitism, and familial belonging between heaven and earth.

Looking for the sources of lived theology: Incarnation and God’s abductive presence

First, an ethnographic approach to theology privileges the body’s multiple senses of experience as a significant source of divine knowledge. This assumes that human feeling is as important as critical reasoning and physical material is as holy as abstract concepts. All knowing, including knowledge of the divine, is embodied knowing. Therefore, the traces of God’s presence mark our bodies and actions as much as any sacred text. Theological ethnography endeavors to discern and articulate lived theologies as a form of embodied faith seeking holistic understanding that goes beyond reason.

From a theological perspective, our knowledge of God is rendered through embodiment in the same way God’s presence on earth was revealed through Christ’s incarnation. The


19 Scharen and Vigen, Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics, 64.
incarnation is a central doctrine in Christian theology that brings God’s presence into holy intimacy with every experience humanity can bear. It is the Christological act of boundary crossing and dwelling par excellence, inaugurating a complete transformation of what it means for humanity to know God. To accept the truth of the God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ is to see the world anew.

When God takes on human flesh – hearts, minds, and the very materiality of humanity becomes a sacred site containing the fullness of God’s presence in a way that is familiar and yet foreign. It is a presence we can sense the same closeness we might feel with a family member in our midst and yet also the caution of dealing with a stranger. In this way, the incarnation is also the classic paradigm for understanding God’s abductive presence in the world. The incarnation is a surprise that draws one away from the world and toward transformation. Abductive reasoning can, therefore, help direct one’s theological sensibilities by focusing inquiry on embodied experiences of God’s presence that touch the empirical realities of our lives but cannot be fully explained by the social sciences.

In this context, one must situate the real presence of God as its own unique source of knowledge that can be discerned in our bodily senses the same way we might experience the presence of other persons. This analysis of God’s presence requires an epistemological shift illustrated in Orsi’s work on the inclusion of “real presence” as a ontological reality in religious studies. Orsi argues that the study of religion can and ought to incorporate a sense of real

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20 See Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Oliver Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), for two extensive volumes analyzing the theological significance of the incarnation for all of Christian doctrine. Crisp’s essays on materialist Christology and multiple incarnations is of particular interest for the present study.

presence where God, gods, and/or spirits act as important players in the intersubjective formation of one’s lived experiences:

I am inclined to believe that presence in the norm of human existence, including in religion, and absence is an authoritative imposition... Such a perspective shifts attention away from what is already always given socially, linguistically, and historically, to what may happen in the intersubjective worlds humans are born into, then make for themselves with the tools they find and craft. It introduces creativity and unpredictability into what would otherwise be determined.  

Orsi’s proposed orientation for religious study can be seen as an extreme application of the lived religion model, one that brings empirical study to the doorstep of theology without passing through it. He argues that lived religious practices are distinct from others by nature of their orientation toward the real presence of some form of divinity. Secular attempts to reframe this dimension of divinity as only symbol or myth misses the point. In other words, lived religion involves one’s relationships with living gods. Orsi continues,

What is called for is a fundamental rethinking of the study of history, beginning with how “history” is constituted in the first place, in both its content and its method, and of the study of “religion,” again beginning with its most basic coordinates. The gods never departed lived experience. They insistently reached through the bars of language, law, and theory erected around them. I am proposing that we let the gods out of their assigned places and that we approach history and religion through the matrix of presence. Once the gods return and once their presence is acknowledged, functionalism yields to a messier, less predictable, and perhaps less recognizable past, one that is not bound to a single account of human life or to a single, short period of time or to a single ontology.  

From this standpoint, Orsi defines religion as a network of relationships between heaven and earth where the presence of spirits, gods, saints, and other supernatural entities are real and

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22 Orsi, History and Presence, 6-7.

23 Orsi, History and Presence, 251.
active. This re-conception of religion as relationships with real presences makes up the transcendent yet socially grounded reality at the heart of everyday religious life.

This shift toward presence contains important challenges for the way both religious studies and theology operate. Orsi argues, “Once the gods return and once their presence is acknowledged, functionalism yields to a messier, less predictable, and perhaps less recognizable past, one that is not bound to a single account of human life or to a single, short period of time or to a single ontology.”²⁴ By placing authority in the hands of the practitioner and his or her conception of a real relationship with the divine, Orsi’s radical reimagining of religious studies aggressively reclaims a pluralism open to dynamics that secular modernity claimed were only symbolic or mythological. To remain stubbornly committed to a secular analysis that only disenchants and exiles the transcendent is to, “...miss the empirical reality of religion in contemporary affairs and they will fail to understand much of human life.”²⁵

This openness is important for scholars of religion because it is the only way they can honor the real presence of the individuals and communities they study and to understand the dynamics they experience. It assumes everyday lives are experienced as a hybridized form of modern enchantment where God and the spirits may not be omnipresent in one’s conscious reasoning but are always capable of surprising us. To make sense of how God is present in the lives of believers in the tangible, relational, sense is to begin constructing theologies.

If religious studies scholars are guilty of banishing the presence of God in their research, theologians are equally guilty of ignoring the real presence of everyday lives in their theological

²⁴ Orsi, History and Presence, 251.

²⁵ Orsi, History and Presence, 251.
reflection. The implications of Orsi’s call to account for the real presence of God is, therefore, also a call to lift up the real relationships between God and as a significant source of theological knowledge. When this emphasis on presence and relationship is added to the assumption that God’s engagement in human lives is often experienced abductively, a pathway emerges for discerning God’s real presence as a source of religious formation and theological knowledge.

It is in this theological foundation of the incarnation as abductive presence that resonance can be drawn with the negotiation of selective re-enchantment observed in my informants. The incarnation provides theological ethnographers a doctrinal center from which to engage human experience as a source of theology. When a preference for real presence is joined with abductive reasoning, one assumes the precedence set by the incarnational presence of God in Jesus Christ is also recognizable in incidents that lay outside the realm of routine understanding and experience. The possibility of the incarnation’s power breaking through is the essence of a sacramental theology that recognizes the holy potential of materiality. Moreover, throughout scripture we see God’s presence break into the lives of ordinary peoples in ways that disrupt their routine sensibilities and outlooks. If this is the God that is portrayed in scripture, then this must also be the God who also acts in the world today. Just as the incarnation of God’s presence among humanity was an unexpected and surprising presence, so too is God’s presence among us today.

*Examining the substance of lived theology: Mixed revelations in Christian community*

If God’s presence and work can be discerned in the body’s sensory response to God’s presence, then the study of Christian embodiment and community in process is also a
This means that the study of Christian practice and community, embedded in the messiness of social life, is a theological enterprise in and of itself because it reveals, “... how intertwined faith, theology, church, culture, and the larger societies are.”

This is an affirmation of what some theologians highlight as the relationship between special revelation and general revelation. Special revelation is traditionally associated with modes of knowing God revealed through the initiative of God alone. This includes the person of Jesus Christ, the Christian scriptures, and ecclesial pronouncements passed down through particular traditions. Special revelation is gifted by God and received through faith when persons put their trust God’s abductive presence and are led to truths that can resonate beyond reason.

General revelation is understood to be the marks of God’s universality present and visible to all humanity, capable of being deduced and induced through human inquiry and reflection. They are processes of nature in the created order, in human relationship and society, in literature and the arts, that suggest God’s presence and character.

To invoke dynamics of special and general revelation in the study of Christian practice and community engages the complexity of how both forms of revelation come together in human experiences, situations, and places to provide the raw materials from which theologies can be constructed. Special revelation may have an inspired role in revealing eternal truths about God that could not have been perceived otherwise, but once they have been received...
and internalized by the faithful, they become part of a mixed economy of spirituality. In the everyday life of Christians, both individually and in community, the truths of special revelation are interwoven with general revelation amidst the brokenness of the world in a variety of contexts requiring careful discernment. The substance of theology articulated by theological ethnographies are the means and ends by which special revelation is applied to, with, and through general revelation in everyday situations and places that are embedded in the world.

This complex intertwining is well illustrated in Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s 2008 study of Good Samaritan UMC in North Carolina, a multi-race, multi-class, and multi-abled congregation that formed a welcoming place for all people.29 Fulkerson discerns how the congregation’s theological worldview coalesces in the church’s multiple activities to create an inclusive atmosphere that was grounded in their relationships and concludes that empirical studies of God’s people can reveal explicit knowledge of God.30 If the church is truly the body of Christ in the world and not simply a symbol, then there exists within all communities of faith an intermingling of special and general revelation that must be critically discerned.

Fulkerson asserts that, “Like a wound, theological thinking is generated by an inchoate sense that something must be addressed.”31 Theology emerges when one must say something about God in response to dramatic and unexplainable circumstances. Using the language of the RF frame, theology first emerges from affects that demand embodied responses. The formation of theology and religiosity thus share common ground. When Christian religiosity is

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worked out in community, theological truths are revealed through particular times and places.

Fulkerson expands on this thought when sharing,

This place of faith will be made up of the resonances of different people, their bodies, events and physical things – from welcoming habits, the character of the preaching, to the racial histories and subtexts of its participants. What “gathers” to make this place will be ordered by way of refracting media and their resonances as well as by the explicit interpretive acts used to make sense out of this Christian community. Its unity will be complex and multilayered... its boundaries will never be fixed. But it will be just as real.  

While such community-based theological expressions may be impossible to systematize given their many contingencies, God’s real presence is at work. It is in these lived realities that special revelation and general revelation intertwine to produce substantial knowledge of God.

Seen through this theological lens, Fulkerson argues Good Samaritan’s practices created a “place to appear” for persons who were marginalized in other settings. Fulkerson’s definition of “place” builds heavily on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus.” The habitus of a person can be understood as a system of embodied dispositions formed and expressed at an unconscious level, internalized through socio-cultural interactions that temper and direct one’s manners and sensibilities. Fulkerson explains her understanding of habitus in this way,

...the ‘understanding’ of the habitus is, first, a competence, one that is productive and creative. Importantly, the social and bodily character of this competence gives it a particular character, distinguishing it from certain types of abstract productivities. It is... an ‘everyday’ knowledge. It will draw from inscribed traditions, from ends and visions

32 Fulkerson, Places of Redemption, 32.

33 See Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52-66. Bourdieu, popularized use of the term, habitus, which he defined as, “…systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (53).” Bourdieu was fond of referencing the habitus of persons as their “feel for the game,” a disciplined yet intuitive sense of how to speak and act in response to selective signals and cues, all without the necessity of intentional rational processing.
available, but it may outrun them and reconfigure them. Second, its wisdom is a capacity to respond improvisationally to a situation; it is competence to say or do something well for a circumstance. Third, while shaped by inscribing practices of a culture, habitus as incorporative practice is a distinctively presentist and performed bodily way of communicating meaning as well (Emphasis in the original).  

Seen as a competence for particular situations, the habitus can be understood to be a practical wisdom that, while socially inscribed from the outside at first, is internalized and embodied with a sensitivity to particular contexts. This tension between the inscription of norms and the plurality of their contingent expressions is what makes a habitus so dynamic. If the habitus is one side of a person’s embodied competency to respond in socially creative yet acceptable ways, then the situations that persons finds themselves in is the other.

When a person’s habitus responds to resonant situations with enough consistency, a distinct “place” emerges. Utilizing post-modern place theory, Fulkerson defines “place” as, “a structure of lived, corporate, bodied, experience.” Emphasizing a person’s situated-ness, Fulkerson conceives of place as matrices of meaning gathered out intimate relationships, social structures, built environments, and distinct times that form a “sense of unity.” A place is an experiential construct built out of a combination of bodily affects, diverse discourses, reflective narratives, and ritual practices wrapped up in the materials constitutive of a space and time. All of these are ordered into a cohesive whole that can be assigned a real yet fluid set of meanings contingent on a life’s many twists and turns. For example, one’s conception of “home”

\[34 \text{ Fulkerson, } \textit{Places of Redemption}, \textbf{47-48}.\]

\[35 \text{ See Monica McDermott, ”Situation,” in } \textit{Approaches to Ethnography: Analysis and Representation in Participant Observation}, \textit{ed.} \textbf{Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan} (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), \textbf{185-210}.\]

\[36 \text{ Fulkerson, } \textit{Places of Redemption}, \textbf{26}.\]
constitutes a distinct place. Dependent on what one might be experiencing at a given moment, the unitary conception of one’s “home” offers a wide range of memories and sensations that can be resourced to provide grounds for new meaning making and practices.

In the context of Fulkerson’s study, many of Good Samaritan’s congregation members came with a habitus marred by marginalization inflicted by the norms of society. They came wounded by racism, classism, and able-lism. Good Samaritan became a place where those wounds were felt, seen, and responded to. To use Bourdieu’s terminology, the church presented an alternative “field” driven by a different constellation of values and practices that fostered a radical sense of inclusion.37 Within this distinct place, a new habitus is formed, inscribing new sensitivities and manners capable of fostering hospitality to difference.38

This intermingling of special and general revelation at work resonates with the negotiation of everyday cosmopolitanism observed in my informants. From a theological standpoint the interplay between habitus and situations can be likened to the complexities of attempting to live out the truths of special revelation, particularly the example of Jesus Christ’s life, within the various worldly situations one encounters on a day to day basis. Even if God’s special revelation is limited to a few select moments, the habitus they form must expand and adapt across numerous situations and places. Church communities are places where faithful gather around sources of special revelation to learn, be encouraged, and deepen their religiosity and identity. How is the habitus formed in these congregations activated in other


places? How does the habitus developed in other places impact congregations? In both cases, the semiotic chains that link the power of special revelation to everyday life is tested and general revelation is enriched. Surely God is present and active across all of these places and situations. There is, therefore, thick theological substance to be discerned, articulated, and constructed out of the varieties of Christian life.

*Lived theology as self-critique: Reflecting with the Imago Dei for the Missio Dei*

Lastly, theological ethnography serves as a reflexive self-critique of theology, one that relies on the relationship between the image and mission of God to correct theological doctrines and systems that would denigrate praxis in favor of rational and systematic coherence. Christian doctrine teaches that God’s image, the imago dei, is present in every human being. The implication of such a teaching is that every person has to potential to reflect the character of God. It is an inherent part of us all, even if sin and brokenness can distort or damage it.39 Christianity also believes that God’s will for creation contains a telos, a trajectory toward an end that glorifies God and brings all of creation to perfection. To realize this reign of God can be called the missio dei, the mission of God. When oriented by the active presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the image of God within us is inclined toward realizing God’s reign. The image pushes toward the mission and the mission pulls upon the image. This is an active faith lived with consistency and direction, a holistic habitus acting in the world.40

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40 See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). The conception of the Missio Dei employed in this study draws heavily from Lesslie Newbigin’s holistic approach to
Based on this relationship between the image and mission of God, theological ethnography argues that it is only in praxis that theological construction can be legitimated. Just as one can get a sense of a tree’s unseen roots based on the fruit it bears, theology ought to lead God’s people to lifestyles that advance God’s mission. However, given humanity’s sinfulness and brokenness, theological constructions can also have an opposite effect of obstructing God’s mission. The study of the empirical church as a self-critique of theology is fundamental because only through such research can one discern the overarching causes and effects of Christian engagement with the world.

In order to interpret God’s work lived out in Christian community, ethnographic research must, therefore, be integrated with a process of theological reflection based on a critical, abductive, and constructive self-reflexivity. The root definition of “ethnography” can be rendered as “writing culture” (“ethnos” and “graphy”). Implicit in this definition is the dimension of translation, of inscribing complex observations into some form of text. Theology, our “words about God,” is similar to ethnography in that it is a process of articulating and inscribing something beyond words into words. This means neither discipline can claim complete objectivity because elements of interpretation are always present.

This process begins with self-reflexivity – a careful acknowledgement and accounting of the researcher’s role and the ways their physical presence and social positionalities influences their findings. Reflexivity is a critical process of taking stock of personal biases and assumptions with humility and openness, especially when findings do not align with expectations. Without

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missiology. See also David Martin Whitworth, Missio Dei and the Means of Grace: A Theology of Participation (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019).
reflexivity, researchers are in danger of selecting data to confirm previously held conclusions. Forrest Stuart defines reflexivity as moving beyond simply checking one’s bias to an active awareness and self-analysis of the researcher as participant instead of outsider: “reflexivity refers to the practice of consistently and candidly examining how we, as fieldworkers, impinge on, and even transform, the phenomena we aim to study.”

First, seeking an empirically based understanding God is therefore intimately tied with power dynamics between researcher and informants. Theological ethnography is particularly aware of the contingent and contextual nature of theological inquiry, prizing critical reflexivity as a check on the professional theologian’s privilege. This is an attempt to correct many of the church’s greatest theologians who have assumed a “view from nowhere” in their theological constructions, an imaginary neutral standpoint capable of seeing everything as it actually is. Only recently has it become widely acceptable to recognize all theologies are contextual constructions built around the positionalities of the theologian.

The researcher must therefore take stock of their images of God’s mission and hold them loosely as they conduct their research. They must be doubly cautious of traits Christian teachings warn against as products of sin and/or brokenness such as pride. Assuming the incompleteness of all theological models and the social embeddedness of all theologians, the ethnographic standpoint demands a posture of humility and self-awareness that will readily

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admit bias and blind spots in one’s own theological constructs. It is also a call to ecclesial and ethical accountability where studies of particular cases of lived theology are employed in dialogue with established theological systems and arguments.

Second, one can also apply an abductive posture to reflexivity that integrates the role of the researcher into the study. Building on Charmaz’s conception of theoretical sampling alongside Tavory and Timmermans’ posture of abductive analysis, Stuart defines abductive reflexivity as a process of, “collecting data and forming hypotheses about how our own presence alters or transforms the normal state of things in our field sites... researchers engaged in this form of abductive reflexivity can exert significant direction and control over hypothesis testing. Because the ethnographer is simultaneously a participant and the data collection instrument, we can actively contribute to negative cases ourselves rather than wait for them to occur (emphasis in original).” Reflexivity is not a process of purging biases and positions but of mindfully directing them to help reveal deeper truths that can benefit and strengthen the community studied.

As members of the Christian community, empirical theologians are not to be impartial observers. Not only is this practically impossible, it is undesirable from the larger standpoint of theological construction and critique on behalf of God and church. The researcher’s view of God’s mission can be bracketed for a time but must eventually be brought into negotiation with

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43 Stuart, “Reflexivity,” 221-222.

their informants and observations. Abductive reflexivity asks the empirical theologian to be as diligent with their self-analysis as they are with the analysis of their informants and data in order to facilitate a collaborative theological enterprise. On the one hand, empirical theologians must be mindful of the sinfulness that colors their interpretation. On the other, they must extend a greater trust in the image of God at work in their informants. The explicit goal should be the strengthening practices that contribute to a shared vision of God’s reign.

Third, while the biases that arise from our standpoints may be viewed as detrimental from a positivist perspective, a constructivist perspective embraces them as important components of research outcomes. A constructivist perspective avoids framing qualitative research as a quest to discover concrete facts. Instead, it recognizes research as a process of co-constructed knowledge between researcher and participants. For example, constructivist grounded theory operates on the following assumptions: “(a) multiple realities exist, (b) data reflect researchers’ and research participants’ mutual constructions, and (c) the researcher enters, however incompletely, the participant’s world and is affected by it. This approach explicitly provides an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (emphasis in the original).”

This understanding critically embraces the researcher as a real and present variable in the analysis of data over the course of the researcher’s growing relationship with participants.

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Natalie Wigg-Stevenson’s conception of ethnographic theology is one example of a critical, abductive, and constructivist theologizing between researcher and informants.\textsuperscript{47} Wigg-Stevenson’s study of a Nashville Baptist church’s Christian education program is not only about how lay members articulate their theologies, but also a holistically reflexive investigation of her role as the facilitator and teacher of this program. Embodying a critical, abductive, and constructivist reflexivity, Wigg-Stevenson carefully designed lay introductory courses in Christian theology to integrate student experience and reflection with historical doctrines and developments. This encouraged an atmosphere of shared theological formation where student experiences of religiosity both enriched and challenged traditional notions of Christian identity.

Wigg-Stevenson situates her positionality as a professionally trained theologian when noting, “Rather than reflect on Christian community or on Christian practice, I sought to do theological reflection in Christian community as Christian practice. I wondered, ‘What happens when we bring together everyday and academic theologies in reciprocal conversation? What types of theology can be produced out of their coherence and clash with each other.’”\textsuperscript{48} Recognizing her role as curator and facilitator of encounter between dense academic theology and the often unarticulated yet rich dimensions of lived faith, she fosters a collective sense of lived theology that can only be revealed when both the scholar and the layperson theologize together with a shared commitment to both the image and mission of God. This type of research resonates closely with another important movement within practical theology known

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\textsuperscript{47} Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, \textit{Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge} (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

\textsuperscript{48} Wigg-Stevenson, \textit{Ethnographic Theology}, 2.
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as theological action research (TAR).\textsuperscript{49} Bringing together insights from both practical theology and action research, TAR is animated by the conviction that all of life is “theological all the way through.”\textsuperscript{50} This means that because life itself is saturated with God’s presence and activity, all parts of it carry equal potential for theological reflection and construction. \textsuperscript{51}

A critical, abductive, and constructivist form of reflexivity provides a vital foundation for theological ethnography’s commitment to conducting empirical research as a form of theological self-critique because it is a holistic application of the Christian belief in all of humanity as bearers of God’s image, each with a role to play in the pursuit of God’s reign and the co-construction of theology. In the pursuit of theological truth, therefore, the theological ethnographer does not stand apart but is a part of the community being studied. The researcher can thus be understood as a translator whose empirical research provides grounded ecclesial insights for advancing the mission of God as well as checks on theological knowledge that hinders it. Qualitative research becomes both prophetic in its presentation of theology’s lived impacts on society and pastoral in its listening and amplification of marginalized voices.

\textsuperscript{49} Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, \textit{Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology} (London: SCM Press 2010).

\textsuperscript{50} Helen Cameron, et al, \textit{Talking About God}, 51-52

\textsuperscript{51} TAR utilizes a “four voice” model of theological inquiry, a method of discerning both sources and modes of theological action. The first of the four voices is espoused theology, theology articulated by the laypersons. The second category is operant theology, embodied practices that express assumptions about the way God works in their world. The third voice is formal theology, theologies provided by academic theologians, clergy, and other leaders of the church. The fourth voice is normative theology, drawn from scripture or liturgy – the basic building blocks from which the church and Christian life takes form. Utilizing these four voices, TAR guides research teams in a collaborative process to identify what each voice can teach and learn from the others in a given place or situation. Each member is expected to practice forms of critical, abductive, and constructivist reflexivity as they consider which theological voices resonate with their own faith lives, how they inter-relate to form the distinct place and practice being researched, and how these discourses and practice can be brought into greater alignment with the mission of God to illuminate God’s image in and through the church. See Helen Cameron, et al, \textit{Talking About God}, 53-56.
By lifting up living experiences of the body of Christ, the whole church is put in direct conversation with philosophical, historical, and systematic forms of theology.

The image and mission of God also serves as a foundation for my informants’ negotiation of familial belonging between heaven and earth because it takes into account the difficulties of navigating one’s Christian commitments and identity as a part of multiple communities. What the empirical theologian must be aware of within themselves is in fact a responsibility of every Christian seeking to discern God’s will for the church and the world. If one believes the Imago Dei is within every person then a critical examination of the self is an important resource for discerning God’s heart. The image of God within us makes reflexivity itself a theologically constructive act as it mindfully considers how God is shaping the various dimensions of a researcher’s life.

**A model case: Todd Whitmore’s anthropological theology**

In the preceding sections, I have sketched three semiotic parallels between the triple negotiation and the theological foundations of the incarnation, revelation, and the image and mission of God. Building on the growing literature in theological ethnography, I have also argued empirical research can serve as an important source, substance, and self-critique of theology that requires an abductive orientation toward the real presence of God, a process of analyzing the ways special and general revelation interact in Christian life, and a critical, abductive, and constructivist form of reflexivity animated by a collaborative missiological praxis.
This section examines how Todd Whitmore’s landmark “anthropological theology” illustrates these factors at work together.\textsuperscript{52} Whitmore’s study of lived Christian experience among the Acholi people in the region of Magwi, nestled across northern Uganda and southern Sudan, stands out for its rich ethnographic research and ambitious theological agenda. This extended look at Whitmore’s methodology signposts the final methodological pivot needed to transform empirical conclusions into theological assertions. It is an exemplary case of balancing the universal impulse of theological construction with the particularities of empirical study of a particular place and time. Most importantly, Whitmore challenges his readers to incarnate the theological truths he has learned from Acholi Christians across boundaries in such a way that honors God’s image in the particular in order to advance God’s mission universally.

Whitmore’s method for constructing anthropological theology operates through four movements that he labels attention, discernment, commitment and return.\textsuperscript{53} At first glance, these movements appear no different than traditional anthropological ethnographies. They turn their analytical gaze on a new cultural space, giving attention to the various components that make up the whole. They discern the patterns and logics that animate it. They commit to certain elements to deepen their analysis. They return to their home institutions and cultures to translate and re-present their findings in the form of literature for others to read and engage. But Whitmore’s work is not just anthropology. It is an anthropological theology. The methods of the anthropologist are placed in service to theology, and theology is always about

\textsuperscript{52} Todd D. Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology} (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

\textsuperscript{53} Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi}, 24-35.
God. This method normally oriented toward understanding humanity is shifted to toward understanding God and, by extension, how humanity ought to orient its relationship to God.

Whitmore’s fourfold movement for anthropological theology mirrors the theological foundations of the incarnation, revelation, and reflexive missiological praxis argued above. Attention is related to identifying the incarnate Christ’s presence among empirical realities. Discernment and commitment involve the use of a hybrid analysis to identify the theological truths embedded in everyday life’s intermingling of special and general revelations. Lastly, return can be compared with the researcher’s practice of critical, abductive, and constructivist reflexivity in order to extend the missiological praxis of this theological truth across boundaries into new contexts and situations.

The latter two movements of commitment and return are of particular importance here. From a theological perspective, commitment is not simply a decision made about sociological and anthropological conclusions. To commit in this context means to recognize the universality of the theological truth at work within the particular context of the research. To return is then understood as finding ways to speak and embody these theological truths in one’s own life. The theological commitments that Whitmore’s research with the Acholi produces are two elements of a radical proposal for discipleship and spirituality: what he calls “Gospel mimesis” in a context of “magical Christianity.”54 Compared with the present study, these two concepts contain semiotic parallels with what I identify as the negotiations of everyday cosmopolitanism and selective re-enchantment.

Gospel mimesis refers to the physical embodiment of Christ’s life as presented in scripture and emulated in the saints. It is a disciplined attempt to mimic Jesus Christ’s life in the context they live in no matter the sacrifice. This is what Whitmore witnesses in the lives of the Acholi faithful in war and post-war settings. Here, local priests ride out on their motorcycles to plead peace with incoming armed militias ready to slaughter villages.\textsuperscript{55} Nuns from the Little Sisters of Mary the Immaculate of Gulu serve the community around them with fervent prayer and charity, prepared to die for the people who depend on them.\textsuperscript{56} In between these dramatic confrontations are daily routines of prayer and service. They are inspired by the holy lives of the leaders who came before them, whose holiness is traced to their imitation of the saints and then back to Jesus Christ himself.\textsuperscript{57} Theirs is a religiosity of disciplined embodiment centered on Christ’s life. Theology here is not debated or written, it is lived in holy mimesis.

Magical Christianity refers to Whitmore’s experiences of Magwi’s spiritual realm, replete with the presence of ancestors and spirits. At one point, Whitmore is visited by the spirit of a murdered eight year old girl seeking comfort, an experience that abducts Whitmore into a Christian spirituality full of real presence.\textsuperscript{58} It is an enchanted world where the material and the spiritual are co-mingled and, thus, where rational and magical logics co-exist. A magical Christianity is one in which Christ’s presence is not the only one Christians must discern, but

\textsuperscript{55} Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi}, 1-2.

\textsuperscript{56} Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi}, 85-86.

\textsuperscript{57} Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi}, 90-114.

\textsuperscript{58} Whitmore, \textit{Imitating Christ in Magwi}, 202-203.
also many others from ancestors to demons. It is a world Whitmore is uncomfortable with, but one he also admits is closer to the one Jesus himself inhabited.⁵⁹

Both Gospel mimesis and magical Christianity are conclusions that rub against modern sensibilities which prefer critical thought to mimetic action and analytical absence to unpredictable presence. As a Catholic moral theologian, Whitmore must negotiate the degree to which these truths ought to apply to Christians outside the boundaries of Magwi. Rather than issuing general claims, however, Whitmore takes the bold step of applying his conclusions to himself. This meant negotiating and embodying the lessons he learned about God in Magwi to his own context in the gilded domes of the American academy.

This marks a transition from Whitmore’s stage of commitment to return. Returning to his role as a prominent moral theologian and professor at the University of Notre Dame, Whitmore attempts his own Gospel mimesis by ignoring the academy’s stoic commitment to objectivity and complicit participation in neo-liberal expansion.⁶⁰ Based on the relationships he has built during his fieldwork, he attempts to embody Gospel mimesis through a limited but genuine collaboration with the Acholi people. In response to requests from villagers for more cattle, Whitmore founds an NGO dedicated to agricultural development. After gaining the trust of local officials, Whitmore is also handed a cache of politically sensitive documents that implicate the Ugandan president of possible war crimes. The implicit ask is for him to publicize them in some way and give voice to the local experiences ignored by global media. Whitmore


uses the documents to pen and publish the information to the American public. The consequences of the publication put his research agenda in turmoil as he is temporarily denied entry back to Magwi to complete his fieldwork. Whitmore also faces sustained critique from his university administration and colleagues who find his actions against the interests of the school.

Whitmore’s work is one of holistic empirical theologizing that exhibits all the traits this study advocates for. First, without explicitly naming it as such, Whitmore conducts much of his fieldwork in a posture of abductive inquiry. He wanders and listens, waiting for genuine surprises to emerge that lead him away to potentially new sources for theologizing. Second, his research is an ideal example of multi-disciplinary theologizing. He draws heavily from biblical studies, church history, post-colonial studies, ethics, sociology, and anthropology to conduct a holistic theo-social analysis, constantly comparing his fieldwork data with insights from all of these disciplines. Third, the text is an ideal example of the critical, abductive, and constructivist reflexivity needed to make theological ethnography a meaningful and sustained self-critique of theologies constructed in contexts outside of everyday Christian life. Whitmore reflexively engages what his presence means for his study including its moral and ethical implications.

Most importantly, Whitmore illuminates an exciting but difficult pathway forward for scholars who confess Christian discipleship to be their first priority. It is a study committed to God’s image in all people but also to the Acholi in particular. Through their example, Whitmore seeks to strengthen God’s universal mission to all. This is a work of glocal Christian praxis, one that infuses everyday local Christian life with an awareness of the late modern world’s curious entanglement of globalized markets, post-colonial legacies, local conflicts, religious pluralism,

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61 Whitmore, *Imitating Christ in Magwi*, 249-266.
and more. All of this reminds us that the future of ecclesial practice is glocal, grounded in local lives that are also intimately influenced by global phenomenon and experiences.

**A theological shift in method and frame: Commitment and return in semiotic parallelism**

Whitmore’s example provides the final piece in this theo-social method’s perilous construction. Now that the semiotic parallels between this study’s sociological findings and some of Christian theology’s most foundational concepts have been drawn, it is time to commit and return. If a movement from the sociological to the theological can foster creative analogy without overriding real differences, then the same should be true of the other direction. To fully apply Tracy’s analogical imagination, a commitment must be made to the theological insights embedded in the research. These insights must then return and reframe the empirical methods and frameworks that originally lead the project.

How do the doctrines of the incarnation, revelation, and the image/mission of God discerned in the triple negotiation reframe the multi-method RF frame that orients this study? Preceding chapters have mapped how the RF frame and its various methodologies have guided my fieldwork and analysis, concluding with articulations of God’s peace and guidance worked out in everyday life via a triple negotiation of liquid religiosity. The theological foundations promoted in this chapter as semiotic parallels to these conclusions must now provide the resources needed to reorient frame and method in the service of theological reflection, analysis, and construction. When moving from the theological back through the sociological,
priority must be given to theological logic and ends regarding God’s character and mission. Method and frame are no longer used for analytical objectivity to discern the causes and effects of social relationships. Instead, they become means to knowing and living in God through Christ.

This chapter concludes by reframing the orientation of the RF frame and the qualitative methodologies used to identify the triple negotiation as proposals for spiritual formation and theological construction. This process mirrors the commitment movement in Whitmore’s method of anthropological theology by utilizing the theological principles of incarnation, revelation, and the image/mission of God as mediums for articulating how God is present in the sociological processes observed in the lives of my informants. By shifting to a theological register, the particular ways in which God abides and acts in the experiences of my informants is expanded beyond the confines of one context with lessons for the global church.

*From sociological to theological method*

How is Christ’s presence active all the way through these sociological processes and how can the church learn and grow from these theological insights? Answering this question begins with shifting one’s methodological focus and process from the social and empirical to God and God’s engagement with the world. First, at the individual level, our focus must shift to the unique traits of Christ’s presence via an abductive Christology. After all, in the Christian faith, it

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is Christ who was incarnated, saves, and continues to guide through the Holy Spirit. As Christians, should we not expect Christ to abduct and surprise us in similar ways as the incarnation did two millennia ago? And if Christ is to surprise us again, should we not be watchful and familiar enough with Christ’s character and values to recognize it? This orientation may be difficult for rationalist forms of Christian faith uncomfortable with real presence, but Christian life is not defined by rationality. It is defined by a faith of expectancy of abduction. In other words, to experience Christ’s presence in our lives ought to be genuinely surprising.

Second, at the everyday level, constant comparison of data and theory must give way to constant comparison of lived experience with Christian scripture and tradition in the light of Christ’s abductive presence. In a world where institutional Christianity can express itself through a range of traits linked to various cultures and norms, it can be easy to fall into the trap of bad faith where social or personal biases lead us to eisegeting instead of exegeting. But if Christ’s presence presents itself as truly other and yet and fully among us, then lived experiences cannot be compared with scripture and tradition alone. Instead of a dialogue between faith and culture, Christian life must be a triangulation that includes the very presence of Christ. Introducing this third variable creates potential for movement beyond dualistic reasoning, a chance for God to speak and be heard in the same ways that scriptures attest to in the past. This provides critical grounding for discernment that will resonate with reason but also checks and balances emotionalism.

Lastly, there is a shift from the co-construction of religiosity and identity in the context of community and history to a holistic reflexivity oriented toward reforming the church for
missiological praxis. Theological ethnography is a movement that takes seriously the spiritual experiences of the entire body of Christ instead of only from elite pastors and theologians. This co-constructive orientation does not mean, however, that theological leadership is not necessary. It only means that pastors and theologians must be trained to construct theological reflection together with the entire communion of saints in practical ways, building together from the ground up instead of delineating from the top down. In this model of participatory ecclesiology, the theologian is tasked not with normative pronouncing but with reflexive facilitation, helping Christians mediate and articulate their experiences of Christ together to discern how God is still working through the church to accomplish God’s mission.

*From religious formation to Christ-like formation*

With these methodological shifts in place, the RF frame used to organize and direct this study’s analysis can be reconstructed to reflect the priorities of Christian theology and discipleship. The RF frame focuses on segmenting and mapping the various categories of experience that contribute to a person’s sense of religiosity and identity. As a sociological tool, its ends are descriptive. A theological frame, however, is not only descriptive but also prescriptive because the church’s understanding of God is not only about traits and character but also about action and ends. Christian theology contains soteriological and teleological programs that must be taken into account for constructing a robust theological framework. In this new frame, Christology, missiology, and ecclesiology become the operational logics for formation.
From this standpoint, a framework oriented toward describing religious formation must now shift to facilitating a missional praxis capable of steering the church toward Christian discipleship in the image of Christ. Abductive experiences of Christ’s presence are understood as starting points for Gospel mimesis, the imitation of Christ’s image. Following the RF frame’s original structure, Christians must first intuit and discern Christ’s presence at a phenomenological level, nestled in affects and symbols abductively experienced. Despite its surprising nature, Christians must learn to be receptive in order to recognize it when it emerges. The feelings and meanings that emerge out of experiencing Christ’s presence then serve as touchstones for further reflection and action in the same way God’s peace served as a precursor to ethical courage in some of my informants’ lives.

From a missiological perspective, one assumes experiences of Christ’s presence will bring with them either encouragement to carry on or challenge the direction of the church and its mission. It calls for a missiology that is ever adapting to multiple situations and cultures. This frames the triangulation between experiences of Christ’s presence, everyday lived experiences, and scripture/tradition in an active register that both discerns Christ’s presence in relationship with us and negotiates how one ought to live and behave as a reflection of the moral and ethical image of Christ across various contexts and situations. Paralleling the structure of the RF frame, specific attention should be paid to the discourses and embodiments expressed in everyday lives similar to the negotiations my informants engaged in when parsing their Christian identities in different situations.

Lastly, this missional frame acknowledges the co-constructed and participatory quality of ecclesial life influenced by multiple sources across history. As explained above, a co-
constructed sense of Christian religiosity and identity is fundamental to this framework, but its construction cannot be completed within the confines of a single congregation or locale. In the same way the RF frame addresses large dynamics of society and tradition embedded in narratives, texts, and rituals, so too must Christian discipleship account for the various social, cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts that flow through the church’s attempts to follow Christ.

In this study, the triple negotiation of liquid religiosity discerned in my informants is embedded in a larger narrative of modern China’s religious question. Selective re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitanism, and familial belonging are questions that must be worked out across multiple boundaries. A theological reading of these negotiations challenges Christians to view them as opportunities to be abducted by Christ, to work out of an adaptive missiology, and to embrace their part in a participatory ecclesiology that is grounded in Christ’s incarnation, embodied through God’s image within us, and directed toward God’s reign.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has laid the foundations and mapped a process for realizing the final movement of this study’s proposed theo-social method, pursuing theological reflection and construction alongside and through empirical social research. First, it operationalizes Tracy’s analogical imagination via semiotic parallels that pin the empirically derived conclusions with theological concepts based on the work advanced in practical theology and theological ethnography. In the context of this study, Christian conceptions of the incarnation, revelation, and the image/mission of God are aligned with the tripe negotiation of liquid religiosity. These
theological concepts are dialectically applied to this study’s qualitative methodologies and analytical framework, shifting its means and ends toward a Christological, missiological, and ecclesial ends (see table 4).

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Theological insights rendered from this study’s sociological conclusions must also be made applicable, however, by prescribing concrete doctrines and practices for spiritual and ecclesial growth relevant to the specific context from which they are drawn: the context of
contemporary China. The last chapter of this study engages this final imperative by focusing on contextual resources for advancing Christ-like formation from three well-regarded Chinese theologians through their physical and theological migration.
CHAPTER 7: Reframing modern Chinese theologies as migrant lived theology

In the previous chapter, Whitmore’s anthropological theology is cited as a map for empirical theology delivered with a praxis orientation. For Whitmore, the fruits of theological reflection on the empirical particularities of one sociocultural context must be applicable in some way, shape, or form to other contexts because God’s truth must be true across all of God’s creation. This dynamic is best illustrated by Whitmore’s concept of “return” in his fourfold method. Return requires the researcher to apply the theological conclusions rendered from one context into another, ideally the context the researcher calls home. It is a call to spiritual growth and discipleship across boundaries, embodying God’s truth across differences.

This final chapter expresses the spirit of such a return by applying the theological frame of Christ-like formation to the larger context of theologies of migration and to the specific context of modern Chinese theology. In this study, migration and boundary crossing have emerged as the dominant metaphor for analyzing the experiences of my informants in both their individual lives and the context of modern China as a whole. It follows that the theological insights gathered from this analysis should be returned and applied to this particular context. How does an agenda for forming Christ-like religiosities and identities figure into global realities of a theology of migration? More specifically, how can the larger context of boundary crossing and Christ-like formation be applied to the specific context of modern China?

This chapter suggests some answers to these questions in three parts. In the first part, theological methodologies applied to migration as metaphor and context of theology are examined and reframed to emphasize migration as process and dialogue, providing grounds from which to position boundary crossing and Christ-like formation as a lived theology of
migration that emphasizes the emerging nature of religiosity and identity led by God’s abductive presence. In the second section, I apply this process-dialogue conception of migration theology to the lives and thoughts of three modern Chinese theologians, Zhao Zichen (T.C. Chao), Ding Guangxun (K.H. Ting), and Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee), to show how key tenants of their theologies can be traced to their global sojourn across the many contexts of modern China’s evolving quest to resolve Christianity with modernity. Lastly, the elements of these Chinese theologies most resonant with the lived experience of my informants and the Christ-like formation framework are identified in the areas of Christology, missiology, anthropology (sanctification), and ecclesiology as resources for lived theology.

Reframing migration and context as lived theology

In chapter five, I adopt migration and movement as a key sociological metaphor for understanding my informants’ shifting experiences of God’s presence across different boundaries, setting these experiences in the larger context of modern Chinese religious history. It follows that migration might also to play an equally important role in the overarching theological framework that is being constructed. In recent years, theological reflection on migration has become a prominent subject.1 Building on the methodological reflections of Dorottya Nagy, this section addresses some of the pitfalls and challenges of adopting migration as a metaphor and context for theologizing, arguing for a broader conception of migration as a

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1 See, for example, the three-volume series edited by Elaine Padilla and Peter Phan, Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Christianities in Migration: the Global Perspective (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
process of emergence and dialogue whereby Christian religiosity and identity is deepened in relationship with expanding perceptions of God and the world.²

To expand and deepen theological reflection on migration, Nagy identifies two dominant methodologies in recent literature on theology and migration and considers their weaknesses. The first takes migration as a “locus theologicus,” a spatial metaphor that is, “… developed into sets of metaphors that transform the theological missiological reflection on the social phenomena of migration into theological inquiries about God’s nature and into theological anthropology.”³ In this method, the language of migration is utilized to reframe and rearticulate traditional theological inquiries into creation, incarnation, salvation, redemption, trinity, and other important theological categories. Using migration as a hermeneutic lens, the theologian grounds their reading and interpretation of scripture and church tradition in migrant experience.

Closely related, the second method takes migration to be the context out of which theological reflection emerges. In most cases, context refers to the, “present socio-political, geographical, and cultural environment, which together with scripture and the tradition present the relevant sources for theological reflection and make theology contextual.”⁴ Such

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theologies move beyond adopting migration language to analyze theological themes. They allow the entirety of the migrants’ world to saturate the theological endeavor. Moreover, Nagy also refers to Stephen Bevan’s conception of context as experience.\(^5\) Using this definition, contextual theologies of migration ought to arise from concrete experiences of migration embedded in their particular times and places.\(^6\)

Nagy lists several legitimate critiques against both these theological methods. On the one hand, there are problems with the specificity of migration discourse in theology. She accuses both methods as prone to reinforcing methodological nationalism, an unintentional reification of national or ethnic identities and cultures to specific spaces (most often nation states) that truncates the complexities of fluid identities and cultural hybridity in a globalized world.\(^7\) Included in this categorization of identities is the problematic dualism that can come from focusing on migrants over and against some form of non-migrant. She is also troubled with how many migrant theologies functionally operate as revised extensions of liberation

\(^4\) Nagy, “Minding Methodology,” 44.


\(^6\) An exceptional example of this form of migration theology is Gemma Tulud Cruz, An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2010), and Toward a Theology of Migration: Social Justice and Religious Experience (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Cruz’s emphasis on the relationship between intercultural theology and migration experience parallels a number of observations made in this study. Other relevant studies of migration and theology resonant with this study include Paul Woods, Theologising Migration: Otherness and Liminality in East Asia (Oxford, UK: Regnum, 2015), whose research is situated in the East Asian context. See also, Jenny McGill, Religious Identity and Cultural Negotiation: Toward a Theology of Christian Identity in Migration (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016). McGill’s conclusions regarding the necessity of migration experiences for Christian transformation parallel the conclusions of the present study. Moreover, McGill reaches these conclusions based on interviews with international students studying at Evangelical colleges in the United States regarding how they perceive their relationship with Jesus Christ. Her method, demographic and subject matter overlap with many dynamics in my research.

theology, a pre-conceived frame that can limit one’s analysis. On the other hand, there is the danger of abstracting migration to a degree it loses its unique standpoint. When migrant experience is equated with all experiences, the contextual nature of migration loses explanatory power. Moreover, a broad conception of context, culture, and experience makes it difficult to organize the vast sea of variables and relationships between them. In other words, while rigid definitions of migration constrain theological reflection to pre-determined categories of “migrant” and various forms of “identity” in relationship with equally pre-conceived theological categories, under-defined conceptions of migration and context lack the boundaries necessary to facilitate compelling explanations of migration phenomena.

In response, Nagy suggests a communicative turn for theologizing migration that redefines context as a multi-disciplinary framework with particular attention given to the linguistic and structural dimensions of process. Citing Teun A. van Dijk’s definition, Nagy argues context can understood as something between social setting and individual experience, “those components of the communicative situation which the participants of the discourse identify as ‘systematically relevant’ and meaningful. These dynamic processes of meaning giving generate the so-called context models.” Such models provide the, “missing link between discourse and society, between the personal and the social, and between agency and structure.” In this view, contexts are, “not some kind of objective condition or direct cause, but rather

8 Nagy, “Minding Methodology,” 43.
(inter)subjective constructs designed and ongoingly updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities.”

For Nagy, the adoption of this linguistic-structural conception of context can revitalize migration theology because it calls attention to “the importance of ongoing talks, discourse, and non-verbal communication related to migration phenomena where the accent is on the ongoing nature of the situations and discourses created by the interrelatedness of human beings.” This frames, “Christian communities or other types of communities... as contexts in which discourse on migration happen and they may not need ethnic or national identifiers” and “dismisses arguments which a priori label migration as good or bad and instead reveal the complex nature of migration phenomenon.” In other words, contexts must be viewed as dynamic processes with multiple localities and situations as well as capacity to change over time.

Nagy builds on this basic proposal by drawing from additional socio-linguistic theories of change and process including Andreas Wimmer’s boundary making paradigm in ethnic formation and Ewa Morawska’s conception of structuration and its role in the emergence of identity. Both emphasize the processes that make up migrant experience inwardly and outwardly. Migrant identity, like all identities, is parsed as a process of becoming that is

dependent on both individual reflection and social conditions. For example, Morawska explains structuration as a process in this way:

...(while the) upper structural layers (economic and political systems, cultural formations, technological civilizations) set the “dynamic limits” of the possible and impossible within which people act, it is at the level of the immediate social surroundings that individuals and groups evaluate their situations, define purposes, and undertake actions. The intended and, often, unintended consequences of these individual and collective activities in turn affect – sustain or transform – these local-level, and over time larger scope structures.15

Nagy’s methodological reflection is aimed at advancing the depth and breadth of theological construction related to migration. By decentering common definitions of migration, identity, and context alongside a shift in focus to process and structure, Nagy provides theologians and missiologists an alternative paradigm for considering the role of migration in God’s mission.

It is with this alternative paradigm of migration as process that the present study proceeds. I argue Nagy’s critiques and proposals amount to a turn toward viewing migration theology as a form of lived theology that prioritizes the experiences and negotiations one undertakes amidst experiences of migration across boundaries, both figurative and literal. The theories Nagy draws from resonate closely with this study’s differentiation of religiosity from religious identity and align with the processes outlined in the RF frame that guides its analysis. While accounting for both the inward experiences of my informants as well as the larger sociocultural dynamics of tradition and society, the RF frame gives extra weight to the everyday discourses and embodiments that shift and reframe one’s sense of Christian religiosity and identity. In this arrangement, migration is decoupled from its commonly understood

definitions to allow new lines of inquiry with enough structure to guide its analysis. What emerges is a description of how migrant consciousness arises and the various ways this conscious sense of movement and change is related to Christian religiosity and identity. These movements can be as simple as crossing situational boundaries or as complicated as crossing large geographic and cultural boundaries. What is most important is that each crossing facilitates a process of negotiation regarding how Christian faith ought to operate in responses to these contextual changes.

The primary variable that shifts this study’s analysis from a sociological analysis of Christianity and migration to a theological one is its explicit inclusion of God’s real presence as an independent agent in this migrant process of Christian becoming. This is not only a study of lived religion but of lived theology because I, alongside my informants, treat relationship and dialogue with a real and present God as fundamental rather than contingent and as real rather than symbolic. I am not only describing the ways my informants experience God but also actively hypothesizing God’s nature and intentions for migration, both for my informants as well as the church and the world at large.

The previous chapter outlines the methodological blueprint used to foster this theological reflection, charting a cross-disciplinary movement from sociological description of religious formation to theological prescription of Christ-like formation based on semiotic parallels in disciplinary language. The Christological character of God’s incarnation, the diffuse nature of God’s revelation through history and community, and the image and mission of God inherent in every person semiotically parallels my informants’ negotiations with spiritual presence, cosmopolitan ethics, and familial belonging. The depth and breadth of this triple
negotiation can also be correlated with experiences of migration, particularly in an age of liquid modernity. Migration catalyzes and amplifies the triple negotiation when pursued across multiple modernities. From a theological perspective, the hypotheses and conclusions rendered by individuals undergoing this triple negotiation are part and parcel to inquiries regarding the nature of God, God’s will for the world, and the church. The triple negotiation is thus closely related to matters of theological ontology, epistemology, ethics, and ecclesiology.

The theological frame that recasts religious formation as Christ-like formation relies on a process-oriented understanding of migration experiences as part of God’s larger plan for bringing renewal and wholeness to the church and the world. This process is closely related to the theological reflections presented in previous chapters. It begins with a sense of God’s presence directed by Christian scripture and then expanded through constructive intercultural dialogue with God and the world’s many peoples, cultures, and religions. First, building on the biblical precedence, I have argued the presence of God’s peace provides my informants an affective and symbolic starting point for negotiations across different boundaries from everyday situations to other religions and cultures. Second, based on the testimony of my mainland informants, everyday inward negotiations can provide the seeds for larger outward dialogues regarding liberation, cultures, and non-Christian religions in the church’s formation and mission. Third, when faced with larger shifts in context and culture wrought by movements across geographical space, such as those faced by my Hong Kong informants, dialogue becomes an intercultural process of dialogic conversion capable of expanding one’s view of God as universal amidst the church’s many particularities.
My informants’ everyday negotiations and dialogues with God and the world, coupled with the Nagy’s methodological preference for reframing the context of migration as one of process and emergence, amounts to a process-dialogue orientation for composing lived theologies of migration. The theology undergirding such a posture assumes one’s relationship with God grows as one struggles with their journeys across boundaries and that Christian religiosity and identity are both deepened and expanded in migration. To be formed in Christ’s image is to view all of life as pilgrimage. This frames Christian experience itself as a process of divine migration punctuated by dialogue, both as an inward journey toward God and an outward sojourn through the world, God’s creation. As global migration continues to rise, discourse on migration and theology continues to blossom. Building on metaphorical and contextual theologies of migration, a process-dialogue oriented view of migration provides fertile soil from which to foster another important line of inquiry: lived theologies of migration.

This study claims not only to be one of lived theology, however. It also attempts to articulate a Chinese lived theology specific to the sociocultural realities of modern Chinese history. This requires more than theoretical and methodological reflection on migration and theology, but also a specific engagement with Chinese theologies. The next section applies the dialogic-process orientation toward migration articulated above to the modern Chinese theologians, examining how their experiences of migration are linked to their theologies.

**Modern Chinese theologians through lens of migration and pilgrimage**

The following sections apply the process-dialogue conception of migration and the Christ-like formation model to three prominent modern Chinese theologians: Zhao Zichen
(1888-1879), Ding Guangxun (1915-2012), and Ni Tuosheng (1903-1972). All three lived during China’s tumultuous twentieth century and each has contributed substantial theologies reflective of modern China’s shifting social and cultural conditions. As Chinese modernity emerged over the century, these three theologians navigated dynamics similar to my contemporary informants. They studied, wrote, and preached as the boundaries that defined Chinese culture and its relationship with the rest of the world were being reshaped. They were well educated and globally connected cosmopolitans seeking theological foundations for their actions in an uncertain world. As Chinese Christians, each also had to negotiate their sense of belonging to nation, church, and God.

By applying a process and dialogue oriented conception of migration to the lives and theologies of Zhao, Ding, and Ni, a lived theology of migration can be discerned in similar ways to the theo-social process applied to my informants. By framing Zhao, Ding, and Ni as pilgrims and migrants, their theological works can be read as a map across changing terrains of time and space. Their dialogues with God and church in the context of an emerging Chinese nation reveal twists and turns in theological reasoning, reflecting a process of religious formation forged through multiple crossings and dwellings. Moreover, this study argues boundary crossing experiences are fundamental to God’s plan to deepen one’s faith by expanding our experiences of God and God’s creation. Discerning the lived theologies of Zhao, Ding, and Ni with a process-dialogue view of migration can thus provide important examples of how God actively uses boundary crossing experiences to shape and reshape theological understanding and relationships.
To establish migration as an animating factor in these modern Chinese theologies, I adopt two methodological frames that have already been applied to Chinese theologies in past literature. First, I recall Peter Tze Ming Ng’s construction of Chinese Christianity as a process of glocalization, an interplay between global and local experiences of Christian faith. For Ng, Chinese theologies must be recognized as hybrid theologies that emerge not only from a Chinese context but also intertwined with other contextual theologies. These local-global connections are not simply a product of intellectual abstraction, but of meaningful relationships between people and concrete travel between places. Zhao, Ding, and Ni’s theologies can only be understood in this context of interplay between their local and global commitments, balancing the realities of the Chinese church and society with their perceptions of God’s global church and mission.

Second, this study references Alexander Chow’s framework of “generational shifts” to highlight the public dimension of modern Chinese theologies, linking theological articulations with the shifting sociopolitical and cultural conditions of various time periods. Through this lens, Zhao and Ni can be classified as contemporaries who came of age during China’s New Culture Movement. Their theological output was greatest during the first half of the twentieth century. Ding, some years younger, would come to play a tremendous role in Chinese theology and ministry in the latter half of the century, especially in the post-Mao period of economic

16 Peter Tze-Ming Ng, Chinese Christianity: An Interplay Between Global and Local Perspectives (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2012). This volume of essays not only establishes a global-local framework for analyzing Chinese Christianity but also includes biographical sketches of Zhao Zichen (167-178) and Ding Guangxun (221-241), which served as important starting points for this study’s analysis.

reform. Ng’s and Chow’s methodological frames both implicitly acknowledge the dialogic nature of theologizing across space and time.

All three theologians were raised in a common setting, but their theologies diverged as a result of the various sociocultural disruptions. In the following summary, I highlight four key periods of time: 1) the Anti-Christian Movements of the 1920s and the subsequent Nanjing Decade (1928-38), 2) The second Sino-Japanese and Chinese civil wars (1938-1949), and 3) the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 through the Maoist era (1949-1976) followed and 4) the economic reform period beginning in the 1980s. Each of these periods contain major disruptions to Chinese life, not only for Chinese culture and society as a whole, but also in the individual faith journeys of Zhao, Ding, and Ni. These disruptions instigate new theological negotiations that can be discerned in their writings and teachings, serving as footnotes to the larger inward/outward dialogue they conduct with God and the world.

First, all three theologians were raised and benefitted from what Daniel Bays calls the “Sino-Foreign Missionary Establishment,” which thrived during China’s brief golden age of Christianity in the early twentieth century.\(^\text{18}\) Zhao, Ding, and Ni were all educated in missionary schools and were fluent in both Chinese and English. Zhao, studied at Methodist affiliated Suzhou (Soochow) University where he was baptized in 1908 and graduated in 1910. Ding was educated at the Chinese-English bilingual St. John’s University in Shanghai, one of China’s flagship international missionary schools well known for training elite diplomats and businessmen. Later, Zhao and Ding would continue their education in the United States (Zhao at Vanderbilt University and Ding at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary),

where their theological sensitivities were attuned to liberal American theologies orientated
toward humanism and the social gospel.¹⁹

Unlike Zhao and Ding, Ni’s religious formation diverged from the missionary
establishment at a young age. Ni was also raised in the Methodist Episcopal Church and
educated at Trinity College in Fuzhou, Fujian province. Despite being raised in an elite
Protestant family, he became disillusioned with denominational churches. In 1920, he
experienced spiritual renewal during a revival service led by indigenous evangelist, Dora Yu.
Ni’s born-again faith would then be nurtured by the mentorship of independent missionary
Margaret Barber and formed by the theology of the Plymouth Brethren via the works of Jessie
Penn-Lewis and John Nelson Darby. All of this shades Ni’s theological worldview with Keswick
mysticism and eschatological fervor.²⁰

The Anti-Christian Movements that erupted in the 1920s brought an abrupt end to
short-lived sociocultural capital of the missionary established church.²¹ Zhao and Ni were both
deeply shaped by this rising tide of anti-foreign sentiment and Chinese nationalism. During this
time, their theological writings reflect critical reassessments of Christian religiosity and identity
in relationship to Chinese culture and foreign influence. Zhao’s journey to contextualize
Christian theology with Chinese cultural resources brought him to academic prominence. He

¹⁹ See Christopher D. Sneller, “Union Theological Seminary’s Dense Social Network in Twentieth-Century

²⁰ Xi Lian, Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China (New Haven, CT: Yale
University Press), 157-158, 163-165.

²¹ Xu, Xiaoqun. “The Dilemma of Accommodation: Reconciling Christianity and Chinese Culture in the
joined the Yanjing (Yenching) University’s School of Religion in 1926 and became dean in 1928. Zhao’s sense of responsibility to the church’s mission was thus intertwined with higher theological education and the training of leaders that could lead an independent and influential Chinese church capable of transforming society in Christ’s image. At Yanjing, Zhao’s commitment to formation was not only academic but also practical. He played an important role in the university’s “Life Fellowship,” a campus ministry focused on deepening Christian faith and witness in preparation for a life of service. In addition to writing academic theology, he was also the author of numerous Chinese hymns that sought to embed Christian worship in Chinese experience.

In 1922, Ni and other like-minded Christians established a new congregational polity: the Christian Assembly, an indigenous Christian renewal movement free of foreign influence. These independent congregations renounced denominationalism and clergy-laity distinctions. Attempting to live out their interpretations of the bible, they emphasized family-like gatherings centered around the communion table. Over time, Ni’s particular vision for the Christian Assembly crystalized in what he called the Local Churches (地方教堂 Difang Jiaotang). They emphasized congregational unity and independent governance based on geography inspired by

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24 Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, 159-163.
the independent city-based churches described in the New Testament. Ni’s Local Churches developed a unique liturgy of their own, including a distinctive ritual of breaking bread together for communion and the singing of a collection of Brethren hymns compiled in the “Hymns of the Little Flock,” from which the movement gains its alternative name: the Little Flock (小群 Xiaoqun).25

During the Nanjing Decade, a period of relative sociopolitical stability under the Nationalist Party, Zhao and Ni find ways to deepen their theological commitments by expanding their global perspectives and relationships. Zhao became one of China’s most globally recognize theologians. Domestically, he helped lead China’s YMCA and newly established National Christian Council. Internationally, he participated in International Missionary Councils (1928, 1938).26 As Ni’s Little Flock congregations continued to multiply throughout China, he deepened his connections with the global Plymouth Brethren movement. He visited with leaders of the movement in the United Kingdom and North America in 1932 and 1938 to learn, dialogue, and teach. These journeys provided great inspiration for how to lead his own churches.27 For Zhao and Ni, the expanding global-local interplay of this era generates a treasure trove of theological writings on Christology, theological anthropology, and ecclesiology. Ding, a generation younger than Zhao and Ni, is only just completing his

25 Lian, Redeemed by Fire, 170.


education during this period. In 1942, he graduates from St. John’s with a Bachelor of Divinity and is ordained an Anglican deacon and priest. He begins his ministry with the Shanghai YMCA, immediately embedding his sense of ministry with social engagement.  

The second great series of disruptions comes during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), ending with the Communist Party’s establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949. This series of events transforms Zhao, Ding, and Ni in different ways. In 1941, two significant events took place in Zhao’s life. First, he was ordained a priest in the Anglican church, an intentional embrace of a particular tradition that would orient his mature theology. Second, Zhao was also imprisoned by the Japanese for several months, an experience that marks a major shift in Zhao’s theological outlook from a more optimistic anthro-centric Christology built on human to a more traditional Christology focused on Jesus’ divinity and God’s response to human sin. During the war years, Zhao’s theological writing continues and his global reputation continues to rise, reaching an apex in 1948 when he is elected as one of the World Council of Churches’ first presidents.

In 1942, Ni steps down from church leadership after accusations of inappropriate sexual relations and corrupt business practices. By 1948, however, Ni’s allies help bring him back into leadership. After returning to power, Ni makes major shifts in his ecclesial vision. He moves away from what he called the “Antioch Principle” of one independent church for one locality to

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29 Peter Tze Ming Ng, *Chinese Christianity*, 167.


the “Jerusalem Principle” which centralized resources and authority to a single head with a focus on mission. During this time, each local congregation submitted itself to Ni’s direct authority and church members sold much of their property to support the church’s larger mission.

Meanwhile, the younger Ding has distinguished himself as a promising cosmopolitan leader of the church. After working closely with the student ministries of the YMCA and ministering with various churches in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, Ding accepts various positions of leadership that take him on a global sojourn. In 1946, Ding served as missions secretary for the Canadian Student Christian Movement. From 1947-1948, Ding studied at Union Seminary in the United States. He also worked as missions secretary for the World Student Christian Federation in Geneva, Switzerland, from 1948-1951. This role allowed Ding to visit churches and student ministries all over the world, establishing in him a firm ecumenical vision. During this early period, Ding’s writings contain an evangelical sensibility with great concern for Christian mission, which he sees as a call to witness to God’s sovereignty over history, made real to humanity through Christ’s incarnation.32

The founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 brings about the most dramatic disruption in the life of the Chinese church yet and thrusts Zhao, Ding, and Ni into uncharted territory. Zhao’s prominence becomes an important asset for the party’s new religious policy making. He serves as one of five Christian delegates at the first Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in Beijing and worked with Premier Zhou Enlai to help craft the

Christian Manifesto and the beginnings of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.⁴⁳ Among the signatories of the Christian Manifesto is Ni who, in good faith, encouraged his Little Flock churches to support the new government.⁴⁴ Zhao’s and Ni’s early support for the party was not rewarded, however. In 1952, anti-rightest campaigns included denunciation of Zhao’s global Christian connections which effectively ended his professional career. Ni is also arrested in 1952 and passes away in a labor camp in Anhui in 1972. Zhao perseveres longer in body but is crushed in spirit. He is widely reported to have lost his faith late in life, passing away in obscurity in 1979.⁴⁵

When the People’s Republic of China was founded, Ding felt called to return to his homeland in 1951, leaving behind the ecumenical work he had so diligently applied himself to. Mentored by Wu Yaozhong, the architect of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Ding rose to become the principle of the newly established Nanjing Union Theological Seminary in 1953 and continued to travel abroad for global Christian gatherings, now as a representative of the post-denominational Chinese Christian church. During this time, his theological writing makes a dramatic shift. The focus on the centrality of Christ in his early essays and ecumenical work gives way to a patriotic anti-foreign rhetoric with greater emphasis given to the Chinese church’s independence and contribution to China’s new socialist project.⁴⁶

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positive relationship with important party officials, including Premier Zhou Enlai, may have saved him from the harsh fate faced by Zhao and Ni during the Anti-Rightist Campaigns and Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{37}

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the institutional church is in ruin. It is amidst this crisis that Ding Guangxun becomes the most prominent Christian leader in the post-Maoist economic reform era. In 1980, as the country begins to rebuild itself under Deng Xiaoping’s experimental market reforms, Ding is promoted to head of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement to help re-establish the church in Chinese society. Under Ding, the institutional church rebuilds itself by established the China Christian Council to work alongside the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. As churches and seminaries are reopened, Ding also founds the Amity Foundation in 1985, one of the People’s Republic’s first faith-based charity organizations. He also re-establishes links with the world church by bringing the China Christian Council back into fellowship with the World Council of Churches. Ding’s rebuilding of the institutional church is, however, often at odds with the growth of China’s unregistered church communities that also evolve alongside the country’s economic reforms. The legacy of Ding’s relationship with unregistered communities is especially complex. There were times when Ding’s political leadership provided cover for family church movements. In contrast, there were other times when Ding rendered harsh critiques of unregistered churches for their fundamentalism and stubborn separatism.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} Wickeri, Reconstructing Christianity in China, 167-190.

\textsuperscript{38} See Starr, Chinese Theology, 200-207. Starr neatly summarizes the contours of the major debates between Ding Guangxun and conservative house church leader, Wang Mingdao.
Amidst this work of rebuilding the church, Ding’s theology is forged out of the multiple negotiations he is making between heaven and earth, church and state. His theology embodies the Anglican spirit of via media, of standing alongside the government’s socialist agenda while holding the line on Christianity’s unique and powerful claim of divine presence at work through the church.\(^{39}\) His early Christology is not abandoned but contextually expanded with heavy emphasis on God’s love at work through all peoples, including the Communist Party. He finds resonance with liberation and process theologies and finds great inspiration in the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Beginning in the 1990s, Ding attempts to reconstruct Chinese theology with the same vigor he brought to rebuilding its institutions. This “theological reconstruction” was a controversial attempt to reshape theological education and weed out fundamentalism that he saw as detrimental to the church’s mission.\(^{40}\)

Zhao, Ding, and Ni are three of modern China’s greatest Christian leaders and their journeys cross numerous boundaries, geographically, culturally, and theologically. When examining their lives through the lens of migration, one finds a process of complex negotiations and dialogues amidst tremendous disruptions in China’s social, cultural, and political life. These disruptions often result in significant shifts in their sense and expression of Christian religiosity and identity. Instead of looking to Zhao, Ding, and Ni for systematically cohesive theologies, what theological lessons can be learned from the processes of disruption, negotiation, and

\(^{39}\) See Jieren Li, “In Search of the Via Media Between Christ and Marx: A Study of Bishop Ding Guangxun’s Contextual Theology,” Phd diss. (Lund University, 2008).

shifting they undergo? In other words, what can we learn from Zhao, Ding and Ni through the lens of a lived theology framed by migration?

**Modern Chinese theologies as expressions of Christ-like formation in process**

By centering migration experiences of movement and disruption in Zhao’s, Ding’s, and Ni’s theologies, new windows are opened into the ways God might have formed Christ-likeness through each person’s changing contexts. Their theologies are not static expressions of God limited to one particular time and place. Rather, they are complex negotiations that express a dynamic dialogue and changing relationship with a timeless and unchanging God embedded in an ever-shifting creation. By examining the theologies of Zhao, Ding, and Ni as lived theologies rendered by God’s abductive presence and boundary crossing experiences, the implications of their theological conclusions can be utilized to illuminate pathways for resolving some of the challenges raised in the triple negotiation faced by my informants: how to discern the presence of God, how to live out God’s universal expectations in particular situations, and how to balance belonging and community between heaven and earth. Zhao, Ding, and Ni have all struggled with such questions. While it may be tempting to take their most influential answers as most credible or to take their final words as most authoritative, the perspective of lived theology demands the entire breadth and depth of their processing be considered together, contradictions and all. It is in their lifelong dialogues and negotiations with God, church, and the world that other Christians might find God similarly at work in their lives.

What follows are three summaries highlighting specific dimensions of each theologian’s work that resonates most closely with the categories of the Christ-like formation framework.
advanced in this study’s conclusions: abductive Christology, adaptive missiology, and participatory ecclesiology. First, Zhao’s Christology and the bi-directional process of Christian formation he advocates reflects an oscillation between the divine and human natures of Christ. Zhao’s conclusions are best seen as a product of his own theological journey between his early years at Yanjing University and his post-war years. Second, Ding’s life of ministry points to an adaptive missiology that challenges Christians to make dramatic shifts in word and deed in response to changing situations while still rooted in a cosmic Christ. This is reflected in Ding’s pivot from ecumenical work around the world to the specific demands of rebuilding the institutional church in Post-Mao China. Finally, Ni’s pneumological anthropology and family-based ecclesiology argue for a sense of spiritual belonging that is entirely dependent upon God while simultaneously interdependent with the life of a local community. Ni’s theological anthropology is not only a product of Keswick influences, but also of his struggles with health and church leadership early in his ministry. Ni’s ecclesial vision also shifts and turns throughout his life as he negotiates a biblical basis for his contextual responses, balancing particular belonging for a global mission.

Before examining each theologian individually, it will be helpful to frame Zhao’s, Ding’s, and Ni’s theologies within some standardized templates as starting points for charting their negotiations. To this end, I rely on Alexander Chow’s analysis of Zhao, Ding, and Ni as contextual forms of Chinese theology built upon resonant conceptions of sin, synthesis, and union. Building on the theological typologies of Justo Gonzalez, Stephan Bevans, and Roger

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41 See Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Chow argues these three concepts are fundamental to Chinese contextual theologies because of China’s religio-cultural heritage. Chinese religiosity has long been
Schroeder, Chow argues Zhao’s, Ding’s, and Ni’s theologies can be understood as contextual exemplars of three theological types, each formed by the unique social and cultural conditions of China’s dual enlightenments.42 First, Chow identities Ni’s theology as an example of a Type A theology sourced to Tertullian, “a law-oriented theology that emphasizes the havoc in this world caused by the sin of the first humans. The only solution is the blood sacrifice of God’s Son as a penal substitution for the world. The entire human race will face judgment at the eschaton and progress to either eternal damnation or eternal bliss based on how they have responded to God’s solution.”43 Second, Chow associates the early theology of Zhao with a Type B theology drawn from Origen, which believes, “While the physical order is the result of the first pure intellects’ sin, when God’s divine purposes are fulfilled, a universal restoration will occur and the material world will cease to exist. This fundamental optimism toward the fate of the physical world argues that Christ’s main salvific role has been to illuminate and to teach, calling all the cosmos back to its original intellectual reality.”44 Lastly, Chow assigns Ding a Type C theology built on the foundations of Irenaeus of Lyon that argues, “From creation on, God has had specific goals that have not been abandoned despite the presence of sin. The cosmos was oriented toward various forms of self-cultivation to overcome human weakness (sin), align with the rhythms of the universe (synthesis), and attain unity with the transcendent (union).” Despite this common ground, however, Chow astutely recognizes Chinese Christian theologies have diverged in their interpretations of these concepts because each has inherited different frameworks from Christian theologies. As a result, Chow argues there are different types of Chinese theologies built from different conceptions of sin, synergy, and union.

42 Chow categorizes the May 4th and New Culture Movements of the 1910s to the early 1930s as the first Chinese enlightenment and the Economic Reform Era of the 1980s to the early 2000s as the second Chinese enlightenment.


created originally perfect, though it is unfinished and continues to grow and develop... The work of Christ, then, is primarily victory over the powers of darkness through recapitulation—he became a new head over a new humanity.”

Chow argues the theologies of Zhao, Ding, and Ni inherit and adapt these three theological types as frames for their conceptions of sin, salvation, and synthesis within the context of modern China’s unique sociocultural conditions to produce three different forms of Chinese contextual theologies. While these typologies heuristically capture important elements of each theologians’ life and work, they can also have the unintended effect of isolating them from one another as competing visions. Chow readily acknowledges the presence of all three theological types in various parts of each theologian’s worldview. For example, Chow identifies strains of Type B theology in Ni’s soteriology and ecclesiology. While classifying Zhao’s early ministry and writings as Type B theology, he also acknowledges Zhao’s mature works are much more resonant with Type C. Chow’s identification of Ding as a Type C theologian is derived largely from Ding’s ministry during post-Maoist economic reform period with little reference to the evangelical tone of Ding’s earlier ecumenical work.

By affirming the contextual nature of all theologies, Chow recognizes all three theological types are present in Zhao, Ding and Ni, but he does not address questions of why or how these three types interact and relate in their individual Christian formation. When framed with a process-dialogue conception of migration, a new picture can be developed. The

45 Chow, Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment, 10.
46 Chow, Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment, 61.
47 Chow, Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment, 84-85.
historical disruptions and theological negotiations summarized above become signs of God’s abductive presence at work. Zhao, Ding and Ni are each drawn away from their theological certainties and pushed across boundaries, facing new situations and context that demand their theologies be renegotiated. In each new place, they must reframe past beliefs and values in dialogue with their understanding of God’s nature and plan for creation.

Seen from this perspective, experiments with different Christological, missiological, and ecclesial types are fundamental to Christ-like formation. Zhao’s, Ding’s, and Ni’s lives should not be read as searches for a single correct theological system. They are, instead, lived processes of dialogue that form Christ-likeness. Elements of different theological types and systems act as tools for molding and shaping emotions, beliefs, embodiments, and discourses to reflect Christ in diverse situations and contexts. All of this reinforces the idea that lived theologies are fluid processes of becoming full of tensions and contradictions that must be understood within their particular contexts. It is through this lens of process and migration that Zhao’s Christology, Ding’s missiology, and Ni’s anthropology and ecclesiology are examined and applied as lived theologies relevant to my informants’ experiences.

Zhao Zichen’s Christology and bi-directional movement for Christ-like formation

One of the themes my informants struggled with was how to recognize and respond to God’s presence in their everyday life. In a secular age that rejects transcendent relations, learning to become sensitive to God’s spirit is a matter of selective re-enchantment. For a Christian committed to a real and vibrant relationship with God, it is also a matter of discipleship and Christ-like formation. With this end in mind, this section considers how Zhao
Zichen’s Christologically grounded conception of discipleship emerges from his lived experiences as an example of lived theology. Like my informants, Zhao too had to reconsider what Christ’s presence meant for Christian life as his life situations changed.

As Chow himself acknowledges, to identify Zhao as a Type B theologian is only one half of Zhao’s larger theological migration. In the years following his imprisonment by the Japanese, Zhao’s reflections on human sin and God’s salvific action for individuals also resonates with a Type A theology. In his most mature works, we see Zhao forging a Type C theology that attempts to synthesize the human and divine natures of Christ, applied not only to social transformation but also individual. This lifelong process of Christological reflection produces a dynamic conception of Christ-like formation that requires movement between both the divine and human nature of Christ in a fluid process that responds and reshapes the world and the individual. Zhao’s theology and life have been organized in different ways based on various seasons of his life. At the most basic level, scholars agree that early Zhao’s theology differs in emphasis and tone with his later theology after the mid 1930s. Based on this division, Yongtao Chen argues Zhao’s Christology contains two key phases. In his early Christology, Chen believes Zhao confessed a “human-divine” Jesus with an emphasis on Christ’s humanity and its potential for transforming human consciousness and life. In contrast, Zhao’s latter Christology shifts to a “divine-human” Jesus centered on Christ’s otherness and his unique salvific character.48

Based on his analysis of Zhao’s work, Chen argues that piecing these two phases of Zhao’s life together fosters a “Dao Christology” resonant with the traditionally Chinese quest

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for aligning the pathways (Dao 道) of heaven (Tiandao 天道) and humanity (Rendao 人道) in a holistic ethical life that renders peace upon all that is under heaven.⁴⁹ Chen emphasizes, “A practical Christology must contain the ethical dimension of Christology. It demands not only that believers talk about Christ, but also follow him in wholeness of their life. By following Christ, the Chinese church, with its rich ethical nourishment in Chinese culture, can bring about many Jesus-like or Christ-like Christians. They are new creatures who can make the Kingdom of God come, the will of God be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”⁵⁰ Relying primarily on Chen’s analysis, this section will highlight the ways in which Zhao’s life and theological evolution reflects this very process of Christ-like formation.

Zhao’s early Christology is deeply influenced by liberal protestant theologies and the social gospel. He expanded Schleiermacher’s conception of Jesus’ God-consciousness to social-cultural proportions capable not only of transforming humanity but also of rendering national salvation for China. This belief is summed up in Zhao’s early hope in “saving the nation through personality” (renge jiuguo 人格救国).⁵¹ The key term in this concept is personality, or renge, which can also be translated as human character or nature. In 1925, Zhao defined this term as “self-awareness in the present dynamic, an existence of direct comprehension that will go freely ahead and an impulse of self-innovation. Our human personalities are revealed in the


dynamic of our lives.”\(^\text{52}\) In other words, human nature is at once both unchanging in its vast potential and yet always changing in its movement toward fulfillment. Based on this sense of personality, Zhao argues that “God and human beings share the same nature” (Shen Ren Tongxin 神人同性). Human beings are extensions of God, made in God’s image with the potential to embody the very traits that make God perfect.\(^\text{53}\) Christologically, Zhao believes Jesus is the perfect embodiment of God’s nature in human flesh.

Zhao advocated that Jesus Christ’s work of salvation could be understood through a lens of “personalism” (renge zhuyi 人格主意) and Father-ism (difuzhuyi 蒂父主意).\(^\text{54}\) Jesus Christ is the perfect personality, complete in essence with the father and therefore showing a way for all humanity to follow in self-cultivation.

What the world needs is God; because he is the great source of all ethics, morals, sacrifice, and service. What our Chinese Christians need is God; we also deeply believe that what the whole Chinese nation needs is God who has been revealed in Jesus’ personality and life... God in whom Jesus believed, the understanding of the relation between Heaven and man which Jesus made clear to all, and Jesus’ personality that is totally beautiful and totally good, all are new wineskins which are needed by today’s people.\(^\text{55}\)

The practical program for discipleship that emerges from Zhao’s early Christology can be summed up in “being with Jesus to become Jesus” (yu Yesu yitong zuo Yesu 与耶稣一同作耶稣).\(^\text{56}\) This optimistic and humanistic Christology emphasizes human capacity to attain Christ-

\(^{52}\) Yongtao Chen, *The Chinese Christology of T.C. Chao*, 87.


likeness because of our shared humanity with Christ. Self-cultivation is forming our personalities to reflect Christ’s. Moreover, this early Christology is linked directly to social transformation. Echoing Confucian beliefs and values, Zhao believed that as individuals strengthen their inner Christ-likeness, an outward life of exemplary ethics will compel others to right living that expands into a just society. Humanity and God collaborate to build God’s reign.57

The major event that divides Zhao’s early and latter Christologies is his 1941 imprisonment by Japanese military during the Sino-Japanese war. Zhao’s later Christology emphasizes Christ’s divinity and otherness, giving greater attention to God’s divine action and revelation over that of human understanding. The shift is noticeable in two versions of Zhao’s article, “My Religious Experience.”58 The 1923 first edition contains an optimistic sense that human experience is a reliable means to knowing God and that human reason and effort could foster Christ-likeness. In a later edition, published some ten years later, Zhao begins noting the important role of God’s revelation and the limits of human experience and reason. This epistemological shift is due in part to Zhao’s increased interest in Karl Barth, evidenced in Zhao’s published study of Barth in 1939. In 1948, Zhao publishes a series of reflections on his prison experience that mark a clear departure from his earlier theological orientations.

The fruit of Zhao’s struggles to synthesize his theological shifts can be summed up in his soteriological conceptions of Chengzhilun 成指伦, “the completion of [God’s] will,” and

57 See Starr, Chinese Theology, 71-99, for a textual analysis of Zhao’s “Life of Jesus.” Starr presents this indigenized biography of Jesus is a product of Zhao’s theological acuteness embedded in a Chinese cultural fluency that seamlessly merges Chinese social-spiritual concerns with the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life.

Tongyilun 同一伦, a “bi-directional movement of union/identification.” From the mid 1930s to 1940s, Zhao came to recognize the depth of human sin. As a result, he began to emphasize that the fulfillment of God’s will for humanity was something only Jesus could do. Zhao’s conception of Chengzhilun argues that Jesus Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection make up the whole of God’s will to save humanity. 59 Human willpower cannot accomplish salvation. It is only by the will of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. What differentiates Zhao’s position from traditional doctrines of justification is his emphasis on the will of God incarnated in the will of Jesus: an example of a person with God’s perfected ethic embodied in a perfect disciplined life. While God’s grace remains the sole source of salvation, it is manifest in a perfect will that humanity can nonetheless pursue. This is Zhao’s attempt to contextualize Christian truth of justification by faith with a Chinese cultural life that has long been concerned with the pursuit of moral and ethical self-cultivation.

If Chengzhilun provides a foundation for understanding justification, Tongyilun provides a means to pursue sanctification. Tongyilun can also be translated as, “a discourse of unification,” signaling a holistic conception of Christology and soteriology that emphasizes unity with Christ as a joining of wills. To put one’s faith in God is not just submitting one’s will to God, but of joining with the divine will embodied in Jesus. 60 Zhao renders this process as “Relying on faith to become upright” (Yixin Weizhi 以信为直). 61 In this arrangement, we see


Zhao’s earlier emphasis on humanity’s pursuit of righteousness joined with a new dependence on faith. This process of unifying one’s will with God also builds upon traditional Chinese religiosities that emphasize the unity of heaven and humanity (Tianren Heyi 天人合一) and the cultivation of outward kingliness with inward holiness (Waiwang Neishen 外王内圣). Zhao’s idea of Christ-like formation unites humanity’s will with God’s so that our lives might become saturated with the same ethical discipline and wisdom as Jesus’s.

Chen calls Tongyilun a “bi-directional movement of union/identification” because this process requires both God’s divine movement toward humanity as well as humanity’s faithful movement toward God. God’s love provides humanity a salvific grace through Christ’s life, but God’s justice also requires humanity to strive and live out God’s will as Jesus did. Grace moving from God to humanity fosters an equal response of humanity’s movement toward God through just and ethical living. In this arrangement, Jesus Christ is not simply a bridge to salvation, but a bridge that allows human will and personality to meet, struggle, and be transformed by God’s perfect of love and justice. Zhao’s Christology and soteriology are, therefore, closely linked to his theological anthropology and missiology. While Zhao’s theological means may have shifted throughout his life, his ends remained ever true to the formation of a truly Christ-like (jiduhua 基督化) community that was resonant with Chinese culture yet capable of transforming both individual and society.

What makes this bi-directional process a product of lived theology can be attested by Zhao’s own journey. In his early life, Zhao moved upward by pursuing God from a human-centric posture emphasizing humanity’s cooperation with divinity to bring about salvific transformation. After the disruptive experiences of war and imprisonment, Zhao recognizes
the absolute necessity of God’s downward movement toward humanity. This recognition does not, however, lead Zhao to abandon his earlier framing of Christian faith as a process of human striving for Godly perfection (what Chow identifies as a Type B theology). Rather, Zhao adopts elements of a Type A theology focused on human sin and God’s to amend his earlier commitments, producing a nuanced Type C theology striving for the unity of divine and human wills. Zhao never gives us on the possibility of humanity and God sharing something of the same nature, but he does ground the possibility of cultivating such a nature upon God’s saving grace alone. Without disruption and negotiation, this more holistic theology could not emerge. Zhao’s pioneering Chinese Christology serves as a foundation for many later Chinese theologians in pursuit of a “Cosmic Christ” resonant and present in all cultures.62

Ding Guangxun’s adaptive missiology

Building on Zhao’s definition of Christ-likeness as a formation of unity with God’s will embodied in Christian life, one ponders how such a will ought to be applied to a world that is always changing. This is also the challenge my informants face as they question how their faith and relationship with God ought to be translated into a concrete ethical and moral foundation for life that is consistent with God’s universal expectations while appropriate to unique situations. This question is especially acute in those who have lived in multiple cultural contexts. While God’s will for humanity and creation may remain forever unchanged, the settings in which humanity struggles and thrives are as numerous as the stars. To this end, the

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ministry and missiology of Ding Guangxun provides one lived example of how faith in a universal Christ can translate into very different forms of ministry and mission depending on the kinds of boundaries that are crossed and the subsequent dwellings that are built.

Ding’s lived theology, like Zhao’s, is a lifelong process of negotiation that must be seen as a whole if missiological truths are to be gleaned. His theology is rarely presented systematically. It is more often articulated in response to shifting situations and contexts, a missiology forged by praxis. Chow identifies Ding’s theology as a Type C theology, but when we look at Ding’s theological journey as a whole, his early years of ecumenical work signals an oscillation between Types A and B theologies. His Type A inclinations, fostered by his focus on evangelistic mission and shaped by his pastoral and ecumenical work with student fellowships around the world, is in constant conversation with his Type B impulses, instilled through his Anglican education, his work with the YMCA, and his studies at Union Theological Seminary. It is only in the intensely focused context of rebuilding the institutional Chinese church in a Communist context that Ding fully articulates a Type C theology. As both a churchman and a statesman, Ding is best understood as a practical-public theologian whose Christian identity and religiosity emerges out of the expansive possibilities of his ecumenical friendships foiled against the crucible of church-state relations in the People’s Republic of China. The result of this unique pilgrimage is an adaptive missiology embodied in what Ding often called “managing the church well.” His vision for the Chinese church was to move beyond the “three-self” principles to a “three-well” model from which Chinese Christians could be well-governed, well-supported,
and well-propagated. Ding’s lived theology sprang from this commitment to the church. It was only in Ding’s late years that the doctrinal concerns addressed in his “theological reconstruction” became a priority.

Ding’s adaptive missiology is grounded in a commitment to the universal character of the Cosmic Christ and animated by three traits: God’s love and compassion for all, the unity of creation and redemption in God’s mission, and a priority to foster the church’s work as witness to God’s reign. These traits are discernable motivators of Ding’s ministry throughout his life, though they take on very different forms dependent on context. In his early years of ministry in Shanghai’s international quarter and student ministries all over the world, Ding’s cosmopolitan sensibilities were oriented toward articulating the universal base of Christian faith that was applicable to the diversity of the world. In 1940, while serving in one of wartime Shanghai’s international churches, Ding proclaims, “Yes, only by participating in the great work of ‘building up the kingdom of God on earth’ can we overcome fear. Great love drives out fear.” These pastoral sensibilities were being shaped alongside a growing sociopolitical consciousness via Ding’s work with the YMCA where he was mentored by Wu Yaozhong, the future architect of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement for the new People’s Republic.

This conception of God’s love and compassion as both personal and political was expanded in Ding’s discipleship and missions during his international ministries with university

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64 Ng, Chinese Christianity, 226.

students. For example, in 1947 Ding extols Canadian university students to reflect well on the purpose of their education through the lens of Christian witness and vocation. During this same period, Ding reflects critically on the nature of missions from both sociopolitical and theological perspectives. While critical of the colonial nature of Western missionary work around the world, Ding simultaneously affirms the paramount importance of mission in God’s plan:

Missionary work among other peoples will enable us to gain a fuller understanding of the gospel itself. It is only in evangelizing that you really start to evangelize yourself. In the gospel of Christ there is such a deep, unplumbed and hidden treasure that it cannot be fully explored by anything less than the human race. We shall not know the eminence of the gospel, and our worship is bound to be incomplete, until it comes to include all for whom it was meant. It will take the whole of humanity to embody the Christ that is yet to be and to bring to full expression the unsearchable riches of Christ. We might very well remind ourselves that the New Testament, which is so essential to our faith, has come to be written only as a result of the missionary work of the apostolic church.

This extended excerpt, written in 1948, features some of Ding’s first recorded inclinations toward framing mission and evangelism as a cosmic redemption that brings wholeness to humanity and creation. Spreading the gospel is a matter of redeeming everyone involved, of all peoples and societies mutually transformed. Ding’s social critique and theological convictions combine in a missional posture of accompaniment and witness over domination, a church that must win hearts by example.

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the principles that Ding expounds in his ecumenical ministry are put to the test. He is faced with a new situation that


67 Ting, “God Calls Us to Serve” in God is Love, 207.
demands a focused and nuanced theological response. Returning to a new China in 1951, Ding’s ministry shifts gears. Instead of emphasizing the global nature of God’s mission in universities and ecumenical institutions around the world, he must now apply it to the very specific context of China’s new national socialist project. The theological commitments Ding fostered abroad must be applied to a genuine partnership with an atheist communist party toward realizing the reign of God in a Godless state, as perilous a task as any one can imagine.

Ding is committed to the idea that the Chinese church must play a very specific and practical role in God’s greater mission of love and reconciliation. To do so, he must balance the unique vocation of Christian mission with loyalty to a political system that is inherently anti-Christian. This dual sentiment is illustrated in two of Ding’s most famous essays from the early years of the People’s Republic, “Why Must We Be Preachers?” and “On Christian Theism.” In the former, Ding offers a rich theological apology for why the church can still support China’s newly established atheist nation state. He is unequivocal on the gospel’s truth and the preacher’s call to proclaim it but is also clear that the gospel is not an exclusive truth that denies the truth that is evident in the progress of a nation and development for its people. As a result, preachers are called to steward God’s gospel truth alongside the state’s work for the people. Doing so provides witness to God’s love for all peoples.

This confession was put to the test during the anti-rightist movements of the late 1950s when many Christians were accused of disloyalty to the party. This time, Ding comes to the defense of the church. In “On Christian Theism,” Ding makes his case for the church to a

suspicious state by dissolving the idealist-materialist duality that divides them. He deconstructs preconceived definitions of religion and state, contextualizing both concepts as a sociohistorical phenomenon that cannot be reified as either an opiate of the masses or the keeper of all truths. In this framing, Christian truth can be compatible with socialist truth without one dominating the other because their differences offer mutually beneficial insights. Ding highlights Christianity’s analysis of human sin as an important compliment to Marxist social analysis while also being frank about the church’s failings to embody its redemptive truth.69

While the two essays noted above address two different audiences, they share a common missiological ends. Building on theological belief that God’s redemptive plan calls for the mutual transformation of all peoples, Ding embraces the shared values he perceives between Christian and socialist visions. With them, he calls the church to be a witness to the state and the state to embrace the value of the church. In “Christian Theism’s” closing lines, Ding admonishes,

The building of the church in a socialist country is a task that has never been faced by the church in all the first nineteen centuries of church history. In self-government, self-support, and self-propagation we face a difficult responsibility. Why does God give this responsibility to us and not to someone else? Is it because we are better? No. God has his own purpose and it is one which we cannot fathom. But at least we know, just because our Chinese church is a weak minority group, that we can demonstrate how the church of God in weakness can show strength and we can show the workings of God’s might and thus give glory to God. God has indeed chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame those that are wise and the weak things to put to shame those that are strong. This shows that the strength is from God and not from ourselves.70


This statement concisely expresses Ding’s dual priorities as a Christian and Chinese citizen committed to both church and nation, mindful of their differences and yet invested in their collaboration. This is Ding’s specific application of his universal missiological impulse.

Ding’s hope for a fruitful church-state collaboration dies during the Cultural Revolution when churches are shuttered. But the opportunity for resurrection emerges with the Economic Reform and Opening Up period when Ding is given the responsibility to reconstruct the church in a new era of planned capitalism intermingled with socialist values. His social and ecumenical leanings lead him to prioritize the reconstruction of the Chinese church’s presence in society, both locally and globally, and reconciling fissures within the Chinese church (with conservative house churches), the state, and the world church. During this period, Ding refers often to the work of reconciliation as a primary metaphor for Christian mission. The basis for this reconciliation is God’s universal love—a love that extends to China’s communist regime as much as it does the world church.

As the Chinese church re-establishes links with other Christian communions around the world, Ding’s writings recapture the ecumenical spirit of his earlier years. His speeches in Prague, Geneva, and London, affirm the unique universality of the church’s holiness and mission. At the same time, he continues pursuing the realization of the Chinese church’s

71 See K.H. Ting, “Religion and Socialism: Can They Co-exist?,” in God is Love, 526-543. Co-authored with Wang Weifan, this essay submits six seven principles for how the church ought to work side by side with socialist state. To better understand Ding’s role as statesman and representative of the church to the Communist Party and vice versa, see also Ding’s commentary on China’s new constitution (“The Church and China’s New Constitution,” 544-546) and Document 19 (“The Church and State,” 562-575).

72 “That Love Might Abound,” was given in 1961 in Bethlehem Chapel, Prague, “The Truth of the Resurrection, was given in Lambeth Palace Chapel, London, in 1982, and” “The Universality of the Church,” was given in 1983 at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva. All three addresses can be found in Wickeri, A Chinese Contribution to Ecumenical Theology, 41-43, 56-61.
particular mission in the context of the People’s Republic. At Nanjing Union Seminary’s reopening ceremonies, Ding invokes the image of Mary as a symbol of service compelled by God’s love and exhorts cooperation with state authorities along the same theological basis as years past: the church as witness to God’s love and service to all. In the preface of the newly established *Chinese Theological Review* in 1985, Ding attempts to bridge the growing divide between conservative family churches refusing registration with government authorities and the re-established church he is leading by appealing to their shared foundations.

It is during these later years when Ding’s ministry and mission gives way to a more clearly articulated theology. Ding’s writings have always been for specific contexts with emphases that correspond to the audience. During the reform era, however, one finds a synthesis of earlier periods of life joined with a more confident theological voice. Drawing from liberation and process theologies, Ding finds new language for the theological inclinations he has put into practice for years. He begins to regularly cite Alfred North Whitehead and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to refine theological themes his writings have long evidenced: the Cosmic Christ’s desire to reconcile all things through God’s love by working through every part of creation. In Ding’s particular context, this controversially included the communist party.


75 See Mikka Ruokanen, “K. H. Ting’s Contribution to the Contextualization of Christianity in China,” *Modern Theology* 25, no. 1 (2009): 107-122. Because Ding did not write his theology in a systematic way, it can be hard to compose a cohesive picture of how his various influences fit together. Ruokanen’s review serves as a strong introduction for framing Ding’s theology from a more holistic standpoint.
As Ding’s reputation as China’s elder Christian statesman rises, he is able to hone and deploy his theological convictions with greater specificity. Speaking to the Chinese seminarians in 1988, Ding commits to God’s love as the defining characteristic of Christian mission, one that bears witness over and against the Marxist class struggle that ravaged China in previous decades.76 Speaking to the British in 1991, he expounds on the many ways a cosmic Christology resonates with both traditional Chinese culture and China’s contemporary moment with a strong affinity for the government’s socialist commitments.77 Ding’s effectiveness at rebuilding the institutional Chinese church and his witness to the party and the world church appear to give Ding a growing confidence in his theology as he articulates it with greater and greater sophistication. It is from this position of confidence that Ding may have initiated his controversial “theological reconstruction” movement in the last decade of his lifetime, which sought to remove fundamentalist leanings from Chinese theological education in favor or beliefs more resonant with his own positions.

Ding is an important example of lived theology as a process of negotiation and emergence. In his youth, he was a cosmopolitan and prominent ecumenist working for the world church with a global missional outlook. In the 1950s, Ding had to adapt his broader missiology to context-specific circumstances of the new Chinese nation state under communist rule. And in the 1980s, as China began to reintegrate with the world, Ding had to chart a via media between the Chinese church’s global and particular belonging. In this way, Ding’s life


also serves as a compelling case study in adaptive missiology, one that prioritizes dialectic tensions and praxis across different situations over systematic coherence. As Ding’s ministry crossed cultural and sociopolitical boundaries, his theological beliefs and values had to be negotiated with different audiences. All three theological types played a role in his decisions, even as they ultimately settled in the Type C theology highlighted by Chow. This resulted in a ministry may seem contradictory and hypocritical at times, but an examination of his theological writings show that these choices were made with a consistent missiological orientation, a particular expression of a universal vision.

**Ni Tuosheng’s pneumological anthropology and family ecclesiology**

Ni distinguishes himself from Zhao and Ding for numerous reasons. Among them includes his rejection of the social gospel preached by establishment missionaries and his evangelical priorities to base Christian life in biblical narrative rather than Chinese culture. But Ni should not be so easily boxed in. His critical impulse to break away from foreign denominationalism and develop new theological frameworks is no different than Zhao’s and Ding’s. Ni’s theological anthropology and ecclesiology are heavily shaded by an eschatology that emphasizes a Christian’s distinctive belonging to God. This belonging must saturate the Christian’s very being and, by extension, foster an alternative family community prepared for God’s return. Chow labels Ni a Type A theologian for his views on sin, salvation, and atonement. When Ni’s anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology are integrated into his theological worldview, however, signs of Type B and C theologies are also present. Just like
Zhao and Ding, Ni’s theological convictions are products of negotiation, working through all three types of theology in response to boundary crossings and disruptions.

This section reviews the development Ni’s theology in relationship to my informants’ negotiation of belonging between heaven and earth. It approaches Ni’s negotiation as similar to my informants’ struggle to frame their own sense of Christian belonging to a world church that is not amenable to Chinese culture or state, as Zhao or Ding claimed, but separate. Ni’s conceptions of the image and mission of God dictate his programs for individual and ecclesial formation. His conception of the “spiritual man” emphasizes a process of transformation through which the soul belongs wholly to God, led by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the church is similarly called to be a community that is set apart and bound to heaven even as it sojourns on earth. The tension between belonging to both heaven and earth as both an individual and as a community is worked out in different ways throughout Ni’s life and ministry.

First, Ni’s theological anthropology contains a distinctly pneumological bent that bridges Type A and Type C theologies. His adherence to traditional conceptions of atonement and salvation from sin align with Type A theology but his emphasis on Christian life led by a form of union with the Holy Spirit’s will resonates with Type C. Ni advocated a tripartite division between soul, spirit, and body.\(^78\) The relationships between these three elements guide his conception of Christian growth. Our spirits contain our connection to God while our bodies are grounded in the created world. The soul is the seat of human consciousness and emotion, influenced by both body and spirit. In Ni’s conception of Christian formation, God’s spirit must

reign sovereign over our souls through our spirit. Humanity contains an inherent God-consciousness embedded in their spirits, bearers of God’s image. But our souls are unable to realize this spiritual power without God’s intervention. The process of realizing this involves an embrace of the cross, emulating Christ’s own suffering and death to attain a spiritual resurrection. To become Christ-like, the Christian must bear their cross daily. The persecutions and difficulties we face are God’s means of forming individuals into God’s image. This disciplined process amplifies the spirit’s power to unify God’s will with our own so that we might become a “spiritual man,” capable of living out a “normal Christian life” that abides in God’s spirit.

The season of life that led Ni to these conclusions is important and telling. In 1922, Ni co-founded the Christian Assembly with other like-minded Christians in Fuzhou. In subsequent years, however, Ni’s co-founders found his positions against denominational missionary churches too radical. Ni advocated for a staunch anti-denominational stance. As the Assembly grew in numbers, it came to be accepted by missionary denominations as a partner in ministry and Ni’s anti-establishment position was rejected. Disheartened, Ni left the Fuzhou Assembly in 1924, entering a season of personal struggle to articulate what he so firmly believed to be God given principles of spiritual growth and ecclesiology. 79

For the next four years, Ni was mentored by Margaret Barber and drank deeply of Keswick spirituality. He translated a number of Brethren teachings including Jessie Penn Lewis’s work while also publishing his own thoughts through a freely distributed newsletter.

79 Lian, Redeemed by Fire, 161-163.
Unfortunately, this quest was accompanied by failing health. In 1924, Ni was diagnosed with tuberculosis which eventually brought him near to death. He would continue to struggle physically with the effects of the ailment throughout his life. The mental, spiritual, and physical struggles of this period are reflected in Ni’s beliefs. His personal experiences become the frame through which he sees Christian formation and discipleship. In 1928, Ni publishes his magnum opus, a three-volume treatise entitled *The Spiritual Man.* the text systematically explains Ni’s conceptions of the spirit, soul, and body and the process through which Christian life ought to bring the soul and body under the spirit’s reign. It serves as a foundation for the ends of his ministry: to form a community of spiritual men and women full of God’s spirit.

In order to realize this vision, Ni makes training and writing the priorities of his ministry. Since his passing, many of his lecture and sermon notes have been edited, translated, and published for a global audience. Three texts are quickly examined here to highlight the emphasis Ni gives to the practical nature of his teachings across different situational periods and the consistency of his pneumological anthropology: *Sit Walk Stand, The Normal Christian Life,* and *The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit.*

First, drawn from one of Ni’s earliest lectures given during the height of the Little Flock’s growth in the 1930s, *Sit Walk Stand* provides a concise exposition of Ni’s spiritual program. Utilizing the book of Ephesians as his general framework, Ni summarizes the Christian life as consisting of “…sitting with Christ, walking by him and standing in him. We begin our spiritual life by resting in the finished work of the Lord Jesus. That rest is the source of our strength or a consistent and unfaltering walk in the world. And at the end of a grueling warfare with the

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80 Lian, *Redeemed by Fire,* 165.
hosts of darkness we are found standing with him at last in triumphant possession of the field.\textsuperscript{81} The image of sitting encapsulates dependence on Christ’s grace for salvation, the image of walking is the process of realizing Christ’s will in the world, and the image of standing speaks to overcoming evil. In these early years of the Little Flock’s expansion, simple but actionable teaching such as this provided Ni’s followers a flexible but firm foundation from which to model Christian living that parallels the basic orientation of many of my informants’ desires to rest in God’s peace (to sit) and act as God’s calls (to walk) against the selfish ways of modern Chinese life (to stand).

Second, Ni’s most widely read text, \textit{The Normal Christian Life}, is based on lectures gave in 1938 during and following his visit to Europe.\textsuperscript{82} This context is important because they represent Ni’s teachings articulated for a global audience. The extensive popularity of \textit{The Normal Christian Life} speaks to the resonance of Ni’s desire to identify a set of universal and transcendent principles that could be pursued in all cultural contexts from the Shanghai to London and New York. While Zhao and Ding moved toward the particularity of Chinese Christianity, either by way of traditional cultural or socialist resources, Ni’s international experiences strengthened his confidence in the universality of his beliefs. Based on an exposition of the book of Romans, \textit{The Normal Christian Life} provides more detailed instructions regarding how to realize the spirit-led life God. It can be read as a more detailed account of what it means to “sit” and “walk.” Several essays rely on the metaphor of walking a

\textsuperscript{81} Watchman Nee, \textit{Sit Walk Stand} (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988), 78.

“path of progress” from “knowing” God’s salvific work to “reckoning” and “presenting” ourselves to God for service. Next, the Christian must “walk in the spirit,” a process Ni identifies as involving experiences of both the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "Oh, my friends, I would fain repeat it you a hundred times – The Spirit of God within me is a Person! I am only an earthen vessel, but in that earthen vessel I carry a treasure of unspeakable worth, even the Lord of glory," Ni proclaims.\textsuperscript{83} For Ni, the Holy Spirit is a real presence of God’s self within each and every individual Christian. To walk in the Spirit is to allow Christ, who dwells in you, to direct your every word and deed. This manifesting of God’s spirit within the Christian life is available to all, but it also requires a process of extinguishing the will of the flesh. With the Holy Spirit, “the Life of Christ [is] made available to indwell, recreate, and empower man,” but this requires, “the working of death in the natural man that the indwelling Life may be progressively manifest.”\textsuperscript{84} While Ni’s teachings optimistically embrace the potential of God’s nature at work through humanity, it labels human nature as something that must be overcome rather than celebrated. Oriented toward an international audience, \textit{The Normal Christian Life} made Ni’s teachings more than just a set of doctrines about the Holy Spirit and human nature; it promoted a complete program of spiritual development in accessible language planted in biblical metaphor and tied together with the growing literature of evangelical pietism.

Lastly, \textit{The Breaking of the Outer Man and Release of the Spirit}, is drawn from lectures Ni used to train church leaders in 1948-49.\textsuperscript{85} While consistent with Ni’s overarching program,

\textsuperscript{83} Nee, \textit{The Normal Christian Life}, 141.

\textsuperscript{84} Nee, \textit{The Normal Christian Life}, 211.

the text contains a different emphasis reflective of China’s struggles during the Second Sino-Japanese and Civil Wars. Here, Ni focuses primarily on the Christian call to bear the cross and the supernatural process God leads to break individuals of their earthly will so that God’s spirit might have complete dominion. Here, Ni emphasizes language of the outer and inner man, giving thicker description to the principles laid out in the last chapters of *The Normal Christian Life*. Here Ni emphasizes “the discipline of the Holy Spirit” as central to formation, more than Bible reading, prayer, and worship. The Holy Spirit’s discipline has one goal, to “break the outer man” so that the spirit where Christ dwells can be released. “The treasure is in the earthen vessel. Who needs to see your earthen vessel? The church lacks the treasure, not the earthen vessels... The Lord wants to prepare a way to bring His blessing to the world through those who belong to Him,” Ni admonishes, “This is a way of blessing, but it is also a way stained with blood. Blood must be shed, and wounds are unavoidable... Unless the outer man is broken, there cannot be any spiritual work.” Without such a breaking, Ni believes our work for God will always be mixed with measures of the outer man, motivated by selfishness and fears. Mindful that these lectures are oriented toward church leaders, the ascetic breaking of the human will Ni pushes reads with urgency and heavy handedness.

Recognizing the shifts in emphasis that Ni makes in his teachings dependent on situation also shows how Ni’s pneumological anthropology resonates with my informants’ experiences and expectations of what Christian life entails: the search for a consistent yet situational

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application of universal standards. These three texts show different emphases within a remarkably uniform program of spirituality that Ni preached throughout his life. Out of personal struggle, theological foundations are laid out in The Spiritual Man extend throughout his life’s work. With a keen sensibility for the needs of different audiences at different times, however, Ni’s teachings shift registers. In Sit Walk Stand, Ni provides an everyday framework for Christian life amongst his newly established local churches. Responding to a global audience, The Normal Christian Life, Ni expands this framework in more systematic ways to anchor its universality. While training church leaders during a difficult time of war, Ni’s The Breaking of the Outer Man emphasizes the hard discipline of the Holy Spirit.

Ni’s conception of Christian formation leads to a corresponding ecclesiology that emphasizes a collective belonging to God that is exclusive and separated from the world yet is also grounded in local geography and relationships. The church’s responsibility is to disciple and form all God’s followers into spiritual men and women who can preach and live out God’s word in the world. Ni’s ecclesiology is thus characterized by a unique paradox befitting the metaphor of God’s family. It is both particular, one church to one setting, and yet universal, all under God. Ni’s ecclesiology was also heavily shaped by his eschatology. With an eye toward God’s consummation of creation, the gathering of the faithful remnant out of the hopelessly worldly denominational churches was a priority that must be pursued.

Three distinctive practices of Ni’s ecclesial structure are highlighted here, all of which Ni believed to be a return to the early church’s true form: its practice of “one locality, one church,” its emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, and its ritual of breaking bread together. The principles behind these practices can be found in Ni’s earliest trainings on how to lead local
churches, published as *The Assembly Life* and *Concerning Our Mission*, published in 1938 at the urging of European friends eager to learn more about the Little Flock’s unique congregational life.\(^8^8\)

First, drawn from the early churches featured in the book of Acts and the Epistles, Ni argued for a “one locality, one church” ecclesial structure he would subsequently dub “the Antioch principle.”\(^8^9\) For Ni, the church bridges heaven and earth. From one side, the Holy Spirit animates the entire body of Christ. From the other side, every church is grounded in a particular locality with its unique concerns. Ni’s ecclesiology thus parallels his anthropology in its emphasis on the spirit’s relationship with soul and body. The church’s self-consciousness is grounded in its earthly experiences in a single place, but its will can be directed by the Holy Spirit that is present in all places.

Every local church was responsible for pursuing Christ’s will as a congregation dependent on biblical testimony and collective spiritual practice unencumbered by denominational doctrines and institutional politics. Ni called for a return to a primitivist church that was dependent on God’s spirit to guide the faithful in response to its local concerns rather than depend on outside teachings and structures.\(^9^0\) The anti-establishment spirit of this ecclesiology had the practical effect of leading devout Chinese Christians away from denominational churches into their own homes and other private spaces where they could be


the one true local church of their town or city. If the community grew beyond the size of any one space, members could be divided into smaller meeting points throughout the city. Ni’s focus on a local church’s ties to geography were not, however, in the interests of a contextualized Chinese theology. He did not support an indigenous Chinese church because he emphasized the church universal without regard to nationalities and cultures. Instead, Ni’s convictions were driven by his belief that these ecclesial practices were the most biblical form of congregational life as well as the most efficacious for spiritual growth.

Second, Ni’s churches embraced the “priesthood of all believers” by rejecting the professional pastorate.91 Instead, it was the members of the local church who were expected to serve as deacons and elders of varying degrees based on their spiritual maturity. All members were to play a role in the life of the church.92 This resulted in congregations that were collectively governed along de facto family-like lines where spiritually mature elder brothers and sisters discipled younger siblings reminiscent of traditional Chinese households. In addition, apostles called to teach and preach traveled between local churches to help each church remain biblically grounded and spiritually inspired in their ministries, but these apostles had no direct power over these congregations. Many elder leaders of these local churches and the regional teaching apostles gathered periodically for “Overcomer Conferences” led by Ni. These training conferences, alongside Ni’s many published periodicals and articles, insured a


strong degree of doctrinal unity amid the Little Flock’s decentralized system. The arrangement built a strong foundation for the church’s survival and expansion during the war years.

Third, Ni’s local church instituted a distinctive practice of eucharist with its own unique breaking bread service.93 For Ni, the body of Christ and the breaking of bread was an indispensable metaphor of Christian unity at the center of what might appear to be diverse particularities. To reflect this importance, Ni instituted a special bread breaking service to take place every Sunday evening, set apart from morning worship.94 Official church membership numbers were also based on those who attended this special service instead of Sunday morning service. The service did not have any formal written liturgy but was typically accompanied by songs and prayers of thanksgiving centered on a simple meal shared together. In Ni’s instructions, he prescribes an attitude of reverence focused upon God’s love and admonishes local churches to set aside desires to pray for self-interests or to listen to preaching for knowledge. The table ought to be the focus of the entire service. Ni also emphasizes the elements could be administered by any member of the church and the table was open to all who considered themselves part of the local church regardless of their position within the fellowship.

Ni believed strongly that this bread breaking service ought to be the most important of all the church’s gatherings. More than preaching, bible study, or prayer meetings, breaking bread symbolized the utmost of many of Ni’s theological commitments. First, this was a

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moment in which the true church affirmed its unity with all true Christians throughout the world and history. Each piece of bread, while broken and given to an individual, is connected to a whole. For Ni, the whole is the Holy Spirit that continually binds all Christians together even as the bread is divided and taken individually. Second, the breaking of bread was a superior symbol of Christ’s sacrifice and a reminder to all Christians to be similarly broken so that God’s spirit might fill every soul and God’s will direct every action. Sharing a meal in remembrance of Jesus Christ’s supreme act is thus a weekly act of thanksgiving and joy in response to God’s love and a recommitment to the God’s call to be set apart from the world, awaiting Christ’s return in the same way the first disciples did.

Unlike Ni’s largely consistent stance on spiritual formation, however, Ni’s ecclesiological thought changes dramatically during his ministry. The teachings expounded in Ni’s early years of writing and ministry proved especially fruitful during the Nanjing Decade. During this time, the decentralized system of the Antioch Principle (one church, one locality) and lay leadership was balanced by a strong central system of teaching and training via conferences and literature distribution. In the late 30s, however, a series of events shift Ni’s ecclesial practice from one focused local grounding to missional outreach. First, Ni’s overseas trips in 1937 and 38 expand his conception of God’s work in the world, especially as it related to his dispensational interpretation of the eschaton. He was both inspired by what he sensed to be God’s larger work in the world but was also repulsed by the divisions and factionalism he witnessed between Exclusive and Inclusive Brethren. Second, Ni’s dismissal from leadership of the Shanghai Assembly in 1942, for alleged moral failures and business practices at his brother’s pharmaceutical company, put Ni back into a period of struggle and searching similar to his early
years. During this time, he reconsidered what the mission of the church ought to be. These two personal events took place in a larger context of China at war, a time of instability that made Ni’s locally oriented ecclesiology difficult to hold together. In Ni’s absence, his close associate, Witness Lee, began consolidating influence in the Shanghai Assembly and laying the ground for Ni’s return. When Ni’s leadership was reinstated in 1948, he brought with him a new vision for the Little Flock churches focused on unity and mission over that of diversity and community. This marked a dramatic shift in the Little Flock’s ecclesial practices.

Known as “the Jerusalem Principle,” Ni qualified his original ecclesiology by proclaiming that, while the church is local, the work is regional.\(^{95}\) Taking the image of Jerusalem as the center of God’s missionary work, Ni places greater emphasis on mobilizing the church for mission with a greater urgency to consolidate God’s elect as the end times drew nearer. Earlier, Ni had separated missional and ecclesial labor, focusing his attention on the missional work of teaching and publishing while church affairs of discipleship were entrusted to local leaders. Ni now preached that the church must be fully engaged in mission and that doing so meant unifying authority and resources under a single apostle. This “Renewal of Dedication” and “Handing-Over Movement” effectively made Ni the bishop-like head of the entire Little Flock network. The informal familial-like rankings based on spiritual maturity were institutionalized in an episcopal like structure that led to Ni at the top. The little families of each locale had come together in a larger family in order to actualize the mission of God in China. This missionary zeal was accompanied by militant language, a call to “conquer China for

“Christ” through “evangelism by migration,” admonishing members of the church to move together to new cities and towns to plant new churches.\textsuperscript{96}

Ni’s newly composed ecclesiology began on the eve of Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, requiring Ni to adapt the practice of his Jerusalem Principle in a Maoist socialist setting. Ni was initially amenable to this new reality because he saw his own ecclesial movement as the very embodiment of the Three-Self principles being raised by the Communist Party. In the early years of the PRC, Ni uncharacteristically began using the language of faith and civic duty to encourage his followers to support the new government. He not only signed the Christian Manifesto himself but submitted thousands of signatures from his churches that totaled 17\% of the full list of signatories.\textsuperscript{97} Much of Ni’s maneuvering can be interpreted as an attempt to protect the interests of his church and ministry, including protecting the church’s properties and leaders amidst national collectivization. Communist rule also provided Ni a unique opportunity to expand his missional ambitions, however. Following the expelling of all foreign missionaries in 1951, Ni launched a campaign to “unite the church” by bringing former missionary churches into the fold of the Little Flock movement, expanding their numbers and influence in ways that may not have been possible in the previous regime.\textsuperscript{98} Unfortunately, the Little Flock’s success provoked increased suspicion from government authorities. Ni and many of his senior followers would be imprisoned during the anti-rightist campaigns. The church they

\textsuperscript{96} Lian, \textit{Redeemed by Fire}, 194-197.

\textsuperscript{97} Lee, \textit{Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China}, 85.

\textsuperscript{98} Lee, \textit{Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China}, 87.
led would fracture along political lines with some folding into the larger Three-Self Patriotic Movement and others going underground.

What does Ni’s lived theology say to questions of belonging? Like Zhao and Ding, Ni’s theologies were negotiated in response to his expanding sense of the church as well as the many disruptions of modern Chinese history. Resonate with a Type A theology, Ni planted the source of salvation in Christ alone. His path to spiritual fulfillment, however, signal signs of a Type C theology that emphasizes a form of mystical union with God’s spirit by nature of humanity’s divinely formed mix of spirit, soul, and body. One’s belonging is to God by God’s grace alone, but for that belonging to be realized is a matter of transformation. Ni’s ecclesiological shifts also address many levels of belonging. His staunch anti-denominationalism was an expression of devotion to God over human institutions. His locally rooted ecclesiology a mark of faith in the normativity of scripture over particularity. And yet, in the latter half of his life, Ni’s ecclesial practice is transformed nearly beyond recognition. As his global reputation expands amidst the troubles that plague his homeland, Ni appears to embrace a new missional zeal. Removed from leadership, that zeal then ferments into a reform of the very ecclesial structures he once championed, trading diversity for unity and inward transformation for outward growth. As Ni pursues his mission into the Maoist era, his ecclesial practices even begin to hint at Type B theological optimism. Through all of it, Ni’s sense of belonging is set on an unchanging heaven. But while on earth, he cannot help but change with the ebbs and flow of China and the world.
Modern Chinese theologies as resources for lived Chinese theology of migration

This chapter marks the culmination of a complex chain of methodological pivots and conceptual shifts that bridge sociological observations with theological resources. It is a movement of return to bring the informal insights of my informants’ everyday theological reflections into formal Chinese theological discourses. Inspired by challenges issued toward migration theology to expand its methodological scope and imagination, I frame migrant theology as a process of emergence rendered through movement and boundary crossing. In this orientation, change and movement are a core part of God’s will to disrupt and abduct and form persons of Christ-likeness. Instead of viewing Chinese theologies purely through lenses of typology or practice, a lived theology orientation requires analysis of a theologian’s life journey with a focus on the surprises that have shifted their theological viewpoints. Emphasis is not given to the most systematically coherent nor chronologically conclusive forms of theology articulated, but rather to the process through which these theologies emerge across many situations and contexts. A lived theology of migration seeks to discern God’s formative presence in earthly sojourns that point to the biblically grounded character of God at work in an ever-changing world.

Just as my informants must work through the questions and challenges of liquid religiosity’s triple negotiation, so too have some of China’s most renown theologians. Just as boundary crossings disrupt and expand my informants’ conceptions of God’s presence, ethical living, and Christian belonging, so too have they pushed and prodded Zhao Zichen, Ding Guangxun, and Ni Tuosheng to negotiate their theological beliefs and practices. This chapter has shown how many types of theology have shaped these three theologians’ development,
even if some types appear more dominant or consistent than others. These theological types emerge and disperse in response to the particular challenges in context. Their examples provide resources to imagine anew how God is similarly present with contemporary Chinese Christians, how they are to live, and to whom they should identify with in community (see table 5). What differentiates Zhao, Ding, and Ni from my informants is not their faith nor their relationship with God per say. All of them seek answers to the same set of questions against similar challenges of Chinese culture and modernity in a globalizing world. The difference lays in the rich theological resources Zhao, Ding, and Ni had at their disposal to articulate, test, and rework their faith. As such, this chapter closes by distilling what lessons the lived theologies of Zhao, Ding, and Ni might offer Chinese Christians of the present.

Building on the theological framework of Christ-like formation adopted in the previous chapter, Zhao’s evolving Christology provides a balanced sense of how God’s presence can be both a gift and a pursuit, working together to form disciples in Christ’s image (see table 5). The bi-directional nature of Christ-like formation revealed in Zhao’s life can encourage Chinese Christians to be both open to surprise and diligent in their discipleship. Ding’s ministry overseas and in China reveal the choices that must be considered when adapting one’s theological convictions to a life of mission constrained by multiple social, political, and cultural contingencies. Any attempt to live out a Christian sense of cosmopolitan ethic must account for all of these factors. Ni’s focus on the power that belonging to God as both an individual and as a church challenges Chinese Christians to consider the variety of ways one ought to orient their relationships with one another. For Ni, the spirit that binds us to Christ with the potential of saturating our very will is the same spirit that binds the true church together in both particular
and universal forms. His ecclesiology provides resources for both processing both the inward distinctions of churches as locally grounded family-like communities as well as a larger global family charged with God’s mission. The theological resources Zhao, Ding, and Ni provide are not only products of their formal theological articulations but also embedded in the negotiations they had to undergo throughout their lives.

Table 5: Modern Chinese theological resources for Christ-like formation

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Semiotic Parallels: Theological Foundations</strong></th>
<th><strong>Shifting Methodological Focus &amp; Process</strong></th>
<th><strong>Theological Framework: Christ-like Formation through Boundary Crossing</strong></th>
<th><strong>Resources for Lived Theology in Modern Chinese Theologians</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The surprise of the incarnation as source of theology</td>
<td>Fostering sensitivity to abductive experiences of the real presence of Christ</td>
<td>Abductive Christology: Christ-likeness formed in the individual through surprising experiences of God’s presence</td>
<td>The bi-directional movement of Christological union in Zhao Zichen (T.C. Chao)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discerning general and special revelation in relationship as substance of theology</td>
<td>Constant comparative process between lived experiences and scripture/ tradition</td>
<td>Adaptive Missiology: Negotiation and expression of Christ-like morality and ethics in everyday life</td>
<td>“Managing the church well” - the adaptive missiology of Ding Guangxun (K.H. Ting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing the Image and Mission of God to co-construct grounded critiques of theology</td>
<td>An abductive, constructivist, and critical reflexivity to reform doctrine in light of missional praxis</td>
<td>Participatory Ecclesiology: Co-constructing Christian identity and religiosity in community</td>
<td>The power of the Spirit and the local church – the pneumological anthropology and the family ecclesiology of Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This analysis of Zhao’s, Ding’s, and Ni’s lives and theologies brings a tentative completion the theo-social analysis pursued in this study. It has not only moved from empirical observations to theological reflection but deployed these reflections to discern principles from Chinese theologies that can be applied to the challenges of migration and boundary crossing navigated by my informants. By utilizing semiotic parallels to reframe the triple negotiation’s sociological concerns as theological questions of incarnation, revelation, and the image and mission of God, a pathway is built to glean answers for questions of discipleship and Christ-like formation. By returning to the experiences of Chinese theologians as examples of lived theology, their own processes of negotiating Christ, mission, and church invite contemporary Chinese Christians to discover and wrestle with what God might also be forming in them.
CONCLUSION

Framing a Chinese Christian lived theology of migration and modernity

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.\(^1\)

In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul encourages the faithful to be transformed by the presence of Christ in their midst. Earlier in the passage, he describes the cosmic Christ that has crossed the most significant of boundaries between God and creation to reconcile all.

Characteristic of Christ’s presence is his love which “binds all things together in perfect harmony.” The Chinese bible uses the term “Quan De” (全德) as a translation of “perfect harmony,” which can also be rendered “complete virtue.” This “virtue” is tied to classical Chinese notions of the power that emanates the Dao (道), the force that permeates and holds all of creation together. The passage continues by admonishing its readers to, “Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly.” In Chinese, this word of Christ is none other than the Christ’s “Dao.” At one level, this Dao, like the Greek, Logos, is a metaphysical concept delineating the cosmic order. At another, it is a practical path to be walked in the everyday.

\(^{1}\) Colossians 3:14-17
This study began with an open inquiry into how young adult Chinese Protestants experienced the presence of God amidst their everyday life and in their encounters with difference. The conclusions gathered from this research point to experiences of God’s peace as a multi-faceted starting point for mapping a larger landscape of contemporary faith in action. As such, this Colossians passage serves as a fitting conclusion to this study. These are verses of formation that, in both their English and Chinese translations, point the reader toward the power of Christ’s presence. According to the passage, a peace that rules the heart is a signal of this presence at work. This peace leads the faithful to unity in one body that grows through worship together and a lifestyle that proclaims Christ in both word and deed. The pattern of faith showcased in this passage resonates with the lives and experiences of the young Chinese Protestants I have been so privileged to learn from.

Utilizing a theoretical framework for religious formation grounded in lived religion scholarship for analysis, these experiences of God’s peace were tied with various expressions at different levels of everyday life. At the personal level there are experiences of peace negotiated through personal prayer, bible study, and congregational life. There are also dynamics of ethical self-cultivation negotiated in situational contexts of family, congregations, and business networks across cultural and geographic boundaries. Collectively, there is a distinct sense of familial belonging to God and church that must be worked out amidst the complexities of an interconnected global economy, nationalism, and cultural hybridity. Altogether, the everyday faith of these young Chinese Protestants parallels what Paul proclaims in Colossians: to be filled with Christ’s presence, to become a holy community, and to live their faith fully amidst the complexities of the world they inhabit.
My informants’ pursuit of the Christian life articulated in Colossians also raises questions of how contemporary faith is conceptualized and expressed in a late modern world that is dramatically different from the context in which Paul wrote this letter. For the cohort of Chinese young adults featured in this study, the tension of everyday living among multiple modernities is worked out through a universal sense of Christian faith experienced in diverse expressions. Mindful of modern China’s unique history of struggle with religion’s role in relationship with the nation state, I have argued my informants are negotiating their Christian religiosity and identity through conceptions of selective re-enchantment, everyday cosmopolitanism, and familial belonging. All three are key components of my informants’ religious formation, part of an emerging liquid religiosity that adapts and grounds spiritual experiences in response to the rigid structures and cultural fluidity that make up a late, liquid modernity.

It is upon these findings that this study pivots from the sociological to the theological, endeavoring to discern a lived theology sensitive to the particular context this cohort of young Chinese Protestants inhabit. What role does the universal God revealed in the gospels play in these sociological movements and negotiations? What do these contemporary dynamics of religiosity and identity mean for God’s presence among Christian believers? To explore some possible answers, this study assumes theological knowledge is not only located within systematic inquiries into doctrine, scripture, or tradition but also in experiences of life itself. Like those who pursue theological action research, I too believe that life is “theological all the way through.”

everyday lives as source, substance, and self-critique of theology. This also means that God’s abductive presence is not simply the initiator of my informants’ negotiations and expressions of faith but also its sustainer and guide. The marks of God’s work are not only to be found in the phenomenological interiority of my informants’ lives but also in and through the materiality of the world they engage and the intersubjective spaces between personal relationships.

Drawing from theological ethnography and the metaphor of migration, this study pivots from the empirically descriptive to the theologically explanatory by fostering a systematic application of David Tracy’s analogical imagination. Throughout my fieldwork, described in chapters one through four, I set aside time and space to alternate disciplinary lenses to evaluate my data in relationship with scripture and intercultural theologies articulated in Asian contexts. This oscillation between the empirical and the theological in the early phases of this research prepared me for the larger explanatory shift articulated in latter chapters that tie my articulation of the triple negotiation of liquid religiosity with theological dynamics of Christ-like formation. Using semiotic parallels that link sociological conclusions with the theological foundations of incarnation, revelation, and the image and mission of God, I have sought to bridge the two disciplines in such a way that their distinct logics are maintained even as they intersect and recalibrate one another. The result is a mutual transformation in framework and method. What is sociologically described via a religious formation framework informs the construction of an explanatory theological framework resonant with Christian beliefs and values. A Christ-like formation framework, inspired by these empirical observations, is then applied to traditional theological construction by analyzing the lived theological dimensions of modern Chinese theologians. These Chinese lived theologies provide examples of how God’s
abductive presence might also disrupt and abduct our contemporary lives to deepen and expand our relationship with Christ, the world, and the church.

The arc and conclusions of this study are animated by the metaphor of migration, experiences of boundary crossing and dwelling among difference both big and small. What began as a curiosity to learn more about the differences in my informants’ experiences of faith across geographical and cultural settings became an abductive presence of its own, leading me to shift the context of my study from the Yangzi delta region surrounding Shanghai to the special autonomous region of Hong Kong. My initial interest in how my informants’ relationship with God is experienced in everyday routines became an investigation of how God’s presence is negotiated amidst movement, disruption, and change. In this process, the image of migration expands from a useful analogy for sociological analysis to become a foundational element in Christ-like formation of individuals and the church.

Reflecting on the state of migration and religion studies, Frederiks makes the following observations regarding the intersection between migration, religious studies, and theology:

Globalization and migration have rather profoundly changed the way people perceive, experience, and shape culture and context. Culture and context have more than ever before become fluid, diffused, and hybrid concepts. If the assumption is correct that Christianity needs to be contextualized in order to be relevant and meaningful, theologians in general and missiologists in particular still face a major task in exploring what the terms context and culture mean in our present day and age. This “task” comprises the development of a conceptual and methodological toolbox that enables meaningful reflection on the contextualization processes of the Christian faith, amidst the complex realities that globalization and migration produce, thus attempting to keep the Christian tradition relevant and germane.³

Based on the experiences of crossings and dwellings observed in my informants, I argue that experiences of migration are fundamental for spiritual growth, deepening one’s conceptions of God’s universality alongside the contextually bound particularity of one’s own faith journey. Here, God’s abductive presence is perpetually at work, calling God’s people to cross boundaries for the sake of the individual’s spiritual maturity, the church’s enrichment, and the evangelization of the world. The result is a theology with its source in an encounter with God’s presence that is also thoroughly embodied and embedded in everyday routines in society. This lived theology of migration and boundary crossing is universal in its rootedness in God and yet particular in its unique times and places.

In conclusion, this study contends that boundary crossing experiences are not only foundational to spiritual growth but an intentional part of God’s divine call to both individuals and the church as a whole. Migration experiences are, therefore, not only descriptive of what I have observed in my informants, they are also God’s prescriptive purpose manifested. Peter Phan has recently argued that “outside migration there is no church.”⁴ If the church is to be the center of Christian formation, I extend Phan’s argument to its next logical step. Based on the data collected and analyzed in this study, I argue that “outside of migration there is no sanctification.” In the language of Eastern Orthodox theology and the constructive project of Alexander Chow, I might also argue “outside of migration there is no theosis.”⁵ From this perspective, the dynamics of liquid religiosity observed in my informants can be interpreted as

⁴ Peter Phan, "Church as the Sacrament of God the Migrant." *Religions*, no. 10 (2017): 66-77.

a part of God’s plan to reconcile all things. The triple negotiation my informants pursue as they cross boundaries are marks of a missional formation that expands the universality of Christ while also deepening each particularity. I summarize the complete arc of this theo-social study in table 6, located at the end of this conclusion.

Practical theology, ecclesiology, and world Christianity: A new agenda for theological ethnography and the church in an age of migration

Theology aims to understand God and God’s relationship with humanity and creation. It is inherently normative in its aim: a search for understanding eternal truths. Much of Christian doctrine is grounded in a sense of God’s permanence above and beyond the particularities of space and time. This traditional sense of theology has generally fostered a goal of capturing God’s universal principles in an ordered fashion, often expressed in a cohesive system discerned across history. In contrast, human experience is marked by change: differences in seasons, relationships, and contexts throughout one’s life. The social sciences capture these dynamics in all their complexity. Despite theology’s grand objectives, human beings are constrained by life itself and our perceptions of God’s eternal character are experientially filtered and confined. Experiences of boundary crossing, no matter how small, diversify our experiences and encourage one to reconsider their images of God. This is the church’s intersubjective understanding of God.

Somewhere in between these two poles is the discipline of practical theology, which pursues an understanding of God that is universalistic in principle even as it is experienced differently in everyday life. As Ray Anderson eloquently describes,
What makes theology practical is not the fitting of orthopedic devices to theoretical concepts in order to make them walk. Rather, theology occurs as a divine partner joins us on our walk, stimulating our reflection and inspiring us to recognize the living Word, as happened to the two walking on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter (Luke 24) ... At the center of the discussion of the nature of practical theology is the issue of the relation of theory to praxis. If theory precedes and determines practice, then practice tends to be concerned primarily with methods, techniques and strategies for ministry, lacking theological substance. If practice takes priority over theory, ministry tends to be based on pragmatic results rather than prophetic revelation ... Barth, from the beginning, resisted all attempts to portray theory and praxis in opposition to one another. In his early Church Dogmatics he described any distinction between “theoretical” and “practical” as a “primal lie, which has to be resisted in principle”. The understanding of Christ as the light of life can be understood only as a “theory which has its origin and goal in praxis”6

This pursuit of praxis has developed within practical theology a growing interest in methodologies that can articulate empirical theologies that do not only describe the works of God but also inquire into what the very structures of creation might say about God. It is not enough to just describe heaven (traditional conceptions of theology) or earth (traditional conceptions of empirical social sciences). An empirically oriented practical theology ventures to be both descriptive and explanatory. One of the fastest developing fields of empirical theology is the work commonly associated with theological ethnography and ecclesiology, a movement that has also deeply shaped my theological sensibilities.

A post-secular age that blurs sacred and profane demands theological resources for explaining the difficult relationship between the church’s unremarkable, and sometimes hypocritical, institutional ways and the lofty ideals of spirituality it aspires to. The church is supposed to be the body of Christ on earth, an outpost of God’s spiritual reign in the material

world. Ecclesiology is, therefore, one of the frontlines of empirical theology. Neil Ormerod describes the tension in this way:

There is perhaps a natural reluctance on the part of theologians and ecclesiologists in particular to accept the need to engage with yet another body of theory. It may help to realize that the social sciences themselves have an implicitly theological dimension, though this is not something those sciences themselves are near to accepting. However, unless ecclesiology does so engage it will remain a largely descriptive study and fail to become truly systematic. To draw from an analogy in the physical sciences, imagine if chemistry attempted to classify the elements by reference to their color, hardness and melting points. It might provide an interesting classification scheme, but it would be nothing as compared to a classification by their atomic number. Chemistry only became truly scientific with the discovery of the periodic table. How many of our problems in ecclesiology, for example the relationship and priorities of ‘local’ and ‘universal’ church, arise because our categories are descriptive and not explanatory? Unless we can make the shift, we shall never know.7

It is this challenge that has driven my attempt to not only propose a theo-social method, but to experiment with it from beginning to end, drawing upon a wide range of theoretical and methodological resources to pursue my study of Chinese Protestant experience as theology. The work featured here is, unfortunately, extremely limited in its scale. It focuses primarily on individual experiences with little theological reflection on the implications of liquid religiosity and Christ-like formation for larger questions of ecclesiology. Expanding the scale of this study’s conclusions to encompass greater questions about the nature of the church and its mission remains as a future endeavor to pursue.8 Moreover, because the growth of ecclesiology and theological ethnography has been largely confined to Euro-American contexts, the picture of the concrete church that is being developed is off-balance. Nearly all of the

7 Ormerod, “Ecclesiology and the Social Sciences,” 651.

8 If I were to expand this study toward ecclesial questions, a promising starting point might be found in Pete Ward’s adoption of the liquid metaphor. See Pete Ward, Liquid Church (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), and Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017).
scholars of practical theology cited throughout this project are of European ancestry. With the notable exception of Whitmore’s groundbreaking work, most studies are largely based in North American and European contexts.9

In response, I conclude this study with a call to bring the empirical and explanatory impulse of practical theology and theological ethnography into the equally young and robust field of world Christianity, of which the present study is a humble attempt. Emma Wild-Wood has defined world Christianity in this way:

The study of World Christianity is a synthetic and collective approach to studying Christian peoples, practices, thought and environment across the globe. It attends to diversity and interconnectedness. It often prioritizes marginality (in its various forms). It uses a variety of methods and works across disciplines (drawing particularly, but not exclusively, upon history, theology and ethnography). It is committed to engage with Christians worldwide. It is informed by scholarship in other parts of the globe and is based primarily in the North Atlantic as a corrective to western-centric scholarship.10

World Christianity is thus an inherently multi-disciplinary field where theologians, historians, and social scientists have each contributed to a richer understanding of the world Christian movement.11 Its focus has always been on the experiences of Christianity emerging in the non-

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majority world at the margins of traditional theological discourses, including practical theology. Anthropologists of Christianity are making ethnographic method a mainstay in world Christianity studies, but few have crossed into making explicit theological conclusions. Many theologians are wrestling with the implications of empirical studies for understanding the nature of God’s work in the world, but few have pursued fieldwork to inform their theologies.

The next step in these promising developments is a clearer articulation of the processes from which thick empirical description of the world’s Christian communities can become prescriptive theologies for a world Church. This study argues for the study of migration and boundary crossing as a key concept for deploying theological ethnography in the field of world Christianity, bringing together theological reflection with empirical study of Christian communities undergoing movement and change around the world to both challenge and enrich doing theology in the context of world Christianity, see Peter Phan, “Doing Theology in World Christianity: Different Resources and New Methods.” Journal of World Christianity 1, no. 1 (2008): 27–53.


traditional conceptions of theology. Migration is an ideal frame for analyzing empirical data and human experiences in both sociological and theological registers. To study theology through the lens of migration is to witness how the presence of a universal God abides among movement in and through particularities of human experience.\textsuperscript{14}

Globalization has accelerated migration experiences. Mediated by numerous forms of technology, our experiences of multiple modernities and religiosities are more diverse than ever. Out of these diverse experiences of culture and of God, closely related questions of ethics and community must also be addressed: how does one live together with diverse others in a morally grounded way? This is not only the dream of the cosmopolitan imagination; it is also the ecclesial mission of the church. This calls forth a need for theological doctrines that are simultaneously inclusive in their embrace of diverse human experiences and yet universal in its principles. There must be a clear boundary and yet this boundary ought to be open for others to cross. A global lived theology informed by migration and movement is an inherently cosmopolitan undertaking. This is the challenge of a global church in a pluralistic age.

Qualitative forms of theological inquiry contain transformative potential for theology and ecclesiology precisely because they can assist social scientists and theologians alike in tracing the many stories of the church’s continued expansion. Theological ethnography across multiple cultures and places maps the church’s cycles of autopoiesis. Movements across boundaries are always accompanied by the need for reorientation. These reorientations do not always have to reject the whole of insights or trajectories that came before it. Instead, they can

\textsuperscript{14} See Peter Phan, ed. \textit{Christian Theology in the Age of Migration: Implications for World Christianity} (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).
also adjust to enlarge the range of situations and contexts earlier foundations can address. This is the autopoietic process that ties together the universal with the particular through cycles of boundary crossing and home making. This is how the church is ever changing and yet ever the same. With each cycle, universality is deepened even as particularities are expanded. Each cycle takes the Christian experience of Christ’s incarnation into new places and situations.

How much more can be learned about God’s abductive presence in the world if similar studies were conducted across cultures and contexts? This experiment in theo-social method and theology is thus part of a humble call to world Christianity scholars to consider pursuing more holistic lived theologies that can enrich the Church’s understanding of God’s presence among us and clarify its mission for an increasingly diverse yet fragmented world.
Table 6: Comprehensive survey of theo-social method applied in this study of lived theology in contemporary China

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APPENDIX: Three everyday lives of faith

Before I began my fieldwork in Hong Kong during the month of July 2019, I took a one-week detour in Shanghai to connect with May, Cassi, and Daniel. All three had participated in my journaling and photo voice exercises. During this visit I conducted another series of open-ended interviews, analyzing their perspectives in relationship with the journaling and photography they produced in the four weeks prior to my arrival. In addition, I had the opportunity to participate in short go-alongs, getting to know a bit more about their everyday routines. Despite the brevity of the physical time spent with May, Cassi, and Daniel, our earlier long-distance interviews coupled with the written and visual reflections they shared provide multiple points of data to cross-reference in my analysis.

This appendix provides three narrative accounts of this concentrated period of interaction by highlighting material from the lives of May, Cassi, and Daniel that thicken the relationships I have observed between everyday life and experiences of God’s presence. These case studies of how God’s presence is experienced in everyday life strengthen the argument for the primacy of peace, familial-like belonging, ethical living, and self-cultivation as key traits of Chinese Christian identity and religiosity.

As an “ecclesial devotee,” May’s experiences provide a deeper look at the familial-like bonds that animate Chinese Christian congregational life and its influence on their experiences of God’s presence. The lives of Cassi and Daniel provide different windows into Christian faith that is not as embedded in congregational life. Cassi can be described as “unremarkably faithful.” She carries a real commitment to her faith and attends church and fellowship when
she is able but struggles to embody her faith in the ways she sees in others. Cassi’s experiences reinforced the importance of ethical exemplars in discerning God’s presence when one feels disconnected to God, particularly in workplace setting she spends so much of her daily life. Daniel provides a contrary example to many of my informants. A “critical loner,” Daniel confesses faith in Christianity and seeks to align his life to what he studies and believes. He does not, however, have a congregational life of any sort and rarely identifies publicly as a Christian. Despite this lack of Christian community, my time with Daniel revealed a subtle but deep sense of God’s everyday presence in orienting his desire for personal growth.

**May: A window into the everyday life of an ecclesial devotee**

May’s lifestyle exhibits a passion for scripture and evangelism rooted in a deep love for the church and the close community it fosters. In conversation, May’s concerns generally trended toward even more practical issues of witness, particularly in her workplace. In my last long-distance conversation with May, she had noted,

> I recently took a course [at my fellowship] about faith life in the office. I am finding it hard to apply in my setting. It has some of the passive-aggressive issues we [previously] spoke about. Most people just do as their told and move on. I’m always thinking about engaging my boss with new ideas or feedback when colleagues want nothing to do with it. I think about scripture and how it says no matter what we do we do it for the Lord, not for people. Don’t view yourself as a worker for your boss alone but for God. This isn’t really a problem so much, but I am often wondering how I can integrate life with work.

The subject of Christian witness at work is brought up in nearly every conversation I have with May. She sees her workplace through the lens of Christian mission. Listening to her recount the various tensions she has experienced over the course of her first year working in Shanghai, I realize that some of her struggles are as related to culture as they are to faith. May’s first work
experiences came in the United States, working for a tech start up embedded in a culture of creativity and initiative. Though her new Shanghai workplace may be an international company, all of her colleagues are Chinese. The problems she perceives with the passive-aggressive behaviors of her colleagues may be viewed negatively in her American start-up context but are perfectly normal in Chinese organizational culture.

May is aware that many of the challenges she is facing have as much to do with culture as with faith, but she has not found a way to think clearly between these variables. When attempting to problem solve her work situations, May oscillates between the language and logic of intercultural relations in organizational settings and Christian faith and witness. On the one hand, she is trying to live out what she calls “Christian responsibility,” how to glorify God by showing initiative and responsibility for one’s work. On the other hand, she also recognizes that Chinese culture is not oriented toward these values the same way she experienced them in the United States. May laments, “At my current work people don’t seem to have a lot of initiative. In the U.S. when we faced problems, we’d work on it together and be creative. Here, it feels like people don’t have a lot of direction. Shanghai gives me the impression of leading very simple peaceful lives without a lot of creativity.”

What emerges from this analysis is a question of how May is framing and differentiating Christian witness from the cultural values and norms that accompany American and Chinese organizational cultures. This process is more complex than just comparing and contrasting two contexts. It requires an operation that triangulates two cultural worlds with a Christian faith that is at once beyond and yet also resonant with both of them. Based on my analysis of May’s language, a major part of her struggle at work may be connected to an unconscious connection
between Western communication styles and her theology. She speaks of the sin and the brokenness of humanity as something causing people to push off responsibility and take shortcuts. In the context of the workplace, Christian witness involves ethical living in the form of responsibility, hard work, and initiative – showing others how God’s presence strengthens them to do everything given them to the best of their ability.

The discipleship course on faith in the workplace May notes is one may be part of the reason for this cultural-theological conflation. May says this course is offered often because so many members of the congregation are young adults in the same season as she is. Other courses include classes on theology or evangelism in everyday life. May tells me the content for these discipleship courses come from overseas, noting in particular that the theology lectures are based on the work of professors from a prominent conservative reformed seminary in the United States. If the congregation’s teachings on integrating faith and life are drawn from such sources, then it is also not surprising that some of the values and beliefs that undergird them are reflect Euro-American standpoints.

May’s fellowship is also made up of many returnees from overseas. She estimates 70-80% of the fellowship have likely studied or worked abroad. All of the church’s leaders also have international experience. May shares that she feels lucky to have been introduced to such a congregation with such resources for discipleship and international connections. This makes May’s church more than just an unregistered Chinese house church. It is also a hub in a larger boundary crossing network of Christians. What deeper conversation with May shows is that these communities are not only bridges for Chinese Christians, but also for theological worldviews and value systems embedded in the educational resources and discipleship courses.
For ecclesial devotees like May, the formative impact of congregations such as these is a holism that provides platforms for integrating multiple experiences of culture and church under a perceived universality of God’s reign. Bible studies that emphasize conversation and application are primed spaces for negotiating the tricky questions of everyday life and relationships. Discipleship courses that address particular life situations like forgiveness, parental relations, and workplace witness provide pathways for the values of faith to cross situational boundaries, establishing new ways of viewing the quotidian as spiritual practice.

The realm of spiritual life expands to encompass every relationship. This is the “living” faith May identifies as a real faith – one that permeates all aspects of life. The sacred consciousness that brings an awareness of God’s presence that is fostered in fellowship settings is brought to bear on other settings and situations.

These forms of faith and community strengthens motivations for both inward spiritual growth and outward missional witness and culture change. In her journal entries, May regularly reflects on her behavior at work regarding how to balance her own sense of responsibility and initiative through a Christian worldview. She is seeking to bring to fruition God’s will for a particular way of living and an opportunity for others to join the family of God as sons and daughters; the dual priorities of ethical living and familial relations already at work in so many of my informants.

While May and I’s conversations have exhibited concerns for the outward dimensions of faith in the workplace and the world, her photovoice and journal entries point to the very collective nature of her experiences of God’s presence. In one photograph of church members setting up a small tent under a tree she states, “Every Saturday the brothers and sisters of my
church gather together in the forests of the park for a barbeque. Thank God for creating such natural beauty and for these brother’s and sister’s heart of love and support” (see figure A1).

![Figure A1: Photograph of May's fellowship gathering](image)

The image captures a rather mundane moment, but one May nonetheless sees as evidence of God’s presence in her life. It mirrors the sensibility Norman confessed earlier, that sometimes being with the church, even just watching members of the church go about an activity, is enough to experience a sense of peace and thanksgiving.

Reviewing May’s participant journaling, the synthetic relationship between her relationship with God and her relationship with close friends of the church was even more pronounced. First, May’s style of writing and reflection was expressed in the form of prayers. Her statements are directed toward God, not to herself or to me. Second, May typed out her entries using a phone application that organized personal journal entries. She tells me this allowed her to write/pray during long commutes on the subway to/from work. This allowed
her to make the best use of her time, connecting with the Lord about the things that mattered most to her during what would otherwise be an uneventful commute.

The subject matter May wrote most often about during the four weeks she kept her journal were related to two specific relationships. The first was for a Christian woman struggling with cancer. This woman was not part of May’s congregation but was introduced to them through mutual friends. They were expanding the support network for her as her condition worsened. May’s journal entries are prayers for healing, for support for her family, but also prayers for peace if she passes. This is not an everyday event the way her congregation gathers for picnics in the park. But the way she writes about them exudes the same sense of holy anticipation. In the gathering, God is present, and this is the time to petition not only for what the community is hoping for but also for wisdom to accept what God wants.

In early June, the woman that May and her church had so faithfully visited and cared for passed away. During this time May’s photos and journal entries converge. She shares two photos with me. One at the funeral and the second of a bouquet of flowers from the ceremony. “Our sister in the Lord has been laid to rest because of her cancer,” she writes, “From last August when she was introduced to our church until June, the sisters of our church have visited her in the hospital regularly without ceasing. We read the bible for her, we prayed for her, we cared for her parents, her grandparents, her husband and child. Now she is at rest in the Lord, freed from the burdens of this world. This photo is from her funeral service” (see figure A2).
The time and effort May and her church took to care for this woman and her family also had a direct impact on her own spiritual growth. In her journal entries, May wrestles with scripture passages as she asks what “faith” (Xin 信) really means when facing a situation with little hope of coming to fruition. On the one hand, May expresses her doubts as she sees her sister in Christ’s body grow frailer and weaker with each visit. Before the sister’s passing May wonders, “I suddenly realize I don’t really know what faith means. Does having faith in God insure one will be healed?” On the other hand, she also marvels at the extent to which her church has adopted the entire family of this sick sister. “I realize it is a sort of miracle! In today’s society, who would be willing to make so much time to care so extensively for a sick friend? Who would check in with the doctors so regularly? Who would sit at their bedside and massage their feet? We often pray for miracles, but do we realize that in our everyday lives we are to live and love as Jesus did? Miracles emerge slowly in this way, don’t they? Don’t believe miracles only come on the day she suddenly gets up [healed]. The Holy Spirit wants us to
participate in this work daily, together experiencing the miracle of being God’s body.” After her friend’s passing, May writes, “It’s been two days since she passed, I’ve finally moved from shock to acceptance, and I do believe she is in heaven now in a more perfect home... Yesterday during worship we recited the Apostle’s Creed. When we came to the last two lines, ‘I believe in the resurrection of the dead, in life everlasting,’ I was filled with hope.”

The second relationship that dominates May’s journal is with an old high school friend experiencing a difficult conflict with her parents. May prays regularly for this person, that she would see God’s love for her even if she cannot understand her parents’ actions. In her journal May pens a prayer: “I so desire she comes to know You / You are able to give her unconditional love, / You are able to help her see her own strength, / Open the eyes of her spirit, / Release her from the grip of sin, / Let her no longer be tormented, / and receive true freedom.”

Because this person is not a Christian, May also prays for wisdom regarding the timing and wording of her outreach. She prays for her to come to know the Lord, but is mindful of the language she uses, when to send a text message to follow up, when to give her space. May’s entries read as one side of a partnership between her and God in a shared ministry for this friend. “She is experiencing the burdens of depression,” May writes, “she suspects her parents’ love for her is not real. I will let some time pass before I message her again to check in on how she is doing. Today in our church library, I found this book focused on counseling one through depression. I hope I can gain some insights from it” (see figure A3).
Figure A3: Photograph of May's Christian counseling book

May’s impulse to photograph the book for my project reveals that in this moment she sensed God’s presence with her as she sought to counsel her friend. As May shared in earlier conversations, she views God’s presence as a cumulative experience across multiple situations that ought to align to guide her decision making. In this case, regarding how to best care for her friend.

This series of photos, prayers, and reflections also emphasizes the relational quality of spiritual life for May. Over the course of four weeks, the presence of God is made real for May in her weekly fellowship time with congregation members, in the extended care she gives for a friend’s battle with cancer, and in outreach to another friend struggling with depression and family conflict. In the context of each relational setting, May interrogates her feelings to see what God might be telling her about life as a whole, ponders them in relationship with scriptures and teachings she’s gained from her church discipleship courses and books, and explores how they might be applied in the context of other situations.
It is worth noting that the book featured in the photograph is a translation of *Looking up from the Stubborn Darkness*, by Edward T. Welch, a Christian psychologist. Elsewhere in May’s journal, she also references books by Francis Chan, another prominent evangelical pastor from the United States. Alongside scripture and her discipleship courses, these are the prominent Christian voices that May draws from to orient her everyday sense of God and faith life. The presence of these translated American evangelical texts in the lives of many Chinese Christians is an important phenomenon to track as they are often the very texts that guide one’s everyday sensibilities toward faith, passing along not only Christian principles but also the cultural contexts and assumptions of the American authors.

My time with May in Shanghai is short. As we part ways, I ask her how I can be praying for her in the weeks ahead. True to character, her response is for yet another friend she has been concerned about. This friend recently stopped coming to church because she was struggling with the death of a beloved grandfather. May recalls that this friend had prayed ceaselessly for her grandfather, joining with the church to also pray collectively on a regular basis. He never became a Christian, however, and May’s friend is now trapped in a crisis of faith, struggling with how God could let her grandfather pass without salvation. According to the teachings of her church, he is now suffering in hell. “She has lost her sense of safety (anquan 安全) in God’s love and has become really withdrawn from the congregation. We are all so worried,” May shares. She asks me to pray specifically for the church’s ability to reach out and welcome her back and for her friend’s heart to soften so that she might return.
Cassi: A window into the life of an unremarkably faithful

“You see? This is why in an earlier interview I talked about ‘not being very good’ at being a Christian. I’m not as devout as these two, but I suppose that’s why I am very important for this study,” Cassi jokes. Cassi is referring to people like Maria and May in her comment. She is also responding to the description of my research project and my interest in hearing about the everyday lives of Chinese Christians across a wider spectrum of experience. As we have seen, May is especially devout in her commitment to evangelism in the workplace and life with her congregation. While Cassi is also confident in her faith, she does not believe she is a very “good” Christian when it comes to the many communal and ethical expectations she perceives of Christian life.

Cassi presents herself to me as an “unremarkably faithful” Christian who finds comfort in God’s active love and yet struggles to live into the spiritual growth she sees in others. She is the first in her family to become a Christian and so does not have the familial support found in Christian families. Her schedule is also filled with a full-time job and part time MBA studies, leaving little time for the many congregational activities that bind fellowships together. During my time with her, she also hints at parental conflicts being another source of her struggles with faith. Her self-characterization as a “below average” Christian was also invoked in her apologies to me regarding the journaling and photovoice project I had asked her to complete. Her journal contained much fewer entries and photographs compared with that of May.

But in the few entries Cassi does provide me, an important narrative emerges. Early in her journal, Cassi confesses a great deal of anxiety in the face of the world around her.

These few days I haven’t been able to answer your questions about God’s presence because the world just feels so messed up, especially people’s morals and behaviors.
Here, society’s promises and teachings aren’t able to calm the anxieties of young people like me. It’s impossible to think of married life and children is these circumstances. It’s easier just to live alone. I know what I am thinking does not align with the Gospel. Maybe it means I don’t have enough faith and am still thinking in the ways of the world, but the anxieties are real. It’s hard to change one’s thinking.

In the face of these challenges, Cassi relies on examples of living faith she finds in mature Christians to keep her own faith alive. She tells me because she does not feel the presence of God very often, she looks to exemplars to encourage her. As explored earlier, Cassi’s boss at work is a particularly important example of faith. Cassi is unable to attend church as often as she would like, so she is proud and thankful to have Christian community at work.

When I learned my Christian was a boss, he invited me to join into a Christian small group network. At my company there are some seventy Christians participating in this group in some way. This group isn’t always about faith or explicitly Christian things, but also a forum to discuss other interests and announce social events. But we do share a common faith and that makes communication about faith and life natural. We will get together in smaller groups once a week to share and pray together, invite newcomers. This was really active for about a year, reserving a room each week and connecting.

Because keeping her faith strong is difficult on her own and she is not able to attend church as much as she would like, Cassi confides in the Christian presence of her workplace.

Two weeks after Cassi’s initial lament regarding the anxieties she experiences in the face of contemporary society, Cassi pens a second journal entry recounting a company retreat she participated in. During that retreat her boss emphasized the importance of servant leadership, a concept she had also heard spoken about in her church fellowship. What stood out to her was the conversation’s emphasis on superiors caring for the needs of those below them and how the world around her teaches the opposite – that those below ought to serve those higher up. Her entry expands on how distinct her work culture is and how much of it is a result of her boss’s Christian faith. She specifically points out the way her boss treats pregnant women in
the company in a kinder and supportive manner in contrast to most companies which will often find ways to pressure women with young children to take lesser positions or even quit.

Between Cassi’s first entry and her second, one is able to catch a bit of the everyday struggle Cassi experiences as a Christian young professional and the importance ethical exemplars of faith, like her boss, play in providing Cassi a sense of encouragement.

This affinity for ethical exemplars of faith took a surprising turn during one of Cassi’s international business trips to northern Africa, challenging her impression of Christianity’s supposedly unique ethical vision. She shares,

I recently made a business trip to north Africa and interacted with a local member of our company who is Muslim. I was really impressed by him because not only did he believe in God but he had really critical way of thinking about faith and life. I actually felt more in common with him in terms of our ethics. He would pray before meals and such. Of course, there are some big differences like a husband being able to marry up to four wives. He tried to explain the expectations for this related to gender roles. But other matters really impressed me, like how you are to give loans without interest. He shared about how Jesus is highly respected and a prophet. And so, in practice I feel like we are often of one accord. It’s different than I imagined it, because in church we are always learning about how we believe in the bible and one God and thus other religions and their gods are false. But when I meet a real Muslim, I feel like a lot of his value system are in accord with biblical principles, they are very devout in terms of times of prayer and worship and the way business ought to be conducted. Perhaps as Christians, because we emphasize sharing the Gospel, we’ll sometimes disparage other faith traditions. But when we look at the way our lives are lived, our witness may very well point to the same reality or same god.

This interfaith encounter left a deep impression on Cassi for the same reason she felt so regularly drawn to Christian exemplars at work: the expression of a clear ethic for life.

Moreover, Cassi’s statement bears a particular openness to the reality of a common foundation among religions. Of the few photographs Cassi did provide me, one features another reflection on the same encounter (see figure A4).
Cassi’s caption for the photograph reads, “I can really feel the truth of his faith from the way he goes about his daily life... Even though the God we believe in is different, this kind of love – one that does not depend on what another does – only God can teach this. People without faith have a difficult time living out and sustaining this kind of love.” In this statement, Maria highlights love as a primary feature that she sees animating this person of another faith, concluding that only God can provide such teaching. In these words, we see a stronger affirmation of the foundation that Cassi might consider common to real faith. In earlier conversations, Cassi did refer to the active love she perceived in Christianity as an important step in her journey to becoming a Christian.

In chapter three of this study, I recount Maria’s reflections on a relationship with her Buddhist colleague that contained similar feelings expressed in a somewhat more skeptical manner. As Maria observed her colleague exhibit the same behaviors and values she associated with real faith in Jesus Christ, Maria was challenged by the possibility that her
colleagues’ Buddhist faith carried the same transformative power as Christianity did for her. This struggle was expressed in Maria’s questioning of whether these traits could be attributed to Buddhist faith or the inherent personality of her colleague. In contrast, Cassi does not appear to express the same struggle and is more ready to embrace the other as a kind of spiritual companion. That this encounter constitutes one of the few times Cassi was impressed enough to both journal and photograph the incident for my project shows how influential it was. This Muslim colleague was not simply living out a cultural set of behaviors dictated by some unreasoned tradition. He explained his actions in relationship to beliefs and values that she too believed to be evidence of God’s presence. For Cassi, this was a sign that they must share some common sense of spirituality.

Cassi does not view herself as a strong Christian. But conversations with Holly, Cassi’s desk mate at work, shows the relativity of Cassi’s self-perception. During my time in Shanghai, Holly tells me that she regularly attended a student fellowship during her undergraduate studies but chose not to become a Christian for personal reasons. Nonetheless, spending time with Cassi as close colleagues reminded her of why she had always enjoyed being around Christians. According to Holly, Cassi is a very good Christian because she is respectful of everyone, follows through on her word, and exhibits a genuine concern for family and friends. Despite this positive impression, Cassi is still uncertain of herself. As I close out my time in Shanghai, I ask Cassi how I can be praying for her. She shares a simple request for herself, hoping God will strengthen her sense of security (anquangan 安全感). She wants to be able to face the challenges of her life with greater confidence, with more faith in God’s presence at work, than she is able to understand on her own.
Daniel: A window into the life of a critical loner

I casually mention to Maria that my fourth research participant lives outside Shanghai and that he, despite confessing to be a Christian, did not go to church at all. Maria was both surprised and skeptical of this, as if no real Christian could be without a congregation to call home. Pondering this situation, Maria encouraged me to investigate further. She was sure that there must be some very distinct circumstances for such a position. After some thought she adds that she has recently learned to be more gracious with those who choose not to or are unable to attend worship, explaining that only God knows what is really in one’s heart.

In the larger narrative arc of this study, Daniel’s presence provides an important foil to the majority of my informants. While a confessing Christian, his reluctance to participate regularly in congregational life set him apart from the many who saw their sense of Christian community as a foundational element of religious formation. He is quite guarded about expressing his faith in public life, going so far as to keep his faith a secret from other Christians in his workplace. Despite these many reservations, Daniel is happy to have me visit him for a day to share more about how faith influences his worldview and life. He lives a couple of hours outside Shanghai, a short train ride away. During my day of conversations and the events I am able to observe, I get the sense that what Daniel lacks in Christian community he makes up for in an independent mindfulness of God’s call on his personal vocation, family life, and ethics. Daniel’s faith is led by a personal sense of seeking truth driven by a combination of critical reasoning and intuition that is tested practically in his everyday living without regard to particular doctrines or congregational rhythms. What matters most about being a Christian is
the way it influences his work as a teacher, his behavior as a son, husband, and father, and his sense of direction and commitment to contribute something meaningful to the world.

Daniel is taking me on a drive through his city, showcasing some of its most recent developments, a new city museum, a new train station, a large new city government complex, new parks and high rises. He presents each with a touch of irony and jadedness. “They’re all empty shells though,” he comments, “that’s the problem with all this development. There’s nothing on the inside. The culture of the people here, the way we think and act, I’m not sure there’s been much development there.” These socio-cultural observations have a direct bearing on why Daniel is a Christian today. It is a way for him to cultivate the inner life that he sees so lacking in most of what is happening around him.

“I read the bible, I look for the truth in it, I do believe in it, but I am still searching,” he notes. For Daniel, Christian faith is the belief in one God and a search for truth in the bible accompanied by ethical living. He mentions the journaling he’s done and how it has forced him to reflect in ways he hasn’t before, to be mindful of God’s presence in his life when he would normally not even think about it. “My wife thinks what I wrote is bullshit though,” he jokes, laughing uncomfortably, “but I don’t think so. It’s genuine, though perhaps immature. I must confess I don’t know how to pray well and I do not have much of a spiritual practice.” Daniel confides to me that, given his lack of everyday spiritual routine, the exercises of writing and photography became forms of spiritual practice through which he could regularly ask himself what God might be showing him through what he is feeling and experiencing. The content of both his writings and photographs reveal a wide range of concerns and reflections related to his
personal spiritual growth, his vocation as a teacher, his responsibilities as a husband and father, as well as short entries about some of his hobbies or events he has read about in the news.

Daniel is a budding scholar of English literature who teaches at a local college. He recently began doctoral studies. As a result, his orientation toward the spiritual is more cerebral than my other informants and wrapped up with his literary sensibilities. He rarely quotes the bible in his journal entries. Instead, Daniel regularly cites writers that he admires.

In his first journal entry, Daniel ponders the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn as presented by Ha Jin’s text, The Writer as Migrant, a collection of non-fiction essays about famous authors writing in foreign languages and how they were shaped by their experiences across borders. “When Ha Jin examines Solzhenitsyn’s words, ‘the goal of Man’s existence is not happiness but spiritual growth,’ I am deeply struck. It renews my desire to reflect on what God’s expectations are for me,” Daniel writes, “Solzhenitsyn is a believer and is also a deep and thoughtful philosopher. He lives and writes out of his experiences as a wandering artist and I cannot help but think of God’s presence with him.” When pondering his uncle-in-law’s struggle with cancer, Daniel refers to John Donne’s poem, “Death be not proud,” as he considers how God’s presence accompanies one in the face of death. He also thanks God for the example of Lin Yutang, a famous Chinese author and Christian whose fluency in English earned him many acclamations from the West for his representations of Chinese culture in texts like The Importance of Living and My Country, My People, as well as his translations of Chinese classics. Daniel struggles with Lin’s legacy as a bi-cultural representative of Chinese culture torn by the socio-political realities of his time. “God’s path for the writer is surely present in his work,” Daniel notes, “and yet, Lin could have been greater. He could have presented a more authentic
representation of his people but faced too many challenges that obstructed his efforts. A pity.”

Unlike May, who find their inspiration from the narratives and teachings of the bible, or Cassi, who looks up to other Christians around her workplace, Daniel’s spiritual companions are writers with a spiritual grounding.

Daniel has acknowledged to me several times a willingness to get baptized, and yet he struggles to move forward on it. “Maybe it’s just laziness,” he says. He understands faith to be a personal commitment first and foremost, one that didn’t necessarily need to be so public. I share with him a bit about the Cultural Christians movement and the Sino-Christian theology/studies of the past decade – a new generation of Chinese scholars who study theology for the sake of understanding culture and philosophy. “But they don’t consider themselves believers, do they?” he asks. Daniel explains that he still thinks the element of personal confession, of acknowledging a sense of belonging regardless of the details, is still important. I respond that some do and some don’t and explain the concept of believing without belonging, curious about his take on living Christian faith completely independently of the church. “Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to think that,” Daniel laughs, “One can’t be completely alone in their faith without any connection to a community.”

Based on these comments, Daniel’s faith can be seen to be somewhere in between complete independence and congregational devotion. I push a little further to try and ascertain where along the spectrum he would be comfortable placing himself. First, Daniel says he has a certain disregard for collective religious piety that comes off as group think. He is uncomfortable with groups of people who appear to all think and act the same way without critical reflection. “Perhaps it is the influence of my father,” he muses, “though he too says he
believes in one God, he refuses to attend any kind of church.” Daniel has already referenced his father several times in conversation with me as the reason for his skepticism. “At least I am more open than that,” he continues, “I will attend church on occasion and study the bible together with others. I do consider other Christians my brothers and sisters.” He shares that he began attending the local three-self church during his undergrad studies every few weeks and had deeper conversations about Christian faith with his foreign English teachers, both of which were important parts of his coming to faith. He also cited that while he did begin to attend church services more regularly in Hong Kong during his M.A. studies, he only really connected with a few people. Altogether, Daniel acknowledged that his faith would not have grown without opportunities for Christian community but preferred a few deeper relations rather than large collectives.

As I continue my conversations with Daniel throughout my visit, it becomes clear that what constitutes a Christian in his eyes is not really about a confession of belief or belonging to a community. Instead, it is centered on how one’s life is lived and its effects on their closest relations. In previous interviews with the majority of my informants, the relationship between Christian faith, congregational life, and ethical living were all closely tied variables in what it meant to experience God’s presence in everyday life. For Daniel, a lack of a committed long term congregational life results in a heavier emphasis on the ethical dimension of faith. Daniel’s litmus for discerning true faith is how deeply one is able to live into these ethics.

He is particularly harsh on those who confess to be Christian and yet engage in what he sees to be unethical behaviors. For example, Daniel recounts to me how a former colleague, a confessing Christian, cut into the front of a long line for social services by leveraging a
relationship. “It wasn’t just that she cut in line,” he explained, “but that she initially stepped in
under the auspicious of kindness, checking in on how this person was doing. They chatted as
the line moved forward and by the time it was their turn, she just acted like she had always
been in line. She was using that person!” Daniel found this behavior particularly repulsive
precisely because this person publicly identified as a Christian. Alternatively, Daniel has the
utmost respect for another Christian colleague who serves as a student counselor in his school.
“It’s just so obvious that this person really cares about their students and that whichever class
is assigned to her is sure to get real guidance, not only in academics but in life as a whole.” Of
all the possible traits one might single out as important to Christian faith, the dimension of
ethical living is something Daniel appears to take most seriously of all.

This emphasis on Christian ethical living is not only something he uses to assess other
Christians but a standard he challenges himself with on a regular basis. For Daniel, God’s
presence is most active when he seeks to improve himself. He portrays his faith as a means to
becoming the best teacher and family member he can be. The four weeks during which Daniel
keeps his journal for this research project contain several important life transitions related to
self-improvement. During my visit, Daniel tells me that he will be moving back to Hong Kong in
the fall to finally begin doctoral studies, a vocational step he has long sought to realize his goal
of being a university professor. In addition, his family was preparing to move into a newly
purchased apartment in a development along the riverfront. These milestones in work and
family life oriented the writings and photos Daniel shared with me and reveal his perceptions of
how God’s presence manifests in his everyday life.
Daniel is serious about his vocation as an English teacher, praying for strength to do his work well in a way that really benefits his students’ lives while also struggling with his shortcomings. In one entry, Daniel writes about being discouraged by students who he perceives to put little effort into their work. He is processing what God must be trying to teach him in this instance. “I suspect God uses incidents like this to strengthen my trust in my students… A good teacher must find the students that really seek to learn, not spend all their efforts on those who ignore you,” he shares, “Today I feel God wants me to strengthen my resolve and increase my faith… the best teachers are those who are able to attract and guide students into a love of learning.” His entry is a self-encouragement, exhorting himself to not give up in the face of difficulties. In one photograph taken from his teacher’s podium while his students are working on an exercise, he says, “My courage to teach lies both in believing my work is actually helpful to students’ growth and in the confidence I gain from my thorough class preparation” (see figure A5).

Figure A5: Photograph of Daniel’s classroom
In Daniel’s life, experiences of God’s presence in the realm of his career serves as a kind of vocational compass. At the everyday level, Daniel’s journaling and photographs reveal a commitment to his craft as a teacher and God’s role in guiding his growth. Reflecting on his last days of teaching at this small local college, Daniel writes, “These freshmen students don’t know anything about my ten years of teaching here, only God knows. In these ten years, God has brought me through a journey of growth... At this moment I can only say that all I have gained in these years, the modest lessons, the trust, and the love, I will take them and invest them in my future students. Thank God for His leading. Thank God for his protection.”

In addition to his sense of calling to teaching, another prominent theme in Daniel’s journaling and photographs is his commitment to becoming a better father and husband. During my visit, I had the unique opportunity to spend time with Daniel’s wife and two young children. Conversations were thus not only about God or spirituality, but also about the difficulties of marriage and parenting. Reviewing his journal entries and photographs, an even greater amount of attention is given to the joys and struggles of family life. In one photo of Daniel’s two children, he comments, “Looking at my kids is like looking at the fingerprints of God.” Another photo shows Daniel’s daughter in a cast around her arm, recovering from fracture after a bad fall. “My little angel is far stronger than I could imagine,” he writes. Reflecting on the fear and worry following his daughter’s fall and her subsequent recovery, Daniel writes, “In retrospect, [my daughter’s] elbow fracture was a lesson to me... God meant [this] for our experience and growth as a parent.”

Daniel’s reflections on God and parenting also emerge out of more routine events. In his journal he records the difficulty he experiences waking up early after a long night of writing
to drive his kids to school. “I would say taking courage in my parental responsibilities comes from a love buried deep in my heart for my children. Although I don’t verbally say this to them, it is obvious to me that God has planted this love, as He has for us, in the most secure place in our hearts. I will continue to work on being a good father and follow the ways of God in being a competent disciple.” Daniel’s sense of God’s presence in his family life is the same as his career. His journaling and photographs evidence Daniel’s routine dependence on his faith as a source of self-cultivation in parenting and a deep desire to become better. To be a good teacher and a good parent seem to be one and the same with being a good disciple. Like many of my informants, Daniel sees this striving as one of the most important elements of Christian life.

Part of this striving includes balancing his desire to advance his vocation as a teacher with his duties as husband and father. On more than one occasion, Daniel asks God for the wisdom to balance these conflicting priorities. In one entry, he laments the challenge of accompanying his wife on various errands when he felt he also needed to be reading and writing. “I regard such paradox as God’s test or guidance,” he writes, “My reality is that family life indeed takes a considerable time out of my life, therefore, unless I chose to be an irresponsible husband and father and be extremely selfish, I have to deal with my problem of having very little free time.” The next day, Daniel pens another entry in a more positive register. While the long list of family errands extends into this next day, Daniel’s attitude is different. He feels more at peace with what must be done to be attentive to his family. “Thanks to God that I can have peace so fast after yesterday’s confusion. I will try my best. I take my changes in mood as God’s guidance, and I will listen to His advice and follow His lead.”
Daniel’s change in mood, an unexpected if temporary resolution to a felt conflict between two equally important priorities, signals to him a sense of God’s presence and guidance. Here again, we have evidence of a link between God’s presence, a sense of peace, and a corresponding behavior that arises with this peace. Despite Daniel’s distance from close congregational life, this basic pattern of experiencing God in everyday life appears to remain constant.

In addition to Daniel’s transition to beginning doctoral studies in Hong Kong, another important change is taking place – his family has purchased a new apartment, built in a new high rise overlooking the river. Daniel brings me along with his family as he picks up the keys. The center of the development contains its own village center of sorts, complete with grocery stores, restaurants, and other amenities. We line up with other new homeowners in a faux European style hall with marble-esque pillars and rich red curtains hanging from floor to ceiling windows. There is a bit of a carnival atmosphere to the “pick up your key day” festivities with balloons, lights, and big posters displaying the renderings of the completed complex which will total nearly ten buildings along the riverfront. Daniel’s daughter is invited to spin a wheel to pick up a house-warming prize. Based on her spin, she is given a choice between a big bag of rice or cleaning supplies, neither particularly interesting to a little girl. Daniel’s wife selects the rice. “We just bought cleaning supplies, the rice will be more practical,” she laughs.

After completing the remaining paperwork, a staff member leads us to the building. We walk along the stone cobbled walkway, passing through newly manicured gardens and a playground that is nearing completion. The environment is new and yet feels somehow still feels aged given its similarity to numerous other nearby developments. Just over the fence one
can hear sound of construction on another phase of the complex. Daniel’s new apartment sits right by the new riverside park that leads into the city core. One of his photographs shares a view from his apartment’s new study and comments, “My family will be living there for many coming years. After carrying my kids up six floors for six years, they finally are willing to climb the stairs themselves. Ironically, the new apartment has elevators... Well, late is better than never” (see figure A6).

Figure A6: Photograph of Daniel’s new apartment window

Throughout Chinese cities, huge swaths of the skyline are occupied by rows upon rows of apartment housing nearly identical in style with the exceptional flourish here or there. I am astonished that, even with 1.3 billion citizens, that this much housing is necessary. Much of it is necessitated by urban migration – with the growing middle class buying new homes while older homes are either torn down or inhabited by lower classes. The ability to buy a new apartment home in China is perhaps the primary sign of upward mobility. While Daniel has chosen not to
jump into the race to claim such standing in prominent cities like Shanghai, he is still making a way to a more prominent standing within his smaller city setting. A drive along the riverside’s many new skyscrapers, where Daniel’s new apartment sits, indeed invokes the shimmer and shine of Shanghai.

But just because they look like Shanghai from the outside does not mean much. In China, new apartments generally come as empty shells without any pre-designed interior. It is up to the new homeowners to supply everything from the kitchen stove to the bathroom tiles, working out the details of installation with numerous contractors. If the interior design cannot be completed when the keys are handed over, the unit will likely sit empty until it can be. This is the norm and Daniel’s circumstances are no exception. As he shows me around the new apartment, I notice the view from his photograph overlooking the river. In his new apartment, the flooring has already been installed as well as the windows and parts of the kitchen. During our visit, a workman takes measurements to factor in where the appliances and cabinets should be installed. Daniel and his family will take at least another year before moving into the new apartment. They’ll need the time to install the rest of the items needed to turn what was once a concrete box into a home.

China’s ambitious social and cultural drive to embrace all that is modern and advanced can be compared with this reality of new shiny buildings with bare concrete interiors. Daniel implicitly made this critique when he showed me around the city. The party calls upon all Chinese citizens to become disciplined agents of modern progress. Each city pursues this goal by equipping its environment with the latest technology, architecture, and commercial trappings, but inside they are still empty shells waiting to be inhabited with the beliefs and
values that can foster the type of cultural cohesion needed to guide the human soul. The resources for this internal work have been lacking and the Communist party is taking a more aggressive approach to remedying it. New slogans meant to inspire are up all over the country: twelve new socialist values that will ground good character and behavior toward the realization of the Chinese dream. This is the positive side of the equation. During my visit I also notice a more explicitly negative tone has arisen. New signs are hung from city lights and posted on huge billboards: “Sweep away gangs. Drive out evil. Bring order to chaos.” There is a new anti-corruption campaign about and this time the party is again recruiting society to take part. On many billboards, a phone number is shared for citizens to call regarding any seedy behavior that need’s addressing. Unable to form the more positive traits needed to build community, it appears the government is also turning toward humanity’s baser instincts.

These larger sociocultural dynamics are an explicit part of Daniel’s embrace of Christian faith, even as he continues to hold many questions about exactly what faith means in Christian community. Christianity provides a genuine set of values and beliefs for cultivating the morals and ethics one needs to live for others with a positive thrust, in his case through his teaching and for his family. Based on my short visit, it become obvious how important family is to Daniel’s everyday life. Over the course of just two days, I met Daniel’s father who had been watching the children while we were out and I even had lunch with Daniel’s parents-in-law who lived around the corner. The closeness between them was something Daniel valued greatly, something closer to traditional Chinese culture’s conception of family.

In his experiences of God’s presence, subtle as they are, Daniel believes he is provided rational and emotional resources for embodying the traits he believes God exhibits. In one of
the Daniel’s most striking reflections, he writes about a family of swallows who have set up a nest in the landing outside their apartment.

I think the swallow couple living under my roof are bearing babies. This year they built the nest closer to our door and we get to see them fly in during the mornings and evenings… These swallows started to come in every spring some three years ago and have been very punctual ever since… Looking at them gives me a sense that God watches us almost all the time. I believe God has a purpose for everyone. Seeing the swallows strive is like watching ourselves, just in the eyes of God. I will try my best to fulfill that purpose!

Daniel may not be an active part of a Christian congregation, but his faith provides him something important to strive for that is grounded in something deeper. Moreover, this striving is for more than one’s self. Like the swallows that Daniel reflects upon, he too is striving to make a good home for his family. Daniel is critically minded, believing and yet searching both at once. He is unsure about the bigger picture yet firm in the few elements he holds to at the moment. “I think the most important thing is to seek truth.” He comments at last, “My stance is I would risk everything to pursue it although I may never reach or possess it.”

Daniel’s sense of faith pushes him to search for truth that is beyond reason or any single objective reality, but a lived one measured by the degree of self-cultivation it can foster. His reflections prioritize building up morals and values that brings growth and purpose to his vocation and responsibility and care for his family. When we consider the experiences of ecclesial devotees like May, the same types of striving can be observed in their church fellowships. Both desire their congregations to be homes for those seeking a deeper knowledge of God that can transform lives and seek to live out their faith with others in a way that points to it. In Cassi, who struggles with the high expectations of faith, the witness of her Christian boss exemplifying servant leadership in the workplace encourages her to keep striving despite the anxiety she experiences around her. The business fellowship that brought her to
faith, though not a church in the formal sense of the word, is a spiritual home that nourishes. Despite the differences across the faith contexts of these three persons, a common end is distinguishable: the value of a safe, secure, home from which they themselves can further grow into the image of Christ they perceive by faith.

As with all of my informants, I ask Daniel how I can be praying for him as we part ways. Daniel’s future doctoral studies are on his mind and he asks for prayer to balance family life and studies, the same prayer he lifts up repeatedly in his journal. In addition, he hopes that his doctoral studies in literature will bring opportunities for deeper reading and understanding. Why does Daniel want to pursue a PhD? He tells me it is not just about becoming a better teacher or getting a better job, though those are real motivations. “It comes from an overflowing of personal feelings,” he muses, “In other words, God put the stuff in us when we were born.” God compels the search and Daniel is ready for the next season.

Conclusion: Peace and security in God during uncertain times

“Security is a state free from fear or harm, but I would say peace is at a higher emotional and mental level,” Daniel shares, “It suggests a degree of satisfaction from feeling safe but also understanding the unknown, of being owned while owning. Like being owned by a family or by God as well as owning a family and God, a kind of reciprocal possession.” He offers me this theologically rich comment when I tell him one of the recurring themes I have noticed in some of my interviews is the experience of God’s peace. Daniel’s comparison of the differences between a sense of security and peace remind me of the prayer requests May and Cassi shared with me as I departed Shanghai – requests for a sense of security in different contexts whether
for themselves or for a friend. Amidst contemporary China’s rapid transformation and the uncertainties that come with young adult life, nearly all of my informants have referenced some form of peace and security as an important experiential basis for their Christian faith, a peace that can dwell in hearts even in the face of uncertainties.

This appendix has taken an in-depth look at three of my informants based on a series of open conversations and go-alongs conducted in late June alongside the journaling and photovoice activities they participated in during the month of May. For these persons, God’s presence manifests itself through Christian community, through the study of scripture, through family bonds, through ethical exemplars, and through changes in mood or attitude. In nearly all cases, these experiences are accompanied by a sense of action – of how one ought to live in relation to the workplace or in their families or in society at large. In all four cases, dimensions of peace, familial-like belonging, ethical living, and self-cultivation are present in various combinations dependent on each person’s life situations.
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